



ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE,
150 ST. GEORGE'S ROAD, SOUTHWARK, LONDON SE1 6HX
TEL: 020 7928 2495 EMAIL: archbishop@rcaos.org.uk

Pastoral Letter for the Solemnity of the Holy Family

To be read at all Vigil and Sunday Masses over the weekend of 28/29 December 2019

My dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ

This is my first Pastoral Letter to you since becoming your new Archbishop last July. I want to begin by offering you, your families, and your loved ones, my very best wishes for this Holy Season of Christmas. In what are changing and sometimes challenging times, we, nonetheless, renew our faith that a Saviour has been born for us who is Christ the Lord. May He bless you this Christmas and give you His peace.

On this Feast of the Holy Family we naturally reflect on what it must have been like for Our Blessed Lady and St Joseph to nurture the infant Lord Jesus. Like so many in our world today, they were a poor refugee family forced to flee their homeland out of fear for their lives. St Matthew records how Joseph took Mary and the Christ child to Egypt until it was safe for them to return to Nazareth. The early years of the Holy Family were far from the idealised pictures on our Christmas cards. This father and mother knew the tears and sorrows experienced by so many families, including those in our communities. But despite all their hardships, they rejoiced at their child's birth, as we too should rejoice at the gift of each new life.

Whether in church or at home, it remains a beautiful tradition for our families, and each one of us, to pray before the Christmas crib. In doing this we return spiritually to Bethlehem. But what do we find there? In the words of the French poet Paul Claudel, we find *'three poor people who love one another and will change the face of the earth.'*

To change the face of the earth by loving one another. This is the vocation of every disciple and especially of the family. Whether rich or poor, our families, first and foremost, are places of love, modelled on the Holy Family. So often I have heard people describe their own upbringing by saying: *'We didn't have a lot of money, but there was always lots of love.'* The love of the Christian family is rooted in faith in God's word and trust in Christ's promises. This love looks outwards to the good of others,

seeking their holiness and their wellbeing. This love overpowers selfishness with generosity and patience. In the midst of all the ups and downs of family living – and we should never underestimate these – this remains a love that is best replenished by being given away.

St John Paul II once wrote that *'the future of humanity passes by way of the family.'*¹ The love at the heart of family life, the love in the heart of each family member, can change the face of the earth. It can create a better kind of future, even if just for those around us. Pope Francis reminds us that *'all family life is a 'shepherding' in mercy.'*² He adds that, like the Church, *'the family has always been the nearest hospital,'*³ a source of healing and care for broken hearts and lives. As the basic foundation of society, and of our common future, the family offers the best security for all of us, individually and together.

Sadly, we know that some families suffer breakdown, separation, and divorce. We know too that not everyone has the best experience of family life, nor will everyone have a family themselves. In whatever struggles we face, there is a space for everyone in the family of the Church. We belong to Christ and, through Him, to each other, united by a love that cannot be broken. Christ reveals the Father's love. It has no limits and includes every person. In Him there are no orphans.

As we look forward to a New Year, please join me in praying for a renewed appreciation of the beauty and dignity of marriage and family life in our society. We ask that the love of Christ might change the face of our own hearts so that we might change the face of the earth.

May the Lord Jesus walk with you each moment of this coming year. May Our Lady and St Joseph pray for you, especially for your families and those in any kind of need. And please pray for me as I do every day for everyone in our Archdiocese. Pray that, together, we might be evermore lovingly the presence of Christ to each other and to our world.

With every blessing
Yours devotedly in Christ

+ John Wilson

Metropolitan Archbishop of Southwark

¹ *Familiaris Consortio*, 86

² *Amoris Laetitia*, 322

³ *Ibid*, 321