

PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
appointed to be read
in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
on 14th December 2025, the Third Sunday of Advent (Gaudete Sunday).

PRIESTLY VOCATIONS

Dear Friends in Christ,

I write to you today about something crucial to the future of the Church in our Diocese. It is an intention close to my heart, about which for a long time I have wanted to write to you. As we approach Christmas, and hear in today's Gospel about St. John the Baptist, a messenger sent to prepare the way of the Lord,¹ I cannot keep it to myself any longer. My topic is the priesthood. I implore every one of you to pray for more vocations to the ministerial priesthood and I want to reach out personally to anyone in our Diocese thinking about priesthood or who, deep in his heart, is wondering whether God is calling him to be a priest.

Let's be clear. Through baptism, every member of the Church, man and woman, has a share in Christ's three-fold ministry as a priest, a prophet and a shepherd.² We are all called to holiness of life, to be like Christ, to be credible witnesses³ and there are many different states of life and ministries to be fulfilled.⁴ To serve this flock, Jesus calls certain men in person to share in a sacramental way in His priestly leadership.⁵ They pray, offer sacrifice, confer the sacraments and seek to live a holy life. They teach the Truth, proclaim the Good News and guide the faithful. As true fathers, they direct the mission, shepherd the flock, release the gifts of the people and seek out the lost. As one of the most beautiful Prefaces at Mass puts it – this often brings tears to my eyes – "as they give up their lives for you, [Lord], and for the salvation of their brothers and sisters, they strive to be conformed to the image of Christ Himself."⁶ What can be more thrilling than that: to give my life and my all to God? To love God with my whole heart? And to love God's people? No wonder St. John Vianney said: "If we really understood the priest on earth, we would die -- not of fright, but of love!"⁷ The priesthood means love, friendship, joy and union with the Heart of Jesus.

In our Diocese of Portsmouth, we are extremely short of priests.⁸ This year, ten priests have died, yet only one was ordained, and this could be the first year ever we will not be sending any students to seminary.⁹ Ask yourself: When was the last time your parish produced a priest? I do thank God greatly for our seminarians. Please pray for them. But we need more. I need men who want to make a difference. I need men who know they are weak yet in Christ strive to be strong. I need priests to be fathers to parish communities. I need priests who can lead in key areas of the diocesan mission: marriage and family life, education, chaplaincy, AI, canon law, and so on. Every priest is a soldier for Christ, a sentinel in the watchtower, a lowly man called to greatness, but each one is humanly different with their personalities, gifts and talents. This is the beauty of Christ's Church: how the Lord puts all these gifts to good use.¹⁰

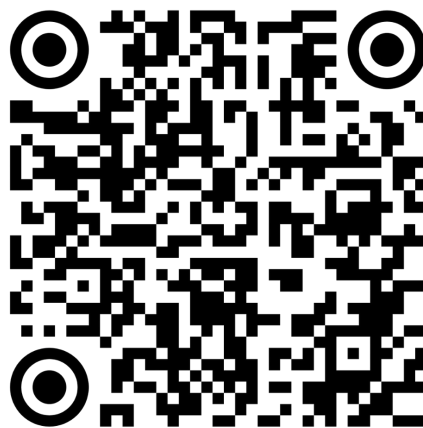
Last year, I celebrated 40 years of being a priest. I can still remember vividly my ordination-day in Altrincham in 1984. I remember my first Mass. What a huge privilege it is to offer Mass, to preach the Word, and to feed people with the Food of Immortality,¹¹ the Body and Blood of Christ!¹² Since then, I have so much to thank God for, although being a priest has not always been easy. Much of the battle has been with myself, with my sinfulness and shortcomings. There were also times when, for the sake of the diocese, the bishop asked me to move, or to do a task or to undertake a ministry I would not myself have chosen. It hurt at the time. Yet, hand on heart, after much prayer and spiritual support, I came to see God's loving providence in it all. Indeed, I now thank Him profoundly.

In St. Matthew's Gospel, there is a dramatic line: "When Jesus saw the crowds, He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." So, what did Jesus do? He said to his disciples: "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest."¹³ That is what I ask of you today: pray earnestly. Ask the Father to send us some more priests. Pray for the inspiring priests we already have. Look after your own parish priest. We have all benefitted from the ministry of priests: heroic men who have laid down their lives to serve us.¹⁴ Being a priest in this twenty-first century is an amazing, fulfilling and vital vocation. Yes, it's challenging. For so many people these days say they are 'nones';¹⁵ they have no religion; they have no friendship with God; they do not know the God Who made them. This truly is poverty!¹⁶ No wonder our society is in a mess, with confusion, unrest and a deep underlying emptiness! That's why we need priests. That's why I am calling you to arms. That's why I am issuing this rallying cry. I don't believe that God is not answering our prayers. God is a loving God. We can be certain He is calling many to the priesthood. But do we hear Him? Can we hear him? And will we respond?¹⁷

So, this is what I want to do. Today, I invite any man in our Diocese, aged 17 or older,¹⁸ who is not married and who would like to know more about being a priest, to contact me. If you are hearing or reading this letter, if you feel God might be calling, if you want to give your life to something great, then email me on *Bishop at Portsmouth Diocese dot org dot UK*. It's all lower case: bishop@portsmouthdiocese.org.uk. Or better, scan the QR code. I will then invite you, and all who respond, to meet me at the Cathedral in the New Year, on Sunday 4th January at 3 o'clock. After Vespers, there will be a short talk, finishing by 5. I look forward to meeting you and I entrust this meeting to the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is the Mother of Priests and Mother of us all. She never lets us down, for She is the Mother of He Who is near, the One Who is to come.¹⁹

In Corde Iesu,
+Philip
Bishop of Portsmouth

PS. Scan the QR code to register for the event:



¹ Mt 11: 2-11

² See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1546-1547.

³ *Lumen Gentium* 39-42.

⁴ Cf. John Paul II *Christifideles Laici* (London, CTS: 1988) 14-17 and 45ff. Without the lay faithful, their faith and witness, the Diocese and its parishes could not thrive.

⁵ Cf. *Catechism of Catholic Church* 1592

⁶ “*vitam pro te fratrumque salute tradentes, ad ipsius Christi nitantur imaginem confirmari*” and it adds: “*et constanter tibi fidem amoremque testentur ...* and [they] offer you a constant witness of faith and love.” See ‘Preface: The Priesthood of Christ and of the Church’ in *The Roman Missal. English Translation according to the Third Typical Edition* (London, CTS: 2010) 326

⁷ B. Nodet *Jean-Marie Vianney, Cure d’Ars* (Editions Xavier Mappus, Le Puy-Paris: 1958) 100

⁸ I always say that first and foremost in the Diocese of Portsmouth we are short of people, that is, ‘can-do’ laity on fire with the love of Christ, who are willing to take responsibility and give a lead, to share their time, talent and treasure, in order to make the Church ‘be’ what she is meant to be.

⁹ “Without ministerial priests, there would be no Eucharist, no Mass. It is no exaggeration to say that, without priests to celebrate Mass, eventually this local Church, which is the Diocese of Portsmouth, would cease to exist. It would become like the places in North Africa which are now used as titular sees for auxiliary bishops” Canon James McAuley *Homily at the Mass for Deceased Clergy* 20th November 2025, in *Portsmouth Diocese Enews Issue* 512

¹⁰ Cf. Benedict XVI *Homily for the Closure of the Year for Priests, Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus* (11th June, 2010): available online <https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2010> (November 2025)

¹¹ “Every time this mystery is celebrated, the work of our redemption is carried on and we break the one bread that .. ὅς ἐστιν φάρμακον ἀθανασίας, ἀντίδοτος τοῦ μὴ ἀποθανεῖν, ἀλλὰ ζῆν ἐν Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ διὰ παντός .. provides the medicine of immortality, the antidote to death and the food that makes us live for ever in Jesus Christ” St. Ignatius of Antioch *Ad Eph* 20: 2; SCh 10,76.

¹² “Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the priest lends his hands and his voice to Jesus, and the Paschal Mystery – the death, the resurrection and the ascension of Our Lord – is thereby made present again; it is re-presented. And the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, truly, really and substantially, so that Our Lord can feed us with His very self and build us up ever more into what we are by virtue of our baptism, members of His Body, the Church” Canon James McAuley *ibid*.

¹³ Mt 9: 36-38

¹⁴ Perhaps being a priest has never occurred to you? You may think that you do not want to be a priest. Few of us would want to be a martyr. But maybe the Lord might want it? Maybe the Lord is calling you? Listen to Him. That is where your duty - and your happiness - lies.

¹⁵ See H. Waite *The Nones: Who are they and what do they believe?* (Theos, London: 2022): available online www.theosthinktank.co.uk (November 2025)

¹⁶ Cf. St. John Paul II *Message of John Paul II for Lent 1998* available online:

<https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/lent/documents> (November 2025)

¹⁷ Let me say a word to all the young men who serve at the altar. You see the priest saying Mass. You assist him saying Mass. You are so close to the Sacrifice of the Mass. Have you never thought of yourself doing that – of being a priest and offering the Mass?

¹⁸ If you are aged 17 to 18, you must come with your parent or guardian.

¹⁹ Cf. Entrance Antiphon for this Third Sunday of Advent: *Gaudete in Domino semper ... Dominus enim prope est* 'Rejoice in the Lord always ... Indeed, the Lord is near.'