

DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



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



December 2015

Pastoral Letter to be read on the Feast of the Holy Family

My Dear People

In the days leading up to Christmas, airports, ferries and train stations are packed with people making their way home to join their families for Christmas. There are tears of joy and gladness as they arrive and very often tears of sadness as they depart. Yet it is not always plain sailing when families come together. Whilst there can be much joy there can also be a lot of sadness. Maybe it is the first Christmas without a loved one. It can be a time of great loneliness for some people and so we should look out for those people and include them. There can be isolation and loneliness even in the midst of all the family activity.

For many of us the image of the Holy Family is that all was sweetness and light where nothing ever went wrong, where peace and harmony prevail and where everything was perfect, but that is far from the truth. They had their trials and tribulations like any family. They led as normal a life as anyone else and treated Jesus as any parent would have treated a child in those days.

They experienced more hardship than most young couples would experience. Mary and Joseph knew what oppression was when they couldn't find a room in which to give birth to Jesus. They knew what it was like to be displaced when they lived as refugees in a foreign land. They knew what it was to live in a hostile climate and they experienced poverty. They knew the pain of having a child who didn't follow the accepted path. Mary knew the loneliness of the widow and the agony of seeing her only son executed as a criminal.

We can learn a lot from the example of the Holy Family. They can give hope to those who struggle for justice; and challenge us to live a simpler life, a life of unconditional trust in God. Mary and Joseph were not weak, they were strong. Strength is not the same as power. One could enjoy great power and yet be very weak, likewise one may have no power at all and yet be very strong. Like most mothers and fathers they had great powers of endurance and seemed always capable of renewing themselves, no matter what misfortune hit them.

Most of us learn how to cope with disagreements and arguments within our families. Ideally the bond of love within families provides that safety and security we all need to grow up and mature, to challenge, to argue and to be accepted and forgiven. There can be difficult and hurtful separations and there can be wonderful compassionate healing words and actions. It is from within our families that we begin to learn to look outwards towards others, to relate and to love, to care and to forgive.

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Bishop's House, East Denton Hall, 800 West Road, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE5 2BJ

Tel: +44 (0) 191 228 0003 Fax: +44 (0) 191 274 0432 Email: office@rcdhn.org.uk

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On his return from the Synod on the Family, Cardinal Nichols referred to our own families and the family of the Church. He said: 'this family-witness to the Church is very, very important, more than what the Church can teach the Family'. The Church has much to learn from the way we forgive and care, welcome and show mercy within our families.

Jesus called his family of followers to become disciples and then he sent them out to preach his word. On this Feast we can give thanks for our calling, our baptism and our responsibility to go out into our world beyond the safety of our own families and parish communities, to make the world a better place to live in. There can be arguments and tensions within the family of those who are baptised. Yet just as within our own families we can experience opportunities for listening, healing and deepening relationships, so also within the Christian family and within the human family there are opportunities for reconciliation and appreciating that it really is better together.

Pope Francis wants us all to become 'missionary disciples' to go from where we are comfortable to explore new relationships, to reach out beyond our parishes and welcome people. In this Year of Mercy, we have a real opportunity to think again about what it means to reach out to our neighbours, our neighbourhood, and indeed to those who seek asylum in our country. When we do this we begin to appreciate something of what Jesus understood by what it means to be family.

I hope you have a happy and peaceful New Year and see the Year of Mercy as a time to rediscover what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and to become an active member of his family.

With my very best wishes

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