



*From the Archbishop of Southwark*

## **Letter to Religious on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 8 December 2020**

*'God chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence.'* (Eph 1:4)

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ

Grace and peace to you whom the Lord loves. I wanted to write to you, the religious women and men living and serving within our Archdiocese, to express my deep gratitude for your ministry and witness during these recent months of the Covid 19 pandemic. Like everyone else, you too will have felt the uncertainty, even the fear, of not knowing how the future might unfold. You will have experienced the impact, on your everyday life, of extra restrictions and requirements. Few of us are impervious to the anxiety this brings, both for ourselves and for those we love and care about. Whether we live alone, or in community, these have been challenging times, even for those schooled in solitude and silence.

Acknowledging our difficulties and frustrations, we bring them to our first love, to the Lord Jesus. Everything we cannot understand, or change for the better, we lay at the foot of His cross. When that wood was planted in the earth humanity's redemption took root. The place of Mary and John is forever ours. What we struggle to accept or achieve is surrendered before the great contradictory sign of transformation. Death is beaten and love reigns supreme. Sin is trampled and mercy abounds. Thank you for being witnesses to the hope born of Christ's resurrection.

As we sit in the middle of our Advent journey, we remember that the mysteries of Christ's resurrection and His incarnation are interwoven. His birth in the stable of Bethlehem foreshadows His rebirth from the tomb in Jerusalem. This is shown strikingly in the iconography of the Eastern Christian tradition. Icons of the nativity depict the Lord's birth in a darkened, tomblike cave. The tiny Christ Child is tightly bound in swaddling clothes, anticipating His burial shroud. He lays in a manger, resembling a coffin. This scene of new life points forward. The mysteries are interconnected. This was brought home to me as a child. The crib in our parish church always had a small crucifix hanging in the background. The darkness of the stable and the gloom of the tomb are illumined by one and the same light radiating, first from the new-born child, and then victoriously from the risen Christ. And this light will be seen again on earth when the Lord of time and history comes again in glory.

Here is a beautiful truth: God loved and knew us long before we were born, and God will love and know us long after we die. Each of us was, and is, chosen in Christ. We are chosen to be holy and spotless, chosen to live through love. In a unique way God called our Blessed

Lady and prepared her, from the first moment of her existence, to be the Mother of our Saviour. Our own journey, of course, is different; but God also prepared the way for each one of us. Just think of your own vocation, of the people, places, and situations that brought you to where you are today. Each of us has heard the words spoken to Our Lady echoed in our own pilgrimage of faith: *'Do not be afraid, because you too have found God's favour.'* Despite the meandering and questions, God prepared a way of hope for us where the love of Christ captured our hearts.

As I look back on my life, there have been religious present throughout. I remember the day I was received into the Catholic Church. I was sixteen and a half. During the Mass, after my reception, at the sign of peace, a religious sister came up to me, kissed me on both cheeks and put a rosary in my hand. I never met her before or since. It was a loving, tangible welcome. I think of the religious sisters who served in parishes I attended, the sister who was my chaplain at university, the sisters who taught me and cared for me in seminary. How blessed I have been to work alongside sisters in schools and parishes, in hospital and prison chaplaincy. What a joy it is to be carried by the friendship of enclosed communities of sisters, and to share and receive the apostolate of sisters in every kind of pastoral, evangelising, and catechetical mission. I think of the religious men too, who have taught me, accompanied me spiritually, shown me hospitality in their houses, and with whom I have worked as fellow labourers in the vineyard. Each and all of them chosen in Christ, living in love through His presence.

I share this not as a trip down memory lane, but to remind you of the difference you make to countless lives by your consecration to Christ and your loving service of His people. I would not be the person, priest, or bishop I am today without the religious who have shaped, and continue to shape, my discipleship. By your very life, by your presence in the Church and in the world, before you ever say or do anything, you are a beacon of the kingdom. You are a sign that *'the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.'* (Rom 5:5) Never believe you are most valuable for what you can do for the Lord. Always believe you are most valuable for who you are before the Lord. You are women and men of faith, consecrated to sanctify and serve the Church and the world.

I want to thank Fr James Hurley, the Episcopal Vicar for Religious in our Archdiocese, and the Vicars for Religious: Sr Shelagh, Sr Yvonne, and Sr Patricia. They work ceaselessly to keep everyone connected and supported. I want religious life to flourish in our Archdiocese. I want there to be more women and men like you who live the Gospel with fidelity so that the Lord Jesus can be loved, known, and served. May the joy of the Lord be our strength, as like Mary, we place all our hope in God's will. Please pray for me as I do for you.

With every blessing  
Yours devotedly in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Wilson', with a small cross at the beginning and a horizontal line underneath.

The Most Reverend John Wilson  
Archbishop of Southwark