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Pastoral Letter following the Synod on the Vocation and Mission of the Family

Last Sunday I joined thousands of people in St Peter's Square waiting to receive the blessing of Pope Francis. I was surrounded by families: babies asleep in prams, young children crawling on the cobbles, older children entertaining each other, teenagers looking studiously bored, fathers surveying the scene protectively, mothers holding up their children and pointing to the Holy Father, groups of families on holiday together, uncles and aunts, three or four generations.

I looked at them with fresh eyes, having just come from the closing Mass of the Synod of Bishops on the Vocation and Mission of the Family. There we had been fashioning fresh ways of thinking about the family in the plan of God. We had agreed that the family is an 'image and likeness of the Blessed Trinity', a reflection of the mystery of love which is the life of God. In the families around me I could contemplate that love being expressed in everyday ways, a love which strives so hard to be faithful, to overcome rows and difficulties with forgiveness, a love which gives energy for the day and rest in weariness. In the Synod we had talked of the family as 'a blessing for the Church': the place where we learn and share how to live by faith, where we teach and practice family prayer, and the place from which we reach out to others in their need.

All of this was summed up for me in a phrase: the family is the flesh of the Church. In St Peter's Square, and in every parish, I see in the families around me the very flesh of the Church, the life of Christ taking place before my eyes. It is they who so often show most clearly the work of the Beatitudes which we have just heard in the Gospel reading.

In our Synod discussion group we had shared together what we treasured most about our own family life. Doing this brought us together powerfully, even though we came from five different continents! The challenges faced by families today were in our own stories, too: poverty; an absence of faith; a reluctance to speak of faith at home; the drama of being refugees or migrants; the breakdown of a marriage in the pain of divorce and, of course, the fact of people entering a second civil marriage and finding there a new start, stability, and fruitful love.

Our main work in the Synod, over the last three weeks, has been to fashion the right response of the Church to many of these situations. In our final reflections, we pointed out clearly that this must be a patient accompaniment, a readiness to listen, a gift of time and attention to one another. This is a pathway for us all to take, but especially us bishops and priests who are entrusted with the care of God's people.

Our final document of the Synod, which we presented to Pope Francis for his consideration, speaks often of this 'pathway of accompaniment', of that 'reverential listening', which is the first act of mercy, of the work of 'discernment', of wanting to come close to the reality of so many lives in their difficulties and trials. During the Synod discussions, many wanted us to express, humbly, a word of regret and apology that this often has not been the path we have taken. I am glad to do so now.

The purpose of this focus of our pastoral work is very clear. It was beautifully expressed in the first reading at Mass last Sunday: 'They left in tears. But I will comfort them and lead them back; I will guide them to streams of water ... For I am a father to Israel and Ephraim is my son' (Jer. 31.9). To all who have left in tears I want to offer a hand of welcome, especially during this coming Year of Mercy. With time we hope to fashion a clear invitation for you to come to meet the Lord, to ponder His ways in your lives, to sense his mercy and his truth and to grow in strength as his baptised disciples in the family of the Church.

Today we honour all the saints. We see them gathered round the throne of God, praising God in joy and thanksgiving. We hear that in their trials and suffering they clung faithfully to Christ, so closely that 'they washed their robes white again in the blood of the Lamb.' They teach us so much.

We all have our favourite or patron saint. Perhaps we were given his or her name at baptism or at confirmation. They have so much to teach us about how to accompany each other through the dilemmas of life and of how to come to a mature understanding of the demands of the Gospel in our lives as the one true path of life. Today we also honour all those who may not be canonized but are surely saints. For so many of these, family life, with all its joy and challenges, was their path to heaven. Think how many saints there may be in your family, still helping you by their example and intercession!

May all the saints encourage and strengthen us today. May we draw from this Synod of Bishops great encouragement for our own family life and for the life of the family of the Church, as we each reach out for the great mercy of God, a mercy that will never fail us once we come, with penitent hearts, seeking its healing and peace.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster