

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



**Appointed to be read at all weekend Public Masses in the
Diocese of Lancaster, on the weekend of 28/29 December 2019**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The Word truly became flesh and has dwelt among us. The image of the infant Christ, Son of God, son of Mary, is placed before us that we might know with confidence the Mystery of God's love. Commercial Christmas is soon over; ours is not. We are given the Season of Christmastide – which we may legitimately extend to 2nd February, the Feast of the Presentation – as a time for staying with the Holy Family. It is a beautiful gift for each one of us and for the world.

Let us take time, itself a gift, to reflect on how Our Lord came. He 'took flesh' within the womb of Our Blessed Lady. He literally 'took flesh' from her. This is how all unborn children grow. His life was completely dependent on her health and well-being. And Mary entrusted herself to St. Joseph, a worthy spouse, step-father and guardian of the Holy Family. Pray for young parents. Pray for unborn children.

Undoubtedly, they were members of an extended family. The Genealogies of St. Luke and St. Matthew make us aware of grandparent figures. Details are lacking but we may imagine elderly members of the family taking an interest and being given a role in the up-bringing of this new Child. Imagine the concern caused by them having to flee to Egypt to escape harm. Imagine the joy at being reunited when eventually they returned, even though it was to Nazareth. These were the days long before any welfare-state. Families were close; they had to be because there was no alternative. It is still the case in many parts of the world. In our own society family must still be seen as the primary place for care and education for life. Pray for extended families. Pray for those who work to support families that struggle.

Marriage is of Divine institution. Christ raises it to the dignity of a Sacrament. It is a vocation, and for many, the way to heaven. A story is told of a young priest conducting a wedding ceremony. At the appropriate time he delivered a well prepared homily on the joy and bliss of marriage, emphasising the privilege of so intimately sharing in the Grace of Divine love, nothing less than Christ's love for His Bride, the Church. During the homily, one elderly woman in the congregation turned to her neighbour and whispered, 'my word, Ethel, I wish I knew as little about marriage as that young man seems to . . .' Pray for those who must preach the truth of the Gospel.

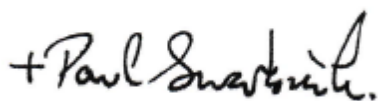
It is easy to mock the experience of marriage. It can be tempting to dismiss the Church's teaching as too idealistic, no longer relevant in our complex times, particularly where suffering and misunderstanding are present. However, the young priest was doing the right thing in presenting the Christian teaching on marriage rather than 'lowering the bar' and presenting a merely human experience. Christian love is not an ideal but a reality. We are not ashamed to appear 'old-fashioned' in our religious practice and teachings. We will not abandon Christ's teachings to follow secular novelties and fashions. Pray for those who have been hurt in marriage. Pray for those who work for healing in our marriage tribunals.

Pope Saint John Paul II noted how the family, a fundamental institution, is experiencing a radical and widespread crisis. He said that the Church cannot yield to cultural pressures, no matter how popular and even militant they may be. Pray for those who have fallen away from the practice of their Faith because of temptation.

Whatever our experience of life, the Holy Family is there for us, somewhere to find shelter, acceptance and belonging. I pray this year for all grandparents. Yours is an indispensable role. You offer support and encouragement to young families. Your relationship with grandchildren gives them memories they will carry into their own later years. May your example and memory be amongst their richest inheritance, especially when the world's riches leave them empty or unsatisfied. Let us pray for our grandparents.

Finally, this year we set ourselves to become more familiar with the God who speaks. Imitate Mary and Joseph, young mother and step-father, waiting eagerly to hear Jesus, the Divine Son, speak his first word. It would be a word that brought great joy to them. They would be quick to tell their relatives and neighbours, 'He has spoken!' As we approach the new year, may we also wait patiently for the Lord to speak to us, whoever we are, whatever our circumstances and needs. I encourage you to attend Mass on New Year's Day if possible, it is an opportunity to begin the year by listening to the Word. He has a word for each of us. It will bring us comfort and hope.

With my prayers for you and your families as we prepare for the new year,

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

+Paul Swarbrick
Bishop of Lancaster