



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
to be read in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
on 10th March 2013, The Fourth Sunday of Lent

GOD'S EXISTENCE - OUR HAPPINESS

Dear Believers, Brothers and Sisters,

In this third Pastoral Letter, I would like to explore something absolutely fundamental. But let me first wish you a Happy Lent! The word Lent, from the Anglo-Saxon 'lencten' ('when the days lengthen') means Spring. Lent is springtime, a springtime of faith, a time of renewal, when the Church is on a forty-day pilgrimage with Jesus to Jerusalem. Lent is thus a favourable time when the Church invites us to undertake three great works: works of prayer, works of self-denial and fasting, and works of charity, justice and reconciliation¹. Today, Laetare Sunday, mid-way to Easter, I pray that as we continue our Lenten exercises, this will truly be springtime for all the priests and people of our Diocese².

This is also the Year of Faith and I wish today to consider the First Article of the Creed: I believe in God, the omnipotent Father, the Creator of everything visible and invisible. To say that I believe in the existence of God, that He is eternal, the Maker of the universe, that I believe God to be Personal, full of love, happiness and laughter, that I believe He is my Father, the One who created me, is the most profound statement I could ever make. It changes everything. It changes how I see the world. It changes how I live my life and what I might hope for. Of course these days, to say 'I believe in God' is daringly countercultural. In Western Europe, with the rise of empirical science and modern philosophy, many people today, at least in public, claim not to believe in God or to be agnostic³. Others live etsi Deus non daretur⁴ ('as if God did not exist'), busy with work, home, shopping and entertainment. This is an ethos the mainstream media reinforce, by frequently giving air-time to scientists and others who dabble in amateur philosophy, negating God's existence, denying life has meaning and equating humans and animals. Indeed, even many Catholics nowadays live their lives as if the supernatural

realm of God and heaven were merely a light at the end of life's long tunnel, rather than a sacramental reality enfolding us at every moment⁵.

As believers, this is the challenging cultural context we live and breathe. Yet we know that to deny God is ultimately to deny Man. To deny God is to 'horizontalise' life, to trivialise human values and to demolish life's real meaning and purpose. This is why we reject the totalitarian ambitions of secularism and State-imposed agnosticism, as strangling human freedom.

St. Thomas Aquinas famously developed five ways of demonstrating the reasonableness of belief in God⁶. In this regard, I find three thoughts helpful. First, nature. When I gaze at the vastness of our universe with its myriad stars and galaxies, and at the beauty, order and inter-connection of all things down to the Higgs-Boson particle⁷, I ask myself, how could all this be just the product of random chance? Surely anyone can see herein the work of an Intelligent Designer?

Secondly, life. When I think of myself and others forever striving for the truth, forever wanting what is best for others and for ourselves, forever aspiring for a Beauty to fall in love with and to sacrifice oneself for, I ask myself, how could all this, in the end, be futile, a useless effort, an enterprise eked out on a narrow strip of space-time, but devoid of meaning and value?⁸

And thirdly, personal experience. When I think of my life and all I have received from God's Providence, of the Sacred Heart of Jesus pierced by a lance, dying on the Cross, who forgives me and calls me into a personal-passionate relationship with Himself in his Church, and who has blessed me in life with the love of family and friends and so many other gifts besides, I ask myself, how could all this be myth and make-believe, a delusion? Could the greatest saints and all the countless millions of believers over two millennia be so wrong and misguided?

No! I believe in God! I believe the alternative is unthinkable, a rejection of the facts and a recipe for social disaster. I believe that 'to believe' is the most attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible decision a person can make to the gift of life.

My brothers and sisters, in this Year of Faith, it would be good to reflect on the foundations of our faith and to have our reasons ready for those who ask⁹. It would be good too for teachers and students in our schools to explore the 'proofs' for God's existence, and most importantly, to help one another experience personally the love of God in their lives. Let me suggest a few simple helps. Why not look up what the Catechism says about God's existence? Spend ten minutes in absolute silence? Try out different types of prayer? Reflect on a piece of sacred music? Watch a TV programme about the natural world that enkindles the wonder of God? You will have other ideas too.

Let me add a final thought: the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy, especially the Mass, which is principally where we experience the power of God's love and receive a foretaste of heaven.

In recent years, a false idea has arisen that envisages the Mass as something we do, rather than what God is doing. In fact, in the Sacrifice of the Mass, Jesus offers Himself to the Father through the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit associates us with Christ's prayer and offering¹⁰. This is why the Mass is not ours; it is God's work¹¹. In this Year of Faith, I would like to invite everyone to review their attitude towards the Mass, to celebrate Mass authentically, to focus at Mass on Christ, not on ourselves as priests or people. It is important, of course, that we do our part, that we abide diligently by the rubrics, that we participate actively with due reverence, and that in our parishes, schools and communities, we foster the full variety and nobility of the Roman Rite, in its liturgical and musical styles, although always with the best examples. In this regard, many of our communities are now international, and so I wish to ask each parish and school to ensure, as Vatican II called for, that everyone knows the Latin prayers and the Latin chants of the Mass, at least those given in the new Missal¹². This is important in itself and for the young, but also as a work of evangelisation: that any visitor will know they have reached the universal 'Church of the Ages'.

So to conclude. Today, Laetare Sunday, I wish you a Happy Lent. Today, Mothering Sunday, we pray too for all our mothers, living and dead. Indeed, as we celebrate this Mass, in which Jesus lays down his life for us, His Heart bruised for our offences¹³, may the Blessed Mother and St. Edmund, Patrons of the Diocese, pray for us that we may celebrate worthily the glorious mystery of the Resurrection.

In Corde Iesu
+ Philip
Bishop of Portsmouth.

¹ "Lent precedes and prepares for Easter. It is a time to hear the Word of God, to convert, to prepare for and remember Baptism, to be reconciled with God and one's neighbour, and of more frequent recourse to the "arms of Christian penance": prayer, fasting and good works (cf. Mt 6, 1-6. 16-18)" CDW *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* (London, CTS: 2002) 124.

² The Second Preface of Lent puts this well: "You have given your children a sacred time for the renewing and purifying of their hearts, that, freed from disordered affections, they may so deal with the things of this passing world as to hold rather to the things that eternally endure" (*Roman Missal*)

³ In the 2011 National Census, 14.1 million of the population England and Wales (25%) said they have no religion, a rise of 6.4 million since 2001. The number who claim to be Christian has declined since 2001 to 33.2 million people (from 71% to 59.3% of the population). Muslims are the next largest religious group (2.7 million people or 4.8%). It is said that by 2018, Christians could be in a minority. See: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/index.html> (6th February 2013)

⁴ This phrase, used recently by Pope Benedict, was coined by the Dutch lawyer Hugo Grotius (d. 1645) in his *De iure belli ac pacis*. cf. Benedict XVI *General Audience (14th November 2012)* online at www.vatican.va (6th February 2013)

⁵ For a superb treatment of this, see John Henry Newman "The Invisible World" in his *Parochial and Plain Sermons Volume 4* (San Francisco, Ignatius: 1987)

⁶ See *STh* I, 2, 3

⁷ cf. St. Athanasius *From a Discourse Against the Pagans* 42-43 (PG 25, 83-87) given as the Second Reading in the Office of Readings for Friday Week One of the Year.

⁸ For a classic presentation of this, see B. Lonergan *Method in Theology* (London, DLT: 1972) 101-103

⁹ "Simply reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts, and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have. But give it with courtesy and respect, and with a clear conscience, so that those who slander you when you are living a good life in Christ, may be proved wrong in the accusations that they bring" (1 Peter 3: 15-16).

¹⁰ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* 2-5, 16 and references

¹¹ The Liturgy is the worship of the 'whole' Christ, Head and members. The error is to split the 'whole Christ,' focusing instead on ourselves and our part in Christ's work, whilst neglecting the Lord who makes our worship possible. "Christ always associates the Church with Himself in this great work wherein God is perfectly glorified and men are sanctified. The Church is His beloved Bride who calls to her Lord, and through Him offers worship to the Eternal Father. Rightly, then, the liturgy is considered as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. In the liturgy the sanctification of the man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs; in the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members. From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others; no other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree" *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7

¹² Vatican II *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 36 and 54; cf. Benedict XVI *Sacramentum Caritatis* (London, CTS: 2007) 62

¹³ *Litany of the Sacred Heart*. The reference is to Isaiah 53: 3, which forms part of the dramatic First Reading (Is 52:13- 53 12) appointed for the Good Friday Liturgy.