

PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP  
 appointed to be read  
 in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth  
 on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2019, the Sixth Sunday of Easter.

#### VERBUM DEI

Dear Pilgrims,

At the end of the readings at Mass, the reader says *Verbum Domini* ('The Word of the Lord'), to which we all respond *Deo gratias* ('Thanks be to God'). I want to explore this - but, first, to announce that next year, 2020, our Diocese of Portsmouth, along with the whole Church in England and Wales, is going to keep a special Year of the Bible called 'The God Who speaks.'<sup>1</sup> 2020 is the 1600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Jerome and the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pope Benedict's remarkable document, *Verbum Domini*.<sup>2</sup> More on this in a moment.

Let me start with a word about the bible. People glibly suggest we read it, yet the bible is long; it's a whole library of literature.<sup>3</sup> The Old Testament has 46 books of chronicles, poetry, laws and prophecy. The New Testament has 27 books of history, apocalyptic, letters and the four Gospels that record Jesus's life, and form its heart and highpoint.<sup>4</sup> As Catholics, we don't believe, in a fundamentalist sense, that every word of the bible is a 'literal fact.'<sup>5</sup> What we do believe is that the bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit. It contains and expresses in the language and concepts of its day the teaching and saving truth that God wants to communicate to us.<sup>6</sup> Nor do we believe that anyone can simply pick up a bible and interpret it. The bible is the Church's book.<sup>7</sup> To understand it, you have to read it within the Church's Tradition and Teaching.<sup>8</sup> After all, it took time for the present collection of books to come together and it was Pope Damasus in the fourth century who commissioned its definitive translation.<sup>9</sup> So when you see someone holding a bible, always exclaim with a loving sigh: "Praise God – there's the Church's Bible!"

Jesus said: "The truth will set you free."<sup>10</sup> Error and ambiguity, in contrast, enslave and confuse, which is why throughout her history the Church has always sought to express her doctrines with great care and clarity. In today's culture, with its noisy plurality of views, many toxic, we must do our best to hold firmly to the orthodox teaching of Jesus. This is crucial because these doctrines express truth not only about God but about how to be human, about happiness and eternal life. As disciples of Christ, we live 'under' the Word of God, and so we must constantly and intentionally reconcile our thinking with that of Scripture, Tradition and Church teaching.<sup>11</sup> Every human person has a mind, a will, a heart. Doctrine is like food for the mind, but it also nourishes the heart with love and it spurs us on to service and action.<sup>12</sup> All the Church's doctrines are rooted in the Scriptures. This is why, in the same way we receive Holy Communion at Mass with devotion, we should listen to the readings with devotion, eagerly ingesting God's Word.<sup>13</sup> For that Word is a Person, God the Son, Jesus Christ. In this way we invite the Blessed Trinity to dwell in our hearts, just as Jesus promises in today's Gospel: "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home with him."<sup>14</sup>

To return to 2020, in our Diocese of Portsmouth I would like us to follow-up the Year of the Bible in 2021 with a Year of the Eucharist. This will give us as a Diocese the opportunity for a deep 'spiritual re-boot.' I pray these two Years will deepen us and unify us, filling us with passion for mission, formation and catechesis, service and charitable action. In this way we can really begin to put into practice our grand vision of *Bringing People Closer to Jesus Christ through His Church*. So I ask everyone to start thinking now about how to know our faith better, how to grow in enthusiasm for God's Word, how to improve our preaching and how to deepen our understanding of the readings we hear at Mass. Every home should have a bible and every parish a Book of the Gospels for use at Mass, revered with candles and incense. I ask all our schools to teach students how to undertake *lectio divina*,<sup>15</sup> how to pray using the Scriptures.<sup>16</sup> Taking care it is an approved version, might our parishes buy their school a class set of bibles for this? And could parishes keep some bibles at the back of church for people to use in prayer? Indeed, in your own prayer-time, ask yourself: Which is my favourite bible-story? Why not pray next Sunday's Gospel? Or download the Gospels to your smartphone or tablet? Or tune into the weekly Wednesday Webinar advertised in e-News? Or join a bible-study group? To assist readers at Mass to develop further the skills this ministry requires, we will be providing a series of workshops leading to a diocesan *recognitio*. I also intend to distribute to every Mass-goer in the Diocese a copy of the Gospel to carry with them in their pocket.

To conclude, St. Jerome once said: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ".<sup>17</sup> Ultimately every line of Scripture speaks of Jesus.<sup>18</sup> The bible's greatest story is the *kerygma*, the proclamation of Christ, His birth, life, death and resurrection for you and for me. Sometimes, erroneously, it is said that Christianity is a religion of the book. It isn't; it's about a Person.<sup>19</sup> Yet we are profoundly grateful to God for giving us His Word in a written form, so that we can read, study, reflect on it and love it, putting it into practice. Just as the Word became flesh in the Virgin's womb by the power of the Holy Spirit, so by the same Spirit, sacred Scripture has been born from the womb of the

Church.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the bible is like a sacrament: it brings us into living union with Jesus, and through Him, with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

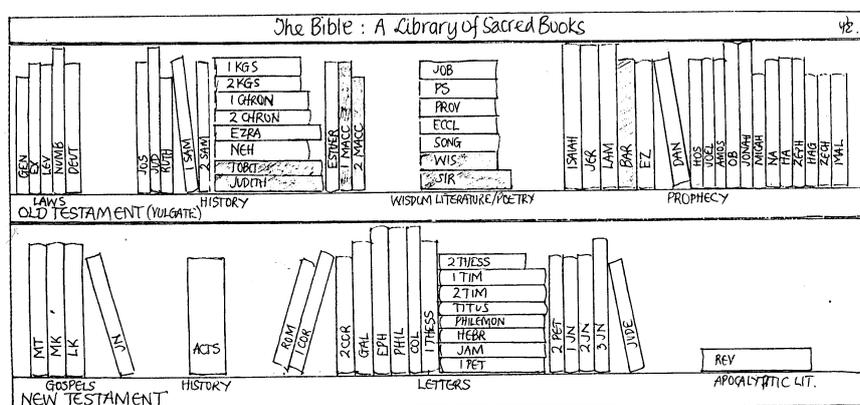
So as we plan ahead for this Year of the God Who speaks, let us ask Mary, the Mother of God's Incarnate Word, to pray for us. At the Annunciation, She gave us an inspiring example of the best approach: She heard the Word, believed it, pondered it in Her heart and put it into practice.<sup>21</sup> Let's also ask our diocesan patrons to pray for us. Both of them dearly loved the Scriptures: St. Edmund of Abingdon, an eloquent preacher, and Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati who applied the letters of St. Paul to his loving service of the poor.<sup>22</sup> To their prayers for you and your loved ones, I add my own with best wishes.

In Corde Iesu  
+ Philip  
Bishop of Portsmouth

<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see [http://www.catholicnews.org.uk/Home/Special-Events/The-God-Who-Speaks/\(language\)/eng-GB](http://www.catholicnews.org.uk/Home/Special-Events/The-God-Who-Speaks/(language)/eng-GB) (May 2019). The Year will be formally announced on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2019.  
<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI *Verbum Domini. Post-Synodal Exhortation on the Word of God* (London, CTS: 2010). It can be downloaded here: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20100930\\_verbum-domini.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html) (May 2019). *Verbum Domini* has been widely acclaimed as the most important teaching document of the Church on scripture since the Second Vatican Council.

### THE BIBLE - A LIBRARY OF SACRED BOOKS

The Deuterocanonical Books are indicated in grey



<sup>4</sup> The canon of Sacred Scripture continues to be a minor divergence between Catholics and Reformed Christians. All Christians accept 27 books in the New Testament, but there was some discussion in the early Church and debate during the Reformation about the 7 Deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament (Tobit, Judith, Baruk, Wisdom, Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, 1 and 2 Maccabees). Even as early as the late-4<sup>th</sup> century, the Church laid down that these books were indeed part of the canon: see Synod of Rome (382) *Decretum Damasi* in H. Denzinger ed. P. Hünermann *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationem de rebus fidei et morum 43rd Edition* (San Francisco, Ignatius: 2012) – henceforth referred to as DH - DH 179. Consequently Catholic bibles to this day contain a 46 book Old Testament (39 Protocanonical and 7 Deuterocanonical books, plus additional passages in Esther and Daniel). The 1994 Catechism re-asserts this: see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [henceforth CCC] 120. Protestant bibles, on the other hand, chose increasingly to omit the Deuterocanonicals, referring to them as apocrypha ('hidden things'). Catholics, on the other hand, apply the term apocrypha to non-canonical books such as inter-testamental literature, letters and other items that never made it into canon. Such would include 3 and 4 Maccabees, the Ascension of Isaiah, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, the Letter to Barnabas and so on.

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<sup>5</sup> “The basic problem with fundamentalist interpretation is that, refusing to take into account the historical character of biblical revelation, it makes itself incapable of accepting the full truth of the incarnation itself. As regards relationships with God, fundamentalism seeks to escape any closeness of the divine and the human ... for this reason, it tends to treat the biblical text as if it had been dictated word for word by the Spirit. It fails to recognize that the word of God has been formulated in language and expression conditioned by various periods” Pontifical Biblical Commission *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana: 1993) 1-F pages 70-71.

<sup>6</sup> “Since .. all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures” Second Vatican Council *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation Dei Verbum* in ed. A. Flannery *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (New York, Costello: 1975/1987) 11.

<sup>7</sup> “The Bible is the Church’s book, and its essential place in the Church’s life gives rise to its genuine interpretation” *Verbum Domini* 29.

<sup>8</sup> “Here we can point to a fundamental criterion of biblical hermeneutics: the primary setting for scriptural interpretation is the life of the Church. This is ... something demanded by the very nature of the Scriptures and the way they gradually came into being. ... Moreover, it is the faith of the Church that recognizes in the Bible the word of God; as Saint Augustine memorably put it: ‘I would not believe the Gospel, had not the authority of the Catholic Church led me to do so’” *Verbum Domini* 29

<sup>9</sup> It was the Council of Trent in its *Decree on the Reception of the Sacred Books and Traditions* (1546) that solemnly determined the canon of Scripture: see DH 1501-1504.

<sup>10</sup> John 8: 32

<sup>11</sup> See *Dei Verbum* 10 for a classic presentation of this ‘triad.’

<sup>12</sup> “There is an organic connection between our spiritual life and the dogmas. Dogmas are lights along the path of faith; they illuminate it and make it secure. Conversely, if our life is upright, our intellect and heart will be open to welcome the light shed by the dogmas of faith” CCC 89.

<sup>13</sup> Saint Jerome is an inspiration here. “In his great love for the word of God, he often wondered: ‘How could one live without the knowledge of Scripture, by which we come to know Christ himself, who is the life of believers?’ He knew well that the Bible is the means ‘by which God speaks daily to believers’. His advice to the Roman matron Leta about raising her daughter was this: ‘Be sure that she studies a passage of Scripture each day... Prayer should follow reading, and reading follow prayer... so that in the place of jewellery and silk, she may love the divine books’” *Verbum Domini* 72.

<sup>14</sup> John 14: 23

<sup>15</sup> *Lectio divina* is a prayerful method for reading and meditating on texts of scripture. Ask your priest to teach you how to do it.

<sup>16</sup> I will ask our Formation for Mission team and our Schools Department to collaborate on producing a guide on how to undertake *lectio divina*.

<sup>17</sup> St. Jerome, *Commentariorum in Isaiam libri xviii* prol.:PL 24,17B. *DV* 25. Cf. *Phil* 3:8

<sup>18</sup> As Hugh of Saint Victor said, “All divine Scripture is one book, and this one book is Christ, speaks of Christ and finds its fulfilment in Christ” *De Arca Noe*, 2, 8: PL 176, 642C-D.

<sup>19</sup> “While in the Church we greatly venerate the sacred Scriptures, the Christian faith is not a ‘religion of the book’: Christianity is the ‘religion of the word of God’, not of ‘a written and mute word, but of the incarnate and living Word’ (Saint Bernard of Clairvaux *Homilia super missus est*, IV, 11: PL 183, 86B)” *Verbum Domini* 7

<sup>20</sup> *Verbum Domini* 19

<sup>21</sup> See J. H. Newman ‘The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine (1843)’ Sermon XV in *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford* (London, Rivingtons: 1872) 312-314.

<sup>22</sup> On April 29, 1925, just two months before his death, Pier Giorgio wrote to his friend Isidoro Bonini encouraging him to read the writings of St. Paul: “...the mind every now and then finds peace and relief and spiritual enjoyment in reading Saint Paul. I’d like you to try and read St. Paul: he is marvellous and the soul is uplifted by this reading and we are prodded to follow the right way and to return to it as soon as we leave it through sin” (ed. T. Deeter and C. Wohar *Pier Giorgio Frassati Letters to His Friends and Family* [New York, St. Paul’s: 2009] 230). According to his sister Luciana, Pier Giorgio always carried in his pocket a hand-written copy of St. Paul’s ‘Hymn to Charity’ (1 Cor 12: 31- 13: 13).