



An Advent Pastoral Letter

On 175th Anniversary of Shrewsbury Diocese

To be read at all Masses on the First Sunday of Advent, 30th November 2025

My dear brothers and sisters,

I write as this Jubilee Year draws to its close and our Shrewsbury Diocese celebrates 175 years since its founding. The Jubilee of 2025 has been dedicated to hope. Christian hope is never a vague expectation that things might work out, rather it is knowing on what, or rather on who we can truly depend. The Jubilee Year has celebrated that Christ is our hope. A hope renewed every day when we raise our minds and hearts in prayer; every time we confess our sins and are ready to start anew; and each Sunday when we come together with all the Church to offer, adore and receive the Holy Eucharist.

Advent renews this hope each year inviting every generation *“to wake from sleep”* because in Saint Paul’s words, *“salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed”ⁱ*. The Gospel declares this hope fulfilled in Christ’s coming: the Eternal Son of God born at Bethlehem, coming now to us in grace, supremely in His Eucharist, the very source of grace, and at last in great power and glory *“at an hour (we) do not expect”ⁱⁱ*.

In this same hope a 39-year-old Bishop James Brown, and the founding generation of the Diocese dared to look forwards. In a threatening atmosphere of anti-Catholic feeling, our first bishop had to be hurriedly consecrated. His new mission was already sufficiently daunting in serving a vast territory, then including North Wales, with only 26 diocesan priests. The faithful barely numbered 20,000 and suffered from what Bishop Brown described as *“a want of means”*; that is a lack of every human resource. This led our first Bishop to lament Sunday Mass was still being celebrated of necessity in taverns, stables and above blacksmith’s shops.

By any human calculation the prospects of this new Diocese were poor indeed. Yet, within a generation, Bishop Brown was able to record the Mass was within everyone’s reach and there was barely a new mission that did not have a school to help parents pass on the Catholic faith to their children. This was a vast achievement in so few years, which testifies to the faith and sacrifices of the first

generation of our Diocese. The celebration of this 175th anniversary, invites us to give thanks for all who were part of a heroic story and to re-dedicate ourselves in making every sacrifice to place the Mass at the centre our lives, to treasure Christ's abiding presence in the Blessed Sacrament and to pass on the fulness of the faith we have received.

The hope in which this Diocese was born, was well expressed by Saint John Henry Newman as being the "*Second Spring*" of the Catholic Church in our land. Addressing the newly appointed bishops he declared, "*One thing I know that according to our need, so will be our strength.*" Newman specifically referred to this Diocese, prophesying that Shrewsbury, "*If the world lasts, shall be name as musical to the ear, as stirring to the heart as the glories we have lost; and Saints shall arise ...*" ⁱⁱⁱ.

As we celebrate this anniversary year, we are encouraged in the same supernatural hope to which John Henry Newman pointed us. It is the hope celebrated in the joy of Christ's first coming in the poverty of Bethlehem; His coming now in His Word and Sacraments, supremely in His Eucharist; and in joyful expectation of His final coming in glory. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* declares that "*Whenever the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she remembers this promise and turns her gaze 'to Him who is to come'*"^{iv}. Insofar as we keep our gaze fixed on the same Jesus, "*who comes even now in His Eucharist and ... is here in our midst*",^v we will continue to build the life and witness of Shrewsbury Diocese for all generations to come.

United with you in this hope of Advent,

+ *Mark*

Bishop of Shrewsbury

ⁱ Rom. 13: 11

ⁱⁱ Mt. 24: 44

ⁱⁱⁱ The Second Spring preached at Saint Mary's College, Oscott, 13th July 1852

^{iv} Catechism of the Catholic Church No. 1403

^v CCC No. 1404