



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
to be read aloud
in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth on
23rd March 2014, the Third Sunday of Lent

SIN, LENT, REDEMPTION

Dear Pilgrims,

I need to raise with you a very serious matter, one that it is appropriate for us to consider during this season of Lent. For Lent is a time of Christian warfare,¹ when, accompanying Christ in the desert, we engage in battle against spiritual evils, both within and without. In this season, we seek "to hear the Word of God, to convert, to remember our Baptism, to be reconciled with God and neighbour" and to use the weapons of Christian penance, namely, prayer, self-denial and charity.² So let me first wish you the grace of God for a happy Lent! May this Lent be for you a truly favourable time, a springtime of faith, a season of real renewal and rebirth, as we prepare to celebrate Easter.

But let me draw closer to my theme. From the Bible and from the *Catechism*, we know that there are basically two types of sin: mortal and venial.³ A sin is 'missing the mark,' a failure to follow our in-built drive towards truth, goodness and love,⁴ an offence against God and neighbour, a thought, word, deed or omission breaking God's law, damaging self, hurting others and harming our society.⁵ A mortal sin, as its name suggests, is lethal; it cuts us off from Christ and His Church, deserving the "eternal death of hell,"⁶ whereas a venial sin is a disorder that wounds and impairs our communion with God.⁷ To commit a mortal sin, three conditions are necessary.⁸ We must have full knowledge. We must give complete consent. (Obviously, external pressures, disordered emotions and pathological or addictive patterns of behaviour can diminish the free character of the offence committed.) It must also be a grave matter, something that directly contradicts one of the Ten Commandments.

Let us consider the Eighth Commandment, not least within the context of today's digital age. The Ten Commandments make explicit the natural law written into every human heart. They tell us to love God (Commandments One to Three) and to love our neighbour (Commandments Four to Ten). The

Eighth Commandment says this: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour."⁹ In other words, we must exercise discretion, respect others and their privacy, and not engage in slander, gossip and rash judgment. We must avoid calumny, that is, slurring and damaging people, and not spread abroad their sins and failings.¹⁰ How do I use Facebook or Twitter? Am I charitable when blogging? Do I revel in other people's failings? All this is grave matter. Yet when we think of our news media and TV, in which fallen celebrities are pilloried, reputations shredded and people's sins exposed, it sometimes seems our popular culture thrives on breaking this Commandment.

The Truth is always graced. When we speak the Truth, our words are always laden with the Holy Spirit, piercing the heart of the listener and inviting them to accept our words and put them into action. "O that today you would listen to his voice; harden not your hearts" exclaimed today's Psalm. We see this too in the Gospel, that magnificent account of Jesus meeting the Samaritan at the well.¹¹ Jesus was thirsty from the journey, but what He was really thirsting for was the woman's faith.¹² In the ensuing dialogue, like a piece of theatre, He encouraged her with the promise of "living water," the Holy Spirit, "a spring welling up to eternal life."¹³ When Jesus, His Heart full of compassion, gently spoke to her the truth about her past and about Who He was, she was transformed.¹⁴ She ran off to tell the whole town she had found the Messiah.

In Lent, we think about serious things, our choices, our sins, our redemption. In this season, the Church invites us to purify our desires, especially our deepest desire for happiness, for love, for goodness and truth. In making a moral decision, we cannot choose simply on the basis of what gives us pleasure and what causes us pain.¹⁵ We must also take account of our values, of what is right and what is wrong, recognizing that often, to do the right thing involves self-sacrifice. This is why to purify our desires, to be happy in life, to be psychologically healthy, we must pray. We must be people of prayer. We must develop a personal relationship with God. St. Theresa of Lisieux once said: "For me, prayer is a surge of the heart, a simple look towards heaven, a cry of recognition and love."¹⁶ We must find time and space every day to pray our morning and night prayers, from the heart to the Heart of Jesus. We cannot be saved unless we pray. We must read the Gospels, use a prayer book, visit the Blessed Sacrament, listen in silence, say the Rosary and the Angelus, maybe recite part of the Divine Office, and take part in the greatest prayer of all, the Sacrifice of the Mass.

One last point. This Lent, I urge you to make good use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.¹⁷ There is no better way to effect Lenten renewal than to meet Jesus One to one, Face to face, in the Sacrament of Penance, burying our sins in Him and rising with Him to new life. This Sacrament is the only means of being forgiven a mortal sin and a huge support in dealing with venial sins and bad habits.¹⁸ The 'secret' of a good confession is a careful examination of conscience, which is why reflecting in prayer on the Ten Commandments is a great help. Indeed, on our Lenten journey with Christ in the desert, we will not reach Jerusalem unless we make a good confession, and so I urge you to find time to celebrate this therapeutic Sacrament now, with a priest near you.

So, once again, I wish you a Happy Lent! Thank you for listening. May God bless you all. Please pray for me, as I do for you, every day.

In Corde Iesu
+ Philip
Bishop of Portsmouth.

¹ See Eph 6: 10-20

² CDW *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* (London, CTS: 2002) 124. cf. Mt 6, 1-6. 16-18

³ Cf. 1 John 5: 16-17. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) 1854-64

⁴ For a succinct summary of the triad ‘progress-decline-redemption’ in the light of the willful transgression of the transcendental precepts (Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be reasonable, Be responsible, Be loving), see B. Lonergan *Method in Theology* (London, DLT: 1972) 52-55. Cf. M. Miller *The Quest for God and the Good Life* (Washington, CUA Press: 2013).

⁵ See CCC 1849.

⁶ “Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself. It results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back. However, although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God” (CCC 1861).

⁷ “Venial sin weakens charity; it manifests a disordered affection for created goods; it impedes the soul's progress in the exercise of the virtues and the practice of the moral good; it merits temporal punishment. Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin. However venial sin does not break the covenant with God. With God's grace it is humanly reparable” (CCC 1863).

⁸ “For a *sin* to be *mortal*, three conditions must together be met: "Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent" (CCC 1857)

⁹ See Ex 20: 16 and Deut 5: 20

¹⁰ See CCC 2475-2487.

¹¹ John 4: 5-42

¹² “For when he asked the Samaritan woman for water to drink, he had already created the gift of faith within her and so ardently did he thirst for her faith, that he kindled in her the fire of divine love” *Roman Missal: Preface of the Third Sunday of Lent*.

¹³ Jn 4: 10-15.

¹⁴ St. John Chrysostom notes that the “Apostles, when they were called, left their nets; this woman leaves her water jar and proclaims the Gospel, calling not just one person but influencing the whole city” (*Hom in Ioannem* 33)

¹⁵ Jeremy Bentham based his philosophy of utilitarianism precisely on this principle, stating at the beginning of his 1789 *Introduction to the Principles and Morals of Legislation*, that "nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure" (p. 1). For a more textured and comprehensive account of making a judgment of value, see B. Lonergan *Method in Theology* 36-41.

¹⁶ St. Thérèse of Lisieux *Manuscripts autobiographiques* C 25r.

¹⁷ The *Code of Canon Law* outlines a Catholic's ‘Easter duties’ as follows: “After being initiated into the Most Holy Eucharist, each of the faithful is obliged to receive Holy Communion at least once a year. This precept must be fulfilled during the Easter season” (CIC 920). Moreover, “each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year. Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion, even if s/he experiences deep contrition, without having first received sacramental absolution” (CCC 1457). The period for fulfilling Easter duties is usually said to be sometime between Ash Wednesday and Trinity Sunday.

¹⁸ See *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London, CTS: 2006) 304-306