

BISHOP OF PORTSMOUTH ISSUES MESSAGE ON EVANGELII GAUDIUM  
December 2013

Bishop Philip Egan has sent the following message to the priests and people of the Diocese of Portsmouth on the publication of Pope Francis' post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*.

On 24 November this year, the Solemnity of Jesus Christ, the King of the Universe, in conclusion to the Year of Faith, Pope Francis published the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* ('The Joy of the Gospel') that followed up the Synod of Bishops held in Rome in 2012 on 'The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith.' On behalf of the clergy and people of the Diocese of Portsmouth, I welcome this uplifting and courageous document and I wish publicly to thank the Holy Father for his deep and meaningful teaching. Because in this exhortation the pope freely develops the discussions of the Synod and adds so much of his own thought and reflection, I suggest that alongside *Evangelii Gaudium*, we also continue to study the 58 Propositions the Synod issued so that the significant contribution of the Synod to Catholic thought and to the work of our Diocese not be overlooked.

*Evangelii Gaudium* is a long document. Yet it is easy to follow, and its central message, about how a personal relationship with Jesus Christ in His Body the Church naturally drives us out joyfully to evangelise others, is direct. It is a classic expression of Pope Francis' thought, style and preaching as seen in his daily homilies at Mass, his speeches and audiences. I encourage everyone in our diocese to read it and study it, perhaps a few paragraphs a day, over the coming months. It is a perfect accompaniment to the 'Year of Faith in Action' that I recently announced for the Diocese as a follow-up to the Year of Faith.

The exhortation has five chapters. In Chapter One (19-41), the Holy Father begins with the Church (19-41) and how we need to transpose everything into a missionary key, going beyond our comfort zones to take the Good News of Christ joyfully to the peripheries. He next discusses the crisis of community in the modern world (50-109), brought about in part by trickle-down economics and consumer culture, which generates individualism and indifference.

In Chapter Three (110-175), he explores certain aspects of evangelisation, such as the need to inculcate the Gospel and the role of preaching. Chapter Four (176-258) is about the social dimension of the Church's mission, especially her preferential option for the poor - "I want a Church that is poor for the poor" (198) - and the need to build peace, justice and fraternity. The Holy Father concludes the exhortation with a brief chapter on the spirituality of being a missionary disciple (259-288).

There are three features of the exhortation I wish to draw attention to, before asking some specific questions about how the Holy Father's message might apply to the Diocese of Portsmouth.

1. First, note the Holy Father's trenchantly critical analysis of the current economic model of consumer capitalism (52-60). Money, he avers, has become an idol that no longer serves people but dominates and excludes, creating huge inequalities that marginalise many and lead some to violence. "How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? ... Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? (53)."

In this context, "some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naive trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralised workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting." Indeed, "we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase" but in the meantime, "all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us (54)." The current socioeconomic system is "unjust at its root" (59): it needs to be brought into dialogue with ethics and with God.

2. Clergy might note, secondly, the Holy Father's extensive consideration of the homily and its preparation (135-159). In the liturgy, the homily should not dominate but lead people, like a mother speaking with her child, to Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. The pastor must be close both to the Word of God and to his people. His words should set people on fire (142). The preacher needs to be personal (149), linked with daily life (154) and able to use clear images (157) with simple language (158). His message must always be positive and lead listeners to a personal encounter with Christ.

3. Thirdly, the Holy Father speaks time and again of the Church's mission as one of preferential love for the poor (186-216). "Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society." Indeed, if we, "who are God's means of hearing the poor, turn deaf ears to this plea, we oppose the Father's will and his plan" (187). This planet belongs to everyone not just a few; the "mere fact that some people are born in places with fewer resources or less development does not justify the fact that they are living with less dignity. It must be reiterated that the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others" (190). God's heart "has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself became poor" (2 Cor 8:9). The Saviour "was born in a manger, in the midst of animals, like children of poor families; he was presented at the Temple along with two turtledoves, the offering made by those who could not afford a lamb; he was raised in a home of ordinary workers and worked with his own hands to earn his bread" (197). This is why, Pope Francis adds, "I want a Church which is poor and for the poor" (198). He mentions the "homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly who are increasing isolated and abandoned, ... migrants ... victims of various kinds of human trafficking, ... unborn children," the latter being the "most defenceless and innocent" of all (210, 211 and 216).

*Evangelii Gaudium* is challenging. At times the Holy Father adopts a style of 'prophetic denunciation,' reminiscent of liberation theology, although without the undercurrent of Marxist ideology. It is a document to savour and return to, and a stimulus and call to put faith into action. In the Diocese of Portsmouth, as a follow-on from the Year of Faith, we have announced a 'Year of Faith in Action' and during this Year we will be establishing our new diocesan agency, Caritas Portsmouth. This is exactly in line with the Holy Father's message. Consequently, I wish to urge the clergy and people of our parishes and pastoral areas to study this apostolic exhortation. Ask yourselves: Who are the poor in your neighbourhood? What is the meaning of 'poverty' in your local context? What strategies of assistance and support for those in need might you individually and communally put in place?

But there are three further questions the document raises for our Diocese of Portsmouth, that I would like to ask.

1. First, our parish communities and pastoral areas. The parish, Pope Francis states, is a key locus of new evangelisation. Over the coming Year of Faith in Action, I wish to ask you to give some thought as to how our parishes and pastoral areas can be transformed into truly evangelising communities. "The parish is ... the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelisers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach" (28).

As your bishop I ask you: How genuinely mission-oriented is your parish and your pastoral area?

2. Secondly, our cities and urban areas. The Holy Father discusses the challenges of modern urban culture and the city as the particular goal of new evangelisation (71-75). We "need to look at cities with a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares" (71). For new "cultures are constantly being born in these vast new expanses where Christians are no longer the customary interpreters or

generators of meaning. Instead, they themselves take from these cultures new languages, symbols, messages and paradigms which propose new approaches to life, approaches often in contrast with the Gospel of Jesus" (73).

The challenge is how to find "innovative spaces and possibilities for prayer and communion which are more attractive and meaningful for city dwellers" (74). So let us think of the cities and urban areas of our Diocese of Portsmouth. They tend to follow the motorway corridors: the M3, M4, M27 etc. Think, for instance, of Oxford, Reading, Ascot and Windsor, Aldershot, Basingstoke, Winchester, Eastleigh and Southampton, Portsmouth and Bournemouth. Then there are the islands, the Isle of Wight and the Channel Isles, which are fairly densely populated. How should we 'interpret' these dispersed urban areas? That is, how might the Lord be calling us specifically to evangelise them? What are the needs? What new 'ways-in' might there be?

At the moment, I am conducting a consultation about grouping our pastoral areas into six or seven larger regions or deaneries in order to enable better strategic thinking for the new evangelisation. But as your bishop I ask you: How might you, your parish community, your pastoral area, become a better evangeliser of the urban cultures of our dispersed centres? 3. And thirdly, ourselves. Pope Francis here and elsewhere calls for our churches to be open. The "Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open. One concrete sign of such openness is that our church doors should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door" (47). Moreover, "without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the Word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervour dies out.

The Church urgently needs the deep breath of prayer, and to my great joy groups devoted to prayer and intercession, the prayerful reading of God's Word and the perpetual adoration of the Eucharist are growing at every level of ecclesial life" (262). How good it is, the Holy Father opines, "to stand before a crucifix, or on our knees before the Blessed Sacrament, and simply to be in his presence! How much good it does us when he once more touches our lives and impels us to share his new life!" (264). For the "primary reason for evangelising is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him." In the Diocese of Portsmouth, I once again urge everyone: keep your church open! Visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament! Adore Him and come away renewed, sharing your love and happiness with others!

But as your bishop I ask you: When and how are you yourself going to find time to do this, to be in the Presence of the Lord in the Holy Eucharist? Pope Francis concludes *Evangelii Gaudium* by turning to Mary. He notes that whenever we look to her, "we come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness. In Her we see that humility and tenderness are not virtues of the weak but of the strong who need not treat others poorly in order to feel important themselves. ... She is the woman of prayer and work in Nazareth, and She is also Our Lady of Help, who sets out from Her town 'with haste' (Lk 1: 39) to be of service to others. This interplay of justice and tenderness, of contemplation and concern for others, is what makes the ecclesial community look to Mary as a model of evangelisation" (288).

At the end of this Message, let us commend ourselves and all the clergy and people of our Diocese to the powerful intercession of Mary Immaculate our Patron. Mary is the Star of New Evangelisation and if you look at my episcopal 'coat of arms' (at the head of this Pastoral Message) you will see that Star shining brightly in the sky over the Diocese of Portsmouth. Here is part of the Holy Father's prayer, which I ask you now to pray: "O Mary, Star of the New Evangelisation, help us to bear radiant witness to communion and service, to ardent and generous faith, and to justice and love of the poor, so that the joy of the Gospel may reach to the ends of the earth, illuminating even the fringes of our world." Amen.

In Corde Iesu

Bishop of Portsmouth 9th December 2013, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception