



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP

appointed to be read
in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
on 27th December 2015, the Feast of the Holy Family

THE MISSION OF THE FAMILY

Dear Followers of Christ,

I wish you all the joys of Christmas! The message of Christmas is one of hope, that God the Son, Who once took flesh in Bethlehem and Who one day will come again, also comes to us here and now.¹ Hope is not wishful thinking, mere optimism, staying positive. Christian hope is much more thrilling. It is a gift of God, a theological virtue, produced by the Holy Spirit.² It is the desire for happiness, able to sustain us through misfortune.³ It is the utterly confident expectation that at any moment now, in answer to prayer, God will act with power to change things. As we enter the New Year, I wish each one of you to be a person of Christian hope. We live under the shadow of death in a world of fear: think of the challenge of climate change, the terrorist threat, the complex migrant-refugee crisis, the war in Ukraine or the many other calamities humanity faces. St. Ignatius reputedly said: 'Pray as if everything depended on God, but work as if it all depends on you.'⁴ So stop grumbling, moaning, complaining! In 2016 put hope into action. Let's counter cynicism and pessimism with words of hope. Let's become people of hope and Good News. Let us put our hope in God and live in the prayer-driven expectation that Jesus is going to act, and to act now.

We celebrate today the Feast of the Holy Family of Nazareth. In becoming incarnate for us and for our salvation, Jesus assumed not only human nature but, under the authority of Mary and Joseph as today's Gospel recalls, He also assumed a history and a culture, a family and a trade. This is why, even in its sacred distinctiveness, the Holy Family is a true model for every Christian family today.⁵ It knew, for instance, what it was like to be a refugee fleeing violence whilst seeking welcome in a foreign land.⁶ The recent Synod pointed this out, although unfortunately the Synod seemed to say so little about the

mission of families in today's world. After all, the Sacrament of Matrimony, alongside Holy Orders, is one of the Church's two great 'service-sacraments'. By receiving the Sacrament of Matrimony, to help them create a loving home that reflects the communion of Persons in the Blessed Trinity,⁷ married couples and their children are also called to reflect the *missions* of the Trinity. A family is sent to serve society, the needs of neighbours and the community, with social concern for the poor, the lonely, the unjustly treated and for creation. Hopefully, in the forthcoming Apostolic Exhortation, the Holy Father will address this mission of the Christian family in the new evangelisation.

Let me add another point: about 'creation – sin – redemption,' the organising principle of a Christian understanding of being human. Every human person is unique, 'loved into being' by God, yet because of Original Sin, we are also fallen, sinners who often fail miserably. But thanks be to God, Who sent His Son to redeem us! As the Second Reading put it: "Think of the love that the Father has lavished upon us by letting us be called God's children."⁸ In the Diocese of Portsmouth, I am determined to do everything we can to value, accompany and send out on mission every baptised Catholic, whatever their status: married, divorced, widowed, single, those with same-sex attraction, the young and the old. As a Church we rightly esteem married couples and the family, the basic cell of society⁹, but let's not undervalue the mission of love and generosity that single persons play in the Church. Since we are all part of God's family, every disciple of the Lord must seek to spread the Good News of Christ and to work for the Kingdom.

Recently, at the request of our Safeguarding Commission and after consulting some of the clergy, I have decided to establish this Feast of the Holy Family as an annual diocesan day of prayer for children and vulnerable adults, for the victims of abuse and for all who work in the ministry of safeguarding. Just as Mary and Joseph created a safe home-environment for Jesus, so too on this day especially, let us pray that the Church in all her contexts will be a safe haven for our children and for the vulnerable. Indeed, for all their efforts, let us thank God today for the work of our diocesan Safeguarding Coordinator, for the members of the Safeguarding Commission and for all who serve so generously in our parishes as safeguarding representatives.

In today's Gospel, the Holy Family travelled to Jerusalem for the Passover. Jesus was almost a teenager, on the cusp, in the Jewish tradition, of His *bar mitzvah*, by which He would come of age. "Did you not know I must be busy with my Father's affairs?" He said to Mary and Joseph.¹⁰ May His aim in adult life be ours too: to do the will of the Father in heaven. I wish you a blessed New Year 2016. Please pray earnestly, through the prayers of Our Lady and St. Joseph, for the gift of hope and in this Year of Mercy, for the grace to put that hope into action.

Thank you for listening! I will write again soon, just before Lent.

In Corde lesu
+ Philip
Bishop of Portsmouth.

¹ "We know that there are three comings of the Lord. The third lies between the other two. It is invisible, while the other two are visible. In the first coming He was seen on earth, dwelling among men ... In the final coming all flesh will see the salvation of our God, and they will look on Him whom they pierced. The intermediate coming is a hidden one; in it only the elect see the Lord within their own selves, and they are saved. ... In case someone should think that what we say about this middle coming is sheer invention, listen to what Our Lord Himself says: 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him' St. Bernard of Clairvaux (*Sermo* 5, *In Adventu Domini*, 1-3; *Opera Omnia*, Edit. Cisterc. 4 [1966], 188-190). This passage is used in the Office of Readings for Wednesday of the First Week of Advent.

² "Faith, hope and charity too, are genuine powers, bestowed by God. ..." YOUCAT 306 (cf. 308)
³ "Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the Kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit." *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1817

⁴ This saying is attributed to St. Ignatius of Loyola: see James P. M. Walsh 'Work as if Everything Depends on—Who?' *The Way Supplement* 70 (Spring 1991), 125-36; Walsh thinks the authentic Ignatian message was, in effect, "Pray as if everything depends on you" (that is, pray desperately, trust God fervently), and "Work as if everything depends on God" (that is, work calmly and with detachment).

⁵ "Nazareth reminds us what is a family, what is a communion of love, its austere and simple beauty, its sacred and inviolable character; it makes us see how sweet and irreplaceable is the upbringing in a family; it teaches us its natural place in the social order" (Bl. Paul VI, *Discourse at Nazareth*, 5th January 1964). This passage is cited in the *Final Relatio* of the 2015 Synod, paragraph 38.

⁶ This, the second of the Seven Sorrows of Mary, the Flight into Egypt, is recounted in Mt 2: 13-23

⁷ "The family is the image of God which 'in His most intimate mystery is not solitude, but rather a family, given that He possesses in Himself, paternity, sonship and the essence of a family which is love' (John Paul II, *Homily during Mass in the Palafixiana Seminary of Puebla de Los Angeles*, 28th January 1979). God is a communion of Persons. ... In the human family, enlightened by Christ, 'the image and likeness' of the Most Holy Trinity is restored (Ch. 1:26), the mystery from which all true love flows" *Final Relatio* 38 (unofficial translation).

⁸ 1 John 3: 1

⁹ "The family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds. In the case of the family, the weakening of these bonds is particularly serious because the family is the fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another; it is also the place where parents pass on the faith to their children. Marriage now tends to be viewed as a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will. But the indispensable contribution of marriage to society transcends the feelings and momentary needs of the couple. As the French bishops have taught, it is not born 'of loving sentiment, ephemeral by definition, but from the depth of the obligation assumed by the spouses who accept to enter a total communion of life' Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium* 66 (www.vatican.va).

¹⁰ Luke 2: 49