

**A PASTORAL LETTER
FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER
FOR THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY 2018**



**Appointed to be read at all weekend Public Masses in the Diocese of Lancaster on the weekend of
29/30 December 2018**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The mystery of Christ's birth, the eternal Word taking mortal flesh, is a celebration of light. And yet, shadows of the Cross reach over the Christmas scene. We may try to retreat from the world's woes for a time, but the truth is that even here sin has left its mark. It creeps in to spoil our comfort. The devil delights in trying to divide us, souring our joy, isolating us, creating new orphans and abandoned lovers and breaking hearts. Ironically, part of our way into the heart of God is to appreciate the depth and power of sin.

The decline in the number of priests means it is not uncommon for many of our parish houses to be unoccupied. In one parish we made arrangements for an empty presbytery to be let. As things worked out the property was ready for advertising shortly before Christmas. In my innocence I suggested to the letting agent that we wait until after the New Year. 'Father, Christmas and New Year is one of the best times of year to be advertising because this is when so many families break up.' What a tragic reality.

The subject set before us for reflection today is the Holy Family of Nazareth. This is where we are invited to start our meditation. The word 'Holy' can, sadly, cause us difficulties because we either misunderstand it or because we are overwhelmed by what is not holy. Perhaps we have lost touch with it through our experiences in life. A story is told of a parish wedding service where the priest's homily is in full flight. The happy couple are there in all their youthful glory before the altar. The families and guests are patiently listening or doing whatever they are inclined to do in such circumstances. At the back of the church two elderly parishioners have come in to watch the proceedings, and at a certain point one turns to the other and quietly whispers, 'I wish I knew as little about marriage as that young feller does!' Perhaps their problem is that the ideal seems so far removed from the reality. Or perhaps their problem is that they are more in tune with Eastenders than with the Gospel.

An old priest once said that Christianity is not an ideal for us to aim for but a reality for us to share. We take Christ as our starting point. God has loved us first. In the Mystery of God's love, found in Christ, we find ourselves. That is the reality. It is ours as a gift. It can be ours in no other way. But as with any gift offered, we must accept it, and then make the effort to understand what we have been given. That will take time and effort on our part. Failings and disappointments need not rob us of that gift. The nature of this gift of Divine Love can cope with such set-backs. Indeed, it is designed to work in just such circumstances. It is a 'redeeming' love.

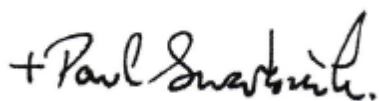
Our Blessed Lady and St Joseph gave Jesus His first experience of human life. Here is Divine love at the mercy of human love. This in itself shows us the humility and trust of the God we believe in. He could have come and taken control, but He was prepared to be led. There are many lessons we can draw from this. We know that, years later, when He entered on His public ministry, Jesus used stories about families to teach us about the spiritual life. He gave us images of family life to act as windows into the life of God. He extended the Holy Family to include us. He instituted the Sacrament of Matrimony as a way of establishing more firmly His Kingdom in our midst. One man and one woman enter into a covenant through their self-giving and form a community where God can be found. Even from the cross, when the effort to speak must have been nigh-on impossible, He gave His mother a new son and the beloved disciple a new mother.

The culture in which we live will always have a strong influence on us. Our faith must offer a stronger one. I can't prevent you watching the 'soaps', but I can implore you to resist being led and fed by them. Remember there is a better option. It is set before us in the example of the Holy Family. Choose the love that is faithful, exclusive and life-giving. Here I must acknowledge the example of family life given by so many who come from overseas to live and work here in the UK. I thank you for your witness to the Gospel. I acknowledge others who choose not to marry but live a good and valuable example of faithful love. I thank those who live a generous love as parents who foster and adopt. I think of those who take a stand in resisting the intense pressures to conform to the passing fashions of society. I am grateful to those who have been hurt by those they love and refuse to become bitter or resentful, choosing rather to be generous and agents of healing. I thank those in our parishes who serve as catechists of Holy Matrimony, helping couples to prepare not for their wedding but for their married life. I am also aware of how our Catholic schools work to give our children an experience of Christian life too often lacking in their homes.

As the Diocese of Lancaster moves forward my attention is drawn first not to our need for more priests, pressing though this is. My concern is for you, the lay faithful and your families. My desire is that your homes become places where Jesus is present through the holiness of your lives. Commit yourselves to quietly making faith present there for all members in all times, the good and the difficult. Reflect often – or at least occasionally – on the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth and in your homes. Do not be afraid to show people that there is an alternative to the 'soaps', and it is open to all. I would be most grateful if our clergy help you by taking to heart in their preaching and their living the beautiful message of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, found in his Apostolic Exhortation, 'On the call to Holiness in today's world.'

I pray that you sense the closeness and affection of Mary, mother of all new mothers, wife of that good and honourable man, St Joseph.

With my blessing for you as we approach the new year,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+Paul Smart". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

+Paul

Bishop of Lancaster