

The Most Reverend Malcolm McMahon OP has issued the following Pastoral Letter to be read at all Masses in the Archdiocese of Liverpool on the Feast of the Holy Family – 27 December 2020.

Dear friends,

No one can fail to be moved by the heart-wrenching accounts of families that have been tragically affected by the coronavirus. At a time when families come together to celebrate the birth of our saviour, Jesus Christ, families are not only mourning their loved ones who have died from this dreadful virus but are often separated from their children, parents or grandparents because of the vital need to keep safe. One of the paradoxes of modern life is that as belief in the reason for Christmas declines, the feast grows in importance because of its emphasis on family. Family as a constant feature in our lives is as important as ever. Therefore, it seems appropriate that today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family to ask for blessings on our own families.

We can learn a lot from the fact that the origins of the devotion to the Holy Family are in 17th-century North America. Early settlers in Canada were separated from their families by great distances and the Atlantic Ocean. The chances of them ever returning home were slim; and there was little possibility of being reunited with parents, brothers, sisters and cousins. Furthermore, despite the best efforts of the Church in sending priests and religious sisters to the New World to care for the settlers, many faithful Catholics would receive little pastoral care and have few opportunities to receive the Sacraments and attend Mass. The prayer life of the family was the backbone of the Church and this had to be supported in every possible way. Family prayers such as the Rosary, and reading from the family Bible, held families – and indeed the Church – together through terrible times. Pope Leo XIII recognised this when he instituted the feast we are celebrating today and another pope, Pope Benedict XV, made it a worldwide celebration. Nowadays, with email, the internet, Zoom and Skype, the world has become very small and families spread throughout the world can communicate in a way which was unimaginable in past centuries. Nevertheless, family life is strained by many different pressures, not only the coronavirus.

This is felt none more so than by refugees, who experience acutely the dislocation of family life through war or persecution, but also by those who seek a different life through migration. According to the United Nations there are over 45 million refugees in the world today that have had to leave their homes and often their countries as well because of war. Five times that number of people migrate in search of a better life for their families.

The Holy Family itself experienced the same pressure of dislocation, and today's Gospel is a reminder that difficulties are never far away. The story of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple tells us that, even as Mary and Joseph bring gifts of turtle doves in thanksgiving to God for the gift of their son, and are united in joy at Simeon's prophecy of the greatness of Jesus, Mary is warned by Simeon that a sword will pierce her own soul too. So it was that Joseph and Mary experienced the anxiety which is often shared by many parents about their children. Yet we also begin to understand Jesus' identity and relationship with his heavenly Father – a relationship which inevitably involves pain and suffering for his family as well as himself.

To know, however, that Jesus, Mary and Joseph, despite all the odds, were able to establish family life gives us great hope and strength. This devotion reminds us that our Catholic faith grows in our homes through the parents' love for each other and for their children. As we are drawn into this love, on reflection, we can see the presence of Jesus as an additional member of our family, guiding, supporting and loving each of us. For this reason, we can be sure that Jesus dwells in all our families, giving families the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens, and to 'be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ' (Eph. 5:21).

That is the mystery that we celebrate in this Feast. I say 'mystery' because in a Church sense, mystery means a sign that recognises the present reality and yet points to an ideal life in Christ. The crisis we are enduring as a Church has shown us that the heart of the Church is in family life; and the loving face of the Church in reaching out to those who are needy or lonely begins in our families and the family of the parish community.

The presence of Jesus in our families is seen in the many signs of hope which are around us. I see this hope in action when I visit our Catholic schools and see how much the children are loved by their parents who go to enormous lengths to ensure a Catholic education for their children. In our parishes there are always young children at Mass, and especially at Christmas. Our youth ministry through Animate engages with children and teenagers as their gift of faith is developed in many ways. So, I am not discouraged. On the contrary, the children and their parents inspire me even though these are difficult times to raise a family. While I am well aware that family life is not simple, I also know that the love that is deep within a family is possible, because that love is an expression of God's love for us.

May the new year ahead be a time of unity, peace and health as we pray that the Lord blesses you and your families.

Most Rev Malcolm McMahon OP
Archbishop of Liverpool

