

ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE,
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**Pastoral Letter for the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God
1 January 2017**

Dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ,

My mother taught me many things. One was this: that a mother can never forget her child, even if that child is no longer in her presence and care. The bond between them endures. It is written into her heart and flesh. A mother carries the hopes of her child as her own; she feels the anguish of her child; she suffers whatever pain befalls the fruit of her womb.

This lesson helps me to understand why, on this Feast Day of Mary, Mother of God, we do so well to turn to her. Mary is our mother. She bears us as her children not by conceiving us in her body but by adopting us within her heart. She is our mother in all things, above all our Mother of Sorrows and our Mother of Mercy.

Because we are her children, she carries our hopes and our pain always within her. Today she stands with us on this first day of a new calendar year, at this moment when we reflect on our hopes and joys, our sorrows and fears. Here she is, sharing our New Year with its promises and prayers.

Often, as a youngster, I would go into the kitchen to tell my Mum all that had happened, what I had done and, sheepishly, what had upset me. In today's Gospel we heard that the shepherds did the same thing and that Mary 'treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart' (Luke 2:19). We can be sure that in the same way Mary will treasure and ponder all that we whisper to her.

Have you noticed that in most statues of Our Blessed Lady she is holding her son? In fact, she is holding him out to us, showing us the blessed fruit of her womb, Jesus. It is to him that she wants us to come. She brings him to us and us to him. In him we find and receive all that we need, for he is our foundation, our hope and our joy. In the words of St Paul, he is the one sent by God, born of a woman, to redeem us. He makes it plain that, in all truth, we are truly sons and daughters of God for 'God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts: the Spirit that cries out "Abba! Father!"' (Gal 4:4-6).

This, then, is how we best set out into the New Year: with the Spirit of Jesus in our hearts; with the prayer, 'Abba! Father!' on our lips; with Mary holding her mantle of protection and love over us all. Then we shall walk steadily, never losing the poise of

grace, and always confident of who we are in the eyes of our loving Father: precious sons and daughters.

Mary conceived the Eternal Word of God in her womb, giving him the gift of her flesh and blood. We, in our lesser way, are to do likewise. We are called to give him our flesh and blood in the actions of everyday which we hope will express his love and compassion, his forgiveness and joy, to all whom we meet. This truth is beautifully expressed in these ancient words:

'Christ abode for nine months in the tent of Mary's womb; he abides until the consummation of the ages in the tent of the Church's faith; he will abide for ever and ever in the knowledge and love of the faithful soul.' (Cf Blessed Isaac of Stella, 12th century sermon 51 for the Assumption of Blessed Mary).

At this New Year I wish you all every blessing. In this I can do no better than to use the words of the First Reading as my own:

'May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord uncover his face to you and bring you his peace' (Numbers 6:25).

And may the prayers of our Blessed Lady sustain us both now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Yours devotedly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vincent Nichols". The signature is written in a cursive style and is preceded by a small cross symbol.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster