



**PASTORAL LETTER
OF THE
MOST REVEREND BERNARD LONGLEY
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM
FOR THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY, 26/27 DECEMBER 2020**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

This child is destined to be a sign...so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare.

May I first of all wish you and all those close to you a blessed and happy Christmas. Every day of the Christmas Octave - in the week leading up to New Year's Day - is a continuation of the celebration of Christmas. But I know that this year – because of the coronavirus restrictions - it will be much more difficult for us to maintain the Christmas spirit across the traditional twelve days.

Today's Feast of the Holy Family is particularly poignant in a year when it has been impossible for our families to gather together as they usually would. Perhaps this serves to emphasise some of the things that we can easily take for granted about family life and the value of our relationships.

The family is part of the natural world that God has created and entrusted to us. All living creatures exist in some sort of kinship, guaranteeing their continuity and sustaining the quality of their lives. Pope Francis has said that we need *education in the care of the common home* to help people understand that *environmental problems are linked to human needs*.

From the very outset of our lives the human needs on which we depend for life itself find their natural setting in the family. From the gift of life itself to the loving provision of food, shelter and all the benefits of human contact, the family is the gift that keeps on giving. A new-born baby becomes the focus of love and attention on the part of parents and family not because of anything it can do, but simply on account of its being.

With the birth of his Son, the Father has revealed his unconditional love for us, irrespective of our ability to achieve anything in life or to merit God's love. St Paul has put it this way: *It is proof of God's love for us, that Christ died for us while we were still sinners...While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son.*

We see this unconditional love in the Holy Family – even when its demands caused some perplexity. St Luke's Gospel indicates something of this where it describes the journey of Mary and Joseph to Jerusalem, taking the infant Jesus to the Temple *to present him to the Lord*. The evangelist says *the child's father and mother stood there wondering at the things that were being said about him*.

Looking back on the closing year, with all its extraordinary ups and downs, we may not always have seen the sense of what was happening to us or our families – we may often have felt anxious or perplexed about events unfolding around us, locally or nationally. At times of crisis we tend to fall back on those things that are fundamental to our lives and our beliefs.

Hence, the need for our family and for our faith have been central to surviving 2020. This year we have missed those very special expressions of family life that continue to make Christmas an important season for believer and non-believer alike. Our parish communities have done their utmost – through the continued opening of our churches, alongside the live-streaming of Mass - to sustain the life of faith within our families.

The familiar saying: *absence makes the heart grow fonder* can never have been truer than it is for 2020. Family life and Catholic faith teach us to hope that the things we have glimpsed, or experienced in part, will one day find their fulfilment in the Kingdom of God. The Holy Family of Nazareth shows us that we are called through Christ to the eternal communion of love and life in God.

As the New Year approaches we ask the holy child - *destined to be a sign...so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare* - to give us the courage to bring our secret thoughts to God.

A beautiful prayer from the Iona Community can help us prepare for 2021:

*You keep us waiting.
You, the God of all time
Want us to wait
For the right time in which to discover
Who we are, where we must go
Who will be with us, and what we must do.*

May the Holy Family of Nazareth help us all, this New Year. With my prayers for you and my kindest wishes this Christmastide.

Yours devotedly in Christ

+ *Bernard Longley*

✠Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham

Given at Birmingham on the 22 December 2020 and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Archdiocese on the Feast of the Holy Family, 26/27 December 2020.