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**Pastoral Letter for the Feast of the Holy Family
29 December 2019**

Pope Francis loves the crib. In his recent Apostolic Letter (*Admirabile Signum*) he describes the Crib as an admirable sign, wanting it to be seen everywhere. He describes a family crib as ‘a joyful tradition’, one we learn from our parents and grandparents. So on this Feast of the Holy Family, while cribs still adorn our homes and churches, the nativity scene is a natural starting point for reflection.

I always look first for the angels. With great glory, they declare the Good News of the birth of Christ, promising peace and goodwill. Angels ask us to listen to the unexpected, directing us to a scene of weakness and poverty as the chosen place of God. For us, listening carefully and hearing the full message is often difficult. We so readily jump to quick conclusions that are not the best because they are based on only part of the story. Only slowly do we learn that, in our search for peace and goodwill, we often begin from the wrong place. The angels teach us where to look!

At the centre of every crib scene is the baby Jesus. This baby is the one who would grow up to profess, in words recorded by St John, that ‘I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life’. Here is Truth, defenceless in the manger! Can we learn that today Truth has always to be respected, nurtured, protected? Selling truth short is one of the ways in which we fail in our love and respect for God. In the Crib we see Jesus Christ, reaching out to all of humanity, urging us to speak the truth always. He will do so, even when it takes him to the Cross. We too, then, are called to live and express truth, in all its complexity, as best we can, even when it takes us where we might rather not go.

We do well to remember, especially at this time of year, that the infant Christ is not only our Truth, he is the ‘Word made flesh’. These three words, ‘Word made flesh’, take us to the heart of the mystery of Christ, and of our Christian faith. God’s creative Word comes to share our nature, our humanity, even as he lies in the manger. In the simplicity of the baby, God offers us a way to the heart of the mystery of his Godhead, and an invitation to walk the pathway of salvation.

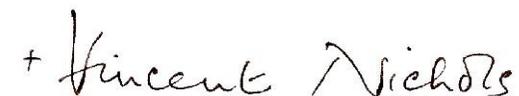
We encounter the living word of God in so many ways but especially in the Sacred Scriptures. In every parish in England in Wales, we are embarking on a 'Year of the Word'. This is an opportunity for us to discover afresh the riches of the Word of God in the Scriptures. On 26 January the whole Church will mark, for the first time, the 'Sunday of the Word of God' that has recently been established by Pope Francis. In our own Diocese, in Westminster Cathedral at the end of January, there will be a Scripture Roadshow, including 'tents of meeting' and specially commissioned artwork throughout the Cathedral, encouraging us to receive the Word of God more attentively. Deepening our knowledge and love of Scripture is such an important way to refresh our love of Christ. I encourage you to do what you can to mark the 'Year of the Word' in your parishes and homes.

Now back to the crib! A third figure is St Joseph, 'the guardian who tirelessly protects his family' (*Admirable Signum* 7). In his heart, as so often in ours, things must have been very far from clear. Only because his heart was also faithful and true to God, did he manage to remain steady in the steps he took. For most of us it is not so. We all have to admit our mistakes. Perhaps this

Christmas in our families there have been mis-steps, harsh words, and unwanted squabbles. In such moments we must learn from our mistakes. Then we can grow closer to the Lord who is full of mercy and compassion for us in our weakness. In a world where things are often very far from clear, St Joseph reminds us that faithfulness and honest stewardship are the essential elements of being a disciple, not success or praise.

As this Christmas season continues, I hope you will find some time for prayer at the crib, in church or in your own homes. I am sure that your family, and all those you love, will be foremost in your prayer. Please pray for me. Please pray too, in this holy season, that we may be more attentive to each other, with a deeper regard for the truth, and faithful in all we do. May the holy Angels and St Joseph pray for us too!

A very happy Christmas to you all. Yours devotedly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vincent Nichols". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster