



Diocese of Plymouth
From the Office of the Bishop

Ref: BMOT1004

Pastoral Letter to be read on Feast of the Holy Family, 27/28th December

A story of the Early Church describes a scene in Nazareth. St Joseph is teaching his young foster son, Jesus, some basic carpentry. This included the use of hammer and nails. In a childish mishap, Jesus cuts his hand and runs bleeding to his father who cries out, "Oh my Son you have been pierced with a nail." Mary and Joseph tenderly bind Jesus' wound.

Growing up in a family prepared Jesus in a very human way for the giving of Himself on the Cross. Today's feast is a reminder to us that this preparation took place in the home at Nazareth. There the Son of God, knew the joy and sorrow of growing up in a human family.

So often we idealise the Holy Family. We can assume that the experiences of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in their family, have little to say to our modern experience of family life. Yet we need only recall the events of the Lord's early years and we realise that it was far from a fairy-tale existence. It began with a controversial pregnancy which caused a degree of local scandal, and was followed by a birth in a borrowed stable. As an infant Jesus was hunted for his life, so that he and his parents were forced to migrate to Egypt and to stay there, probably for several years. We also know that whilst he was a boy His parents did not always understand the full meaning of His call.

These are the details we know from the Gospels. Tradition also teaches us that Joseph died before Jesus' public ministry, so Mary and Jesus knew a deep family bereavement, too. We know from other scenes in the Gospels that Jesus showed great sensitivity to widows, and that he wept over the death of His friend, Lazarus. I imagine that he first encountered those realities in the home of Nazareth, as he comforted Mary, newly widowed, and himself knew the heartache of losing his human father.

This time of year we rightly give more time to be with family. This is a great gift. We learn again the tenderness of being able to be with those whom we love. But as well as being full of joy and great consolation, it can also be a time when we experience some of the tensions of family life. We see some of its vulnerabilities and frailties.

It is easy to think that God does not understand this, or is far from our human reality. The Feast of the Holy Family tells us something quite different. We believe in a God who is with us, who walks with us, who came among us and who knows our joys and sorrows from the inside. There is no genuinely human experience which God does not know, or cannot transform.

It is in the family that we first learn to love, to forgive, to say sorry, to begin to give of ourselves in service of others. In a family we learn to know the rhythm of hurt, of sorrow, of regret, and of healing. For this reason, Blessed Pope Paul VI called the family, "the domestic Church".

You will know that in this Year, Pope Francis, has asked us to reflect seriously on the gifts given through marriage and family life, that we may re-discover something of its treasures in our society. Despite its many struggles, or its ups and downs, we know that without the gift of family we feel cut off, less human, we feel less ourselves. This is why marriage is such a noble vocation and why family life must be strengthened and supported, especially in times of difficulty.

The Bishops of England and Wales have prepared some simple reflections on the Call, the Journey and the Mission of marriage and family life. They are on a sheet, available at the end of Mass. In these days, when we have the chance to spend a little more time with our loved ones, I ask you to read these reflections together and to share your thoughts with one another, especially in your families. If you would like to share those reflections with me then I would be happy for you to write to me here at Bishop's House. I cannot promise to answer every reply but I will certainly ponder what you write, and will use them as part of my submission to Cardinal Vincent Nichols and to Bishop Peter Doyle, who are to be the representatives from England and Wales at the second Synod on the family next October.

Our reflection on family life must not, of course, forget those who are lonely this Christmas, or those who feel isolated or alienated either because of bereavement, or other circumstances. Good marriages and strong families are never closed in on themselves, but are always open to those who are most in need. This is why we all find a home within the family of the Church, whatever our situation. We walk the road of life, and of faith together, and no-one need feel abandoned.

I ask God's blessing on you and all those whom you love, especially your family members this Feast day. Do please pray for me.

Yours devotedly,



Rt Rev Mark O'Toole
Bishop of Plymouth

Enc.