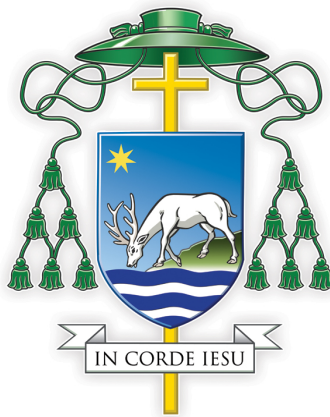


# BISHOP OF PORTSMOUTH

Rt. Rev. Philip A. Egan BA, STL, PhD



## Message from Bishop Philip to the Clergy and People of the Diocese of Portsmouth about the Extraordinary Synod

I warmly welcome the Holy Father's announcement of an Extraordinary Synod of Bishops to be held in Rome in October 2014 on the topic of "The Pastoral Care of the Family in the Context of Evangelisation". The Synod will afford the whole Church an opportunity to reflect on the preparation of people for marriage in today's context, on the valid celebration of marriage, and on the pastoral care and support of married couples and family life. It will also be a wonderful opportunity for us in the Diocese of Portsmouth to articulate once again the teaching of Jesus and his Church on marriage and family life, and to explore new ways of showing mercy to those in difficulty.

I have three hopes from this Synod for our diocese. Indeed, I would like to ask everyone to present these three intentions in prayer to the Lord over the coming months, as the Church prepares for the Synod.

My first hope for this Synod is that it will help our diocese towards a renewed appreciation of the demanding yet beautiful vision of marriage and family life that the Church presents us with. This is so evidently necessary today. Over the last fifty years, marriage, in which one man and one woman commit themselves to each other in life and love, 'til death do us part', has declined in our society while cohabitation has rapidly become the norm. In the Diocese of Portsmouth, for instance, in 1962 there were 1319 marriages, but in 2012, 566, and this, despite the fact that the estimated Catholic population of our diocese rose by 25%. We need to ask: How might we educate, form and support Catholics to embrace with joy the Church's vision and to put it into practice? This has massive implications for our Catholic schools and their RE curriculum, and also for our parishes and their marriage preparation courses. I hope and pray that Pope Francis's initiative in calling this Extraordinary Synod will help us in the diocese to develop new resources, and not least a comprehensive marriage preparation programme, at once spiritual, theological and practical.

My second hope for this Synod is that it will help our diocese to find new ways of celebrating and supporting parents, married couples and Christian family life. Please pray for the Department for Vocation as it seeks to establish teams for the pastoral support of Marriage and Family Life. I hope we will develop new ways of celebrating an engagement, the Rite of Marriage and also a significant anniversary. We need to share wisdom and good practice in parenting skills, in bringing up children, in creating a happy home, in honouring grandparents and our relations, and in living as a family the routines of being 'the domestic church' (cf. Catechism 1655-1658), such as attending Sunday Mass. It would be wonderful to encourage the families of our diocese to keep fast days and feast days, to develop family activities for the liturgical seasons, to say the family Rosary, the Divine Office and prayers at mealtimes and to set up a small altar or sacred space in the home. I wonder too whether we might devise a 'Diocesan Family Manual', with inspiring passages of Scripture and elements of Church teaching, with a suggested 'plan of life' and with simple prayers to be said at meals, on special occasions, when someone is sick, or for departed loved ones on a visit to a cemetery?

My third hope for this Synod is that it will give renewed attention to the situation of those Catholics who find themselves in 'irregular unions', or are divorced and remarried. Is there some way of affording them mercy, help and reconciliation? Along with this, I hope that some help will also be given to those non-Catholics who wish to be received into the Church but find themselves prevented by an irregularity in their own or their partner's marital status.

These are some of my hopes and prayers, as we contemplate the vocation to marriage and family-life. In this, we must not, of course forget to love, care and support all people, including those who are single. So over the coming months, as the Church prepares for this Extraordinary Synod, let us ponder that instruction which Mary gave at the Wedding Feast of Cana: 'Do whatever He tells you' (John 2: 5). Let us ask the Lord Jesus to pour out the many gifts of the Holy Spirit upon us all, above all on our families.

In Corde Iesu,

+ Philip

15<sup>th</sup> October 2013

The Liturgical Memorial of St. Teresa of Jesus