

Letter to Everyone
who lives within the Diocese of Portsmouth
from Bishop Philip Egan on Easter Sunday 4th April 2021.

AN OFFER THAT WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE

Dear All,

My name is Philip Egan, and I am writing to you as the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth. A bishop is an 'overseer' appointed by the Pope. Originally, I come from Altrincham in Cheshire and until 2012 I was a parish priest near Stockport. Our Diocese covers a large swathe of southern England from Oxford and Windsor down to the South Coast and the Channel Islands. Over 3 million people live in our area. About 200,000 (7%) are Catholics. We have 90 parishes, 70 schools and 35 religious communities. Today, I am writing to you and to everyone who lives within this area, every child, woman and man, whether you consider yourself to be a person of religious faith or not. This Easter, I want, on behalf of the Catholic community, to send you my warmest greetings and to extend to you a hand of respect, friendship and service.

This last year has been extraordinary and I wish to share with you some of the things on my mind. The COVID pandemic has caused great harm and disruption, physical, mental, emotional and financial. Sadly, many have fallen sick; some have lost their lives. Yet we have also witnessed amazing generosity and self-sacrifice. I think here of all the medical staff, carers and key workers. The pandemic has had a big impact on the Church. There was a period when our churches – unjustly in my view – had to be closed. But many of our parishes and schools responded creatively to the challenge. Our hospital chaplains bravely supported the medical staff and continued caring for the sick and dying. Priests and parishioners did all they could to keep in touch with the housebound by email, Zoom and phone. Our schools reached out to the neediest families with food-parcels, and *Caritas*, our charitable organisation, adapted its activities, feeding the homeless and caring for the mentally ill.

As Christians, we have been praying for a speedy resolution to this pandemic. Thanks to the ingenuity with which God has gifted scientists and others, there are now some positive signs, not least the vaccination programme. The fact that the vaccines are being given first to the most vulnerable reveals that society knows in its heart that the beauty and dignity of every human life is inviolable. The Catholic Church proclaims this to be true of every person from the moment of their conception to the awesome moment of their natural death: an unborn child in the womb, a new-born baby, an infant, a teenager and young adult, a grown up and a senior. Every person, regardless of their sex, colour, race or creed, regardless of their health, sexuality or wealth, regardless of their faults or failings, is of infinite value. Every person is a gift enriching the community, "holy ground" that we enter upon only with the utmost reverence.

I'm sure that, like me, your life has changed over these last months in its pace and routine, in the way you work and the way you spend your time. I have often felt isolated from the ones I love and learnt afresh how important to me loved ones truly are. The pandemic has exposed the fragility of modern life. It has also exposed its inequalities, unfairness and wastefulness. Many have been reviewing their priorities and asking questions about what is really valuable, about family, love and happiness, about life, death and the role of religion. Interestingly, thousands have been tuning into online religious services, and the word "prayer" as an internet search has surged. But the big question now is: What sort of post-COVID world do we want to inhabit?

We are at a turning-point. We have a God-given opportunity to rebuild a better world, in which truly human values are to the fore: care for the young, for the sick and the poor, care for nature, care for a more just society. People have said that during the crisis the voice of the Church has been unhelpfully silent. Well, let me give a lead! I hereby call on all our politicians and policymakers to listen to these aspirations, especially to the cry of the poor and those on the margins. And to each of you reading, don't let these aspirations be swallowed up in grand ideological plans, but concentrate on changing things yourself at home, at work, amongst your friends and on your street.

Why am I writing to you? I said I wanted, as a bishop and a fellow human being, to extend a hand of friendship and service. In fact, I want to make you an offer. For every human being wants to be happy, wants to be loved, wants to give love, wants to belong, wants to live forever. I believe that none of this is possible ultimately without a relationship with God. True, people ask: If God is so good, why does He allow bad things to happen? And why is religion often abused, leading violence? Yet at its purest, faith in Jesus Christ responds to the human person's deepest longings. It gives immortality, tranquillity of spirit, an assurance of things hoped for. It gives friendship and a sense of belonging. It gives the strength to do the impossible, to bear sickness, suffering, sadness, death. It gives meaning and purpose. It grounds ethics. It builds community, encouraging self-sacrifice and service of the poor. It offers the glue that fosters social cohesion. Our British society has been moulded over many centuries by these beliefs, yet today they are much eroded; in fact, they are vanishing. No wonder we worry about the world our children will live in.

My offer of help is this. We need to ponder the sort of post-COVID world we wish for. We need to reflect too that one day we will die: what happens then

to all my work and efforts? We need to think about values and our friendship with God. We need to get right the spiritual dimension of life if we are to tackle the practical. This is why I'd like to invite you to meet the clergy and people of the Church near you. They can help you to pray, meet God and develop a personal friendship with Him. You will hear from them the Good News of Jesus Christ and what it means. In this way, you can find the Way that leads to that true, lasting human happiness and fulfilment for which we all long. Here's a suggestion: why not try our website www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk or email me on bishopphilipegan@portsmouthdiocese.org.uk?

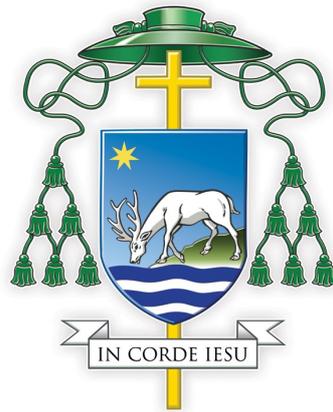
Peace be with you! I wish you a Happy Easter! Thank you for your attention – and please be assured of my prayers.

In Corde Iesu,

+Philip

Bishop of Portsmouth

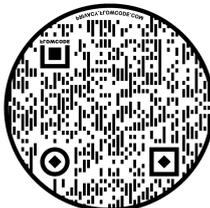




Bishop Philip Egan is the Eighth Bishop of Portsmouth since the foundation of the Diocese in 1882. His motto is: *In Corde Iesu* ('In the Heart of Jesus'). "I chose this motto because Jesus of Nazareth is the centre of our Christian faith, and His Heart, pierced for our salvation, is the chief symbol of His love. Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He knows and loves each one of us without exception, and on the Cross of Calvary, He laid down His life for us. He wants to make us His disciples and to incorporate us into the life of His Body, the Church. Filled with love, His Heart inspires each one of us to reach out in love to our neighbour, especially to the poor and needy, so that everyone may come to happiness and salvation."

The shield of the Bishop's coat of arms is unique and very distinctive. It shews a hart or deer drinking from the waters of life, as in Psalm 41 "Like the deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is yearning for you, my God." The pose of the hart playfully alludes to the naval and seafaring character of the Diocese of Portsmouth. The hart's open mouth points to the left, which, in nautical terms, is the port side, thus creating 'Ports-mouth.' In the sky is a star, like that followed by the Magi, who, led by the light of faith, journeyed far to find the infant Jesus. Here that star also represents Mary, the principal patron of the Diocese. "May this Star of the Sea, with its seven points representing Her seven sorrows and seven joys, lead us all to Jesus Her Son."

Scan me



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