



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
to all Baptised Catholics in the Diocese of Portsmouth
on 13th September 2020, the Twenty-Fourth Sunday of the Year

'COME BACK TO ME' SAYS THE LORD

Dear Friends,

I am writing to everyone in our Diocese of Portsmouth, to every baptised Catholic, to all the clergy, religious and lay faithful, and to all members of our parishes, schools and communities. I write too to everyone of good will, to those 'with ears to hear', to anyone searching for God, and to all who wish to meet His Son, Jesus Christ and to know more about His Gospel. I say to you all: Come back! Come back to Mass! Come back to church for private prayer! Come back to visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament! You are truly welcome - we have missed you!

These last months have been extraordinary. The pandemic has caused great harm, physical, mental, emotional and financial. Sadly, many have fallen sick and some have lost their lives. At the same time, medical staff and key workers have responded with remarkable generosity and courage. Across our Diocese, parishes and schools, clergy and faithful have been highly creative. Priests have done all they can to serve their parishioners: live-streaming Masses, hearing Confessions in gardens, keeping in touch by email, phone and Zoom meetings. Parishioners have generously continued their financial support. Hospital chaplains have selflessly served the dying, ensuring they receive the Last Sacraments, Absolution and the Apostolic Pardon. Schools have sent out food parcels to the housebound. Our diocesan *Caritas* has adapted their projects to continue supporting the needy, whilst the work of CAFOD has been flourishing. Now that schools and many others are returning to work, let us keep up this good work. Let us keep safe. And let us ask the Lord for an end to the pandemic, the invention of a vaccine and the restoration of ordinary life.

In inviting you back to Mass, I am aware that in some places and for some of you - those self-shielding, the sick, the vulnerable – this will not yet be possible. Moreover, we are aware too that the infection-rate is varying, and we might even face a local lockdown. Indeed, for everyone it will require care, prudence and adjustments. It might mean attending Mass on a weekday instead of a Sunday. But as we enter the autumn and our schools return, rather than focusing on what we cannot do, let us focus on what we can, so that the great mission of our Diocese of Portsmouth can go forward: *Bringing People Closer to Jesus Christ through His Church*.

Most of our churches are now open, with very stringent safety procedures in place. I thank our clergy and parishioners for their massive efforts. If you can, please do volunteer your time, help and support so we can keep up this good work. The pandemic has shown us how fragile modern life is. It has caused us to review our priorities. It has made us face our mortality and the question of God. For weeks, by government mandate, our churches were closed and the public celebration of the Liturgy suspended. I know that many felt hurt by this. As human beings we have not only bodily needs but spiritual needs too. Moreover, it is in our churches that the Lord sanctifies, teaches and guides us, uniting us together, giving us the Sacraments of eternal life, and sending us out on mission and service. Many followed Mass online and spoke of their hunger and thirst for God. Online has its place and we thank God for all the work done to enable this. But online is not the same as 'inline' and being there. It's not the same as actually receiving Jesus in Holy Communion. It's not the same as participating in the presence of the eucharistic community.

This is why I say: Come back to the Lord to be nourished by His Word and His Sacraments! True, the canonical obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days is still suspended. But what about the Lord Who calls to us in our hearts: "The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice: I know them and they follow me" (John 10: 27)? What about His promise: "Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him" (John 6: 56)? What about His invitation: "Come follow me" (Mark 1: 17)? His offer: "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10: 10)? Surely, we do not follow Jesus our Lord and Master simply out of habit or duty? No, we follow Him because we love Him. We follow Him because He has called us. We follow Him because He is our Saviour: He has laid down His life for us.

May our diocesan patrons Mary Immaculate, St. Edmund and Bl. Pier Giorgio, pray for you and protect you. May they obtain for you freedom from fear. May they inspire in you a generous response to the Lord's call.

Thank you for listening – and please be assured of my prayers.

In Corde Iesu,

+Philip

Bishop of Portsmouth