

Pastoral Letter for the Feast of the Holy Family

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

This greeting reminds us of an important truth of our faith. In Jesus, we have become God's adopted children. We have been made in God's image and likeness. And now that he has sent his only-begotten Son into the world, we are the Body of Christ. We might imagine the Christ child taking his first breath. In this breath, new life is breathed into our weakness. This Feast of the Holy Family reminds us of the importance of the family in salvation history and in the life of the Church today.

During June 2022, a World Meeting of Families is scheduled to take place in Rome. It is part of the vision of this event that there should be a celebration of family life in our dioceses - Rome at Home if you will! The theme of our gatherings and reflections is *Family love: vocation and way to holiness*. And so today, let us begin to prepare for the World Meeting of Families by reflecting together on our own experience of family.

On this Feast of the Holy Family, we are reminded that the Incarnation is not an idea of theoretical value. Jesus belonged to a family. When we listen to Jesus' parable teaching, so much of the imagery could be imagined from the kitchen window of his family home. From there he would have seen farmers and labourers going about their business. Our Lord would have seen the detail of Palestinian village life. He would have taken his place in St Joseph's workshop. Jesus was known as the carpenter's son. He would have witnessed his Blessed Mother's work around the home, cooking, mending, seeking what was lost. All this imagery of family life spoke to Jesus of his Father's kingdom.

Pope Francis reminds us that our journey to true holiness is rooted within the relational context of gracious love towards others. Our faith should not become Gnostic, a somewhat theoretical parody of authentic discipleship. Living within the community of the family demands the exercise of virtue. Charity and patience are not won easily for most of us. Virtues are developed through learning and practice.

Within the family, we discover our identity. There are popular television programmes in which individuals discover long lost parents and siblings or something of the generations which have gone before them. These programmes demonstrate the variety and complexity of family life within our society. Our cultural identity is first received within the family setting. And all this is also true of our faith in Christ. The family may be an important place where we first learn about our Christian identity. Many of us discovered our vocation within the life of the family. Most of us live out our vocation to holiness within a family setting.

When we think about our own experience of family life today, we may recognise the many challenges we have lived through and perhaps still face. I recently celebrated a diocesan Mass for those with special needs. Despite everything, there was a real joy in the lives of the little families who came to the Mass and the lovely tea afterwards. They could not have imagined how much encouragement they gave

me, simply through the witness of their faith. Holiness wears the face of joy and fidelity to the work of love. And these things were very present on this occasion.

Every parent can surely imagine the nightmare of having lost their child. Today's Gospel moment shares this with us. The shadow of the cross hangs over this scene. Mary and Joseph found Jesus in the Temple in Jerusalem. After they returned to Nazareth, the evangelist tells us, his mother stored up all these things in her heart. May our experiences of family life help us to reflect upon the mysteries of Gospel life.

And finally, I want to thank all those in our Church, here in England and Wales, who are involved in marriage and family life ministry. We call to mind the diocesan coordinators and the members of the alliance of Catholic marriage organisations, together with those who offer theological reflection on the themes of marriage and family life. We pray that your work will help couples to prepare for their life-long vocation in marriage, and that all families may embrace their vocation to holiness.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

✠ David J Oakley

Bishop of Northampton