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WESTMINSTER, LONDON SW1P 1QJ



30 December 2014

Feast of The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

My dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ,

In writing this letter to you for the Feast of the Holy Family, I want first of all to wish you all a very Happy Christmas. For many good reasons, Christmas is clearly focussed on the family. So I hope that you have the opportunity to spend some precious time with your families, far or near, over this holiday period. May God bless you in your homes and in the bonds of your family life.

It is indeed about the family that I want to speak with you today.

You will recall that I was present in Rome last October to take part in the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops dedicated to a consideration of the pastoral challenges facing the family today. The Synod gathered plenty of public attention and I wrote to you all about it on my return.

The intention of Pope Francis was always that this Synod would be followed by a further Synod of Bishops, next October, in order to continue this work and bring it to some conclusions. This next Synod will do that. It will also have a slightly different emphasis as the theme now is 'The Vocation and Mission of the Family Today.'

At the end of the Synod last October, in his closing address, Pope Francis said this:

'Dear brothers and sisters, now we still have one year to mature, with true spiritual discernment, the proposed ideas and find concrete solutions to so many difficulties and innumerable challenges that families must confront; to give answers to the many discouragements that surround and suffocate families... May the Lord accompany us and guide us in this journey for the glory of His Name.'

So this is what we must now do. We must use this time well to ponder and pray over all the challenges and opportunities which face the family, and the marriage at its heart, in our society today.

In the Pope's words, this is to be a time of 'spiritual discernment'. That is rather different than collecting together people's opinions. Spiritual discernment concerns my sense of where God is present and at work in my life. It focusses on those things which both test and strengthen my faith, which give encouragement to me, which warm my heart of faith or, conversely, make that heart fearful and anxious. It includes recognition of all that is wrong and in need of forgiveness. Spiritual discernment also means the Church's task of identifying the promptings of the Holy Spirit, by which we are led to express more fully, in our complex situations, the teachings and actions of Jesus about marriage and the family. This task comes to a crucial moment in the next Synod of Bishops.

In order to help with this 'spiritual discernment' the Bishops of England and Wales have put together a pamphlet of reflection, prayer and questions. I hope that by using it, by following its suggestions, you will be able to join in this period of spiritual discernment.

The leaflet is available today. Please do get hold of one, either from your parish or from the Diocesan website. You may choose to use it alone, or within your own family circle. Perhaps you could follow its suggestions with a group of friends, or perhaps through an initiative within your parish. I am sure you will find it fruitful in any of these circumstances.

The pamphlet contains questions for you to ponder prayerfully. I would like to know how you respond to them. Your responses, then, can be sent directly to Mr Edmund Adamus our Director for Marriage and Family Life by Pentecost Sunday, 24th May [at Vaughan House, 46 Francis Street, SW1P 1QN or on line to edmundadamus@rcdow.org.uk]. I promise that your responses will help me to prepare well for the Synod next October at which again I will be present. Your parish may also decide to draw together your responses for the benefit of the pastoral care offered there.

At the heart of this period of reflection, I suggest, lies an approach to life suggested by Pope Francis. As you know, he speaks of us all as 'missionary disciples', those who not only seek to be close to Christ but also to extend to others the joy and beauty of knowing Jesus and living in his love. This leads Pope Francis to invite us to see every challenge that we come up against in life as an opportunity to make clear the way of Jesus and his power to make a difference in our lives.

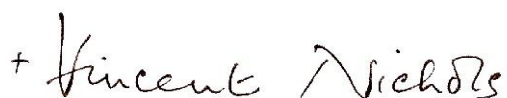
Often those challenges emerge in family life: moments of tension and anger; moments of disappointment and betrayal; moments in which we fail to understand what has got into our loved ones; moments of fatigue or extreme stress. These are the challenges which we are invited to change into opportunities. When we do so, they open up as times of grace and of real witness to the power of our faith.

I can remember many such moments from my own family life, moments which have planted in my heart key phrases which capture the strength given by faith in Our Blessed Lord. These moments often provoked my mother's favourite sayings: 'The Lord never gives a burden without the backs to bear it.' 'This is the day the Lord has made, so let us rejoice and be glad in it.' And then she lived the challenge accordingly.

I hope that you may be able to share with each other, and with me if you would be so kind, some of the ways in which for you too family life is a place of grace, supported by a pattern of prayer, a place in which difficulties are present but in which they become opportunities for true Christian perseverance and for allowing Christ to lead and strengthen us.

At the beginning of the last Synod, Pope Francis said to us bishops: 'Speak freely and from the heart. And listen humbly to each other.' I say the same to you. Then indeed we shall be blessed in all that we strive to do to strengthen family life today.

May God bless you all.

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

+Vincent Nichols
Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster