

# DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



*✠ Rt Rev Séamus Cunningham  
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle*



## **Pastoral Letter on the Feast of the Holy Family** **To be read in parishes on the weekend of 27/28 December 2014**

My Dear People

I once saw a statue of the Holy Family carved from a single piece of wood. The figures rose from the same base, Joseph standing with his arm protectively round Mary's shoulder. Mary, carved out of his sleeve, sits cradling the child Jesus. It was an icon of unity that made me ask the question "What is it that binds The Holy Family together?"

As I looked for answers I contemplated the individual members of the family. Mary's "Yes" to God had brought the child Jesus into the world. Joseph's "Yes" to God had made him take Mary as his wife and look after the child Jesus. Jesus' humility in saying "Yes" to God in the temptations, and in the Garden of Gethsemane, led him to the cross where he won our salvation. This family was united in accepting the will of God.

Sadly, we often dismiss the Holy Family because we see them as too perfect, too far beyond us. The Church needs to be careful when it points to the Holy Family as the ideal as it could be an obstacle. When ordinary people compare their own poor experience of family life, its weaknesses and divisions with this ideal it can lead to a sense of failure and despair. We need to look, more carefully at what scripture tells us about the Holy Family, then, we may find that it actually addresses our divisions and weakness and becomes a source of hope.

There were divisions within the Holy Family. Joseph was minded to divorce Mary. Jesus upsets his parents when he stays behind in the temple. Mary rebukes Jesus because of the distress she and Joseph suffered as they tried to find him. An upset between husband and wife, a wilful teenager, a distressed mother rebuking her child, are all situations which are common to our experience. What is important about the Holy Family is that they seek to resolve these problems. That is where we need to learn from them.

Their problems are resolved by recourse to prayer which asks the Holy Spirit to help them see what the will of God is. In each case they affirm and support one another by first, saying "Yes" to God and then to each other. Where there is no immediate understanding they hold it before God. "Mary pondered all these things in her

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heart." What unites the Holy Family is their willingness to listen to the Holy Spirit and to use his help to obey God; in our weakness we must do the same.

Pope Francis at the recent Extraordinary Synod on the family has reminded us that there are all kinds of families and relationships in today's world. Many are unsettled, broken or in other difficulties and all need to be approached with compassion. He criticised the Church for sometimes being too judgemental in its approach. He reminded us that the Church, called to be the family of God, is called to exhibit compassion and mercy within its own membership. It can only do this by allowing the Holy Spirit to fill it with the burning love and mercy of God. This will seek to bring healing and reconciliation within the family of the Church. But it will go much further than this as it drives the Church to reach out to those on the fringes of society, seeking to understand them and share the gospel of hope.

The process in our Diocese called "Forward Together in Hope" which is just beginning, is a three year period to help us discover what it is to be the Family of God in Hexham and Newcastle. It must be rooted in prayer to allow the Holy Spirit to draw us closer together in understanding and love. If we are to grow spiritually we need to understand ourselves, our needs and weakness. We have to recognise the gifts our community has to offer the wider Church. In the same way we need to understand others, their needs and weaknesses and we must not be too proud to accept their gifts.

If we do this we will grow together in unity, renewing the Church as the Family of God and moving forward in hope to bring his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

With very best wishes

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