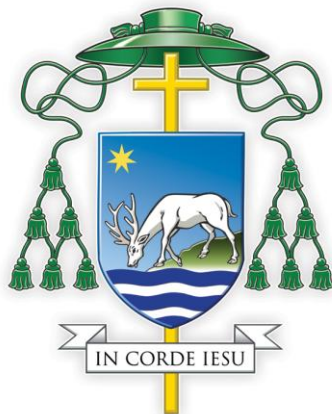




PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
to be read in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
on 30th December 2012, the Feast of the Holy Family

JESUS CHRIST, THE PERFECT HUMAN

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In this second Pastoral Letter, I want to discuss something that many people find very challenging and controversial. But let me first, on this feast of the Holy Family, wish you the continuing joys of Christmas. Since becoming your bishop a few weeks ago, I have been visiting our priests. I thank God for all the wonderful priests we have and for their inspiring love and service of Jesus and his Church. I thank God too for the many beautiful churches in our diocese and not least for you, the People of God, for your perseverance in faith and Christian discipleship in these difficult times. As we enter the New Year 2013, I urge you, in the words of today's Second Reading, often to "think of the love that the Father has lavished upon us by letting us be called God's children."¹

The context of this Pastoral Letter is two-fold. First, the Year of Faith, in which I want to explore the articles of the Creed. Today, let us consider the second article: "I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God."² Jesus Christ is Divine. He is God the Son. He is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, or to use that daringly non-Scriptural term, "consubstantial with the Father". This is an important doctrine to teach today. For many would acknowledge Jesus to be a great religious leader, a Prophet and teacher, a good and holy man. But in fact He is infinitely greater: He is God the Word. When Jesus speaks, it is God speaking. This changes everything. In this Year of Faith, it would be good to review our prayer and catechesis to ensure it reflects the fullness of this truth. We should also study afresh the Creed and its origins³ so we can understand better the Church's teaching and why Jesus Christ is the only Way to salvation.

The second context of this Letter is today's feast of the Holy Family, which presents us with the humanity of Christ: that he became incarnate "for us and for our salvation". Or to paraphrase St. Leo, "He came down from heaven that we might go up to heaven"⁴. In taking on human nature, Jesus also took on a human history and a human culture. He was brought up in Nazareth in the home of Mary and Joseph⁵. Mary, His mother, taught him his prayers and the religious traditions of his people. Joseph, as a father, gave him a trade and initiated him into the society of the day. We recall all of this in the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary, which it would be good to recite every day during the Christmas season. You might also consider reading the new book by Pope Benedict: "Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives"⁶.

So the Creed affirms that Jesus Christ is truly divine, God from God; but it also states that He is the New Adam, the Perfect Human.⁷ To say this today is highly controversial. If in the fourth century it was the doctrine about how Jesus could be divine yet human, today the hot-button issue is what it means to be human. Indeed, most of the big debates in our society revolve around two matters: sex and authority. What is the truth about human sexuality? And who can tell me how to live my life?

In 1968, at the height of the Sixties, Pope Paul VI wrote an Encyclical Letter that then and now many Catholics find difficult. He repeated the traditional teaching of the Church, based on the natural law and confirmed by revelation, that sexual intercourse is an integral act for love and for life, and that these two aspects of sexuality – love and life – cannot be divorced⁸. Humanae Vitae was a prophetic document. Pope Paul spoke of catastrophic consequences for society and culture if these two ends of marriage were split. 45 years on, we can see what he meant in such things as the reduction of sex to a leisure activity, the trafficking of people for prostitution and pornography, broken family relationships, and the explosion of addictive behaviours leading to despair, shame and guilt⁹.

As Catholics, we believe in the natural way of life. We believe that the purpose of sexual intercourse is to express the love between a man and a woman, a love which, within the permanent commitment of marriage, is open to being fruitful to life.¹⁰ This is the way to lasting happiness and fulfilment, even if to become chaste – that is, to develop a mature and fully integrated sexuality, as a single person or a married couple – involves a life-long struggle and "apprenticeship in self-mastery"¹¹. To help us, Jesus calls us to be his disciples, and offers us the healing balm and the strength we need, above all in confession and Holy Communion.

Jesus Christ is the way to personal happiness and authentic humanism. Sadly, the teaching of Humanae Vitae about sexual morality and family values has become something of an 'elephant in the room' that no-one seems to mention. In this Year of Faith then, I would like to invite

everyone to discover again the Church's wonderful vision of love and life, as expounded in the Catechism. I would also like to ask all families, whatever their form or circumstances, to think about developing a deeper and richer Catholic ethos in the home, so as to give a clearer witness to contemporary culture. For instance, why not spend an evening together as a family, occasionally switch off the computer, make the Sign of the Cross on entering the house, adopt a communal work of justice and charity, or keep special the fast-days and feast-days? I am sure you will think of many other ways of preserving our Catholic distinctiveness.

In this Mass of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, let us thank God for our own families, and pray for them. Let us pray for those who struggle to live a chaste life in imitation of Christ. Let us pray for families who are struggling or who have suffered tragedy and pain. And let us pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on our land. Like Mary and Joseph who found Jesus in the Temple, may the people of England find their way to salvation and happiness in Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, ever present and active in his Church. Indeed, in this Year of Faith, may the Spirit lead us all to the living waters that stream from the Heart of Jesus, burning with love for us.

In Corde Iesu,
+ Philip
Bishop of Portsmouth

¹ I John 3: 1. This is the second reading given in the alternative set of readings for optional use in Year C.

² Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, *The Roman Missal* 562

³ see *Catechism of the Catholic Church. Second Edition* (Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2000) 422-455; *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London, CTS 2006) 81f and *YOUCAT Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London, CTS 2010) 71f

⁴ Cf. St. Leo *Sermo 6 In Nativitate Domini* 2-3, 5 (PL 54, 213-216). This constitutes the Second Reading in the Office of Readings for 31st December.

⁵ Luke 2: 51-52

⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (New York, Image 2012)

⁷ *Gaudium et Spes* 22

⁸ For a concise summary of the Church's teaching, see *Catechism* 2331-2400

⁹ See Paul VI *Humanae Vitae* (London, CTS 1968) 19-30

¹⁰ John Paul II *Gratissimam Sane (Letter to Families)* 7-8, available online at www.vatican.va (December 2012)

¹¹ *Catechism* 2339