

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER



FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE HOLY FAMILY 2021

APPOINTED TO BE READ AT ALL PUBLIC MASSES IN ALL CHURCHES AND CHAPELS IN THE DIOCESE OF LANCASTER ON THE WEEKEND OF 26 DECEMBER 2021 (or shared in whatever way is possible).

My dear people,

Yesterday, in churches and homes, we began our celebration of Christ's Nativity in Bethlehem. God has fulfilled His ancient promise to come and save us. How comforting and encouraging it is to know that Jesus comes as our Saviour.

Today, the first Sunday after Christmas Day, we keep the Feast of the Holy Family. They say it was Saint Francis of Assisi who introduced the tradition of building a crib to serve as a focus for devotion and instruction. It is a practice we can treasure and pass on to new generations.

We know that Mary's pregnancy was a cause of deep initial concern to her, and that it even put at risk the relationship she had with Saint Joseph to whom she was betrothed. We know they must have spoken about the way forward, how to understand her pregnancy, and how to adjust their lives to this new life. We too can find it disturbing and inconvenient for our own plans when God enters us.

In today's Gospel things have moved on considerably. Jesus is a boy on the threshold of adolescence, wanting to play His part in the world, but still under the care of His mother and step-father. Obviously, His time in Jerusalem has stirred something deep within Him. It has been a pilgrimage and an adventure, bringing Him to a point where He is finding His public voice. His family should be proud of their boy. But, I smile when I see that even for the Holy Family things did not always go perfectly. The words of Mary reveal something of the panic and fear she has gone through. Many parents unfortunately have been through experiences that did not have so fortunate an outcome. Mary's heart would be traumatised again in later years as she saw her Son gradually drawing closer to the Cross. It is as though she is being schooled in suffering so that she might grow in trust.

The way God has chosen to come to us is remarkable. To be born as one of us is something astounding in itself; to live under the authority of those He came to save moves towards the incredulous. To comply obediently and willingly with the cultural norms of Jewish family life begins to reveal to us the heart of the Father, entrusting His child to an unreliable world. This is something He still does. It tells me that God must still see enough good in us to entrust us with what is most dear to Him. It is a vote of confidence. In the face of all that is wrong, and all that could go wrong, He has not lost sight of the fundamental good that exists within creation and within us, made in His image and likeness.

The opening prayer speaks of how we want to imitate the Holy Family in practicing the virtues of family life, in the bonds of charity. That takes some learning. It also takes a decision. We aren't being asked to reinvent the wheel, but we can be daunted from the outset, after all, those Christmas card scenes make it all look so simple! We can learn the art of keeping the Faith from older generations, and even different traditions. We must be grateful for so many who come to live in the UK from elsewhere and bring a strong example of Catholic family life. This comes at a time when family life in the UK generally is struggling. But perhaps that is not really new; perhaps it has always been a struggle.

The Holy Family is placed before us not with the intention of making life even more difficult, or to emphasise even more how far short of the line I am. One lesson it carries is to remind us of the value of family, yes, even yours! And before we begin with the 'But 's we are shown that God simply uses what we can give Him, even when it appears to fall so far short of what is required. I recall Simon Peter's words to Jesus after the miraculous catch of fish, '*Leave me Lord, for I am a sinful man.*' It is not perfection Christ is looking for but an open heart and a welcome in. I recall the small boy sharing his five loaves and two fish, so little for the crowds, but it gave Our Blessed Lord something to get started with. He can do something good even with our families if we let Him.

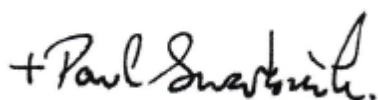
I hold in prayer families throughout the Diocese, conscious that an immense amount of stress is being placed on them. Some appear to cope better than others, but we are not in competition to see whose is best. My heart goes out to families that are grieving or concerned for less able members. I am aware that some relationships have undoubtedly suffered, but you are not beyond the reach of Our Lord, He has not turned away from you. We think of so many families affected by warfare, famine, failing economies and of course lack of adequate healthcare during the pandemic. The problems are endless, and our help so little. The picture of the Holy Family is given to them too, so that even in their extreme need they may find something to give new heart, because 'God is with them'.

As we move into the rich succession of Feasts and celebrations of Christmastide, do what you can to show that Christ is in your home. Simple things such as making sure there is a Crucifix and an image of the Madonna and child is all it might need. Your Faith may seem weak, but you have enough to welcome Christ in. Your family may seem scattered, dysfunctional or even just Weird(!), but it is enough to give Christ a place to work. He does not come to 'catch-you-out' but to unburden you and raise you up. That's just what we all need as we prepare for the new year.

May we sense the closeness of our Blessed Lady, whose children we are, as we offer this prayer, perhaps by candlelight towards the evening of the day, within our own homes.

Kind mother of the Redeemer, who remain the open gate of heaven, and the Star of the Sea; help your falling people who want to rise, you who bore your holy Parent, while nature marvelled; a Virgin before and after, receiving that greeting from Gabriel's mouth, have mercy on us sinners.

With my blessing for all who hear or read this Letter,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "+Paul Swarbrick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

+Paul Swarbrick
Bishop of Lancaster