

ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE.

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**Pastoral Letter for the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph
26/27 December 2020**

These days we hear a great deal about ecology, and rightly so. We must take care of the created world in its beauty and resources.

Interestingly, the word 'ecology' comes from a Greek word meaning 'home' or 'place to live'. So, it is a word that can be applied not only to the natural world but also to our homes and to the Church. It is a good word to have in mind as we celebrate this Feast of the Holy Family.

This year has been so difficult for many families. Homelife has been tested, and financial worries burden many. Separation from loved ones has been painful and many have lost loved ones in death, with little chance to grieve them fully. So, the Prayers of the Mass today are vital. In them, we seek God's blessing on our families and homes, that they may be places of kindness and joy. The reading from St Paul to the Colossians spelt out what that means in practice: compassion, gentleness, patience, and forgiveness. Then he added, 'Over these clothes, to keep them together and complete them, put on love.'

But St Paul is applying these words first of all to the Church, to us, chosen by God to be a witness in the world to God's love and compassion. St Paul adds: 'And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts because it is for this that you were called together as parts of one body. Always be thankful' (Colossians 3:15).

Today, then, we can think and pray not only about our own families but also about the family of the Church. We can ask for God's blessing on this family, this 'ecology' in which we live, the 'ecology' of the Church.

Over these last months, the life of the Church has been under strain. We have been unable to come together to express our faith as a full community. Often, we have not been able to enter into the mystery of Christ celebrated in the sacraments. We pray that slowly this will return as the threat of the COVID-19 virus is overcome.

Over these last months, the life of the Church has been stained by the emergence of the picture of the abuse inflicted on children and vulnerable people in the Church over the last fifty years. We know, with the benefit of hindsight, that bishops and leaders, including myself, have made mistakes. I deeply regret them. We are continually learning from them.

In this moment of strain and stain, we take our lead from the Gospel. Like Anna and Simeon, we fix our eyes on the Lord, on the child Jesus. With them, we say: 'My eyes have seen the

salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see' (Luke 2:30). We know that the Lord never forsakes the Church, his own Body. He remains with us always. Our strength, our renewal, comes from him.

There is a quotation of which I am very fond:

'Christ dwelt for nine months in the tabernacle of Mary's womb. He dwells until the end of the ages in the tabernacle of the Church's faith. He will dwell forever in the knowledge and love of each faithful soul' (Blessed Isaac of Stella).

This is our reassurance. In turning every day to him, in welcoming him into our lives with humility and love, we rise from our prayer refreshed and renewed, wanting to do his will and to give him our thanks.

There is another figure on whom we can fix our eyes: St Joseph. He is there, in the background, protecting the child entrusted to his care. We turn to him as protector of the family of the Church, too.

Pope Francis has declared a year dedicated to St Joseph, from 8 December 2020 to 8 December 2021. He says: 'Each of us can discover in Joseph - the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence - an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble' (Patris Corde - With a Father's Love - Pope Francis). Let's do that. Let's ask St Joseph to keep a watchful eye on this family of the Church, to intercede on our behalf.

A tradition I treasure is that of always having a statue of St Joseph in the kitchen, so often the heart of the home. I recommend this to you. Bring St Joseph into your kitchen. Then he will be before your eyes each day, as protector and guide in these difficult times.

Pope Francis writes: "Joseph teaches us that faith in God includes believing he can work even through our fears, our frailties and our weaknesses. He also teaches us that we must never be afraid to let the Lord steer our course. At times, we want to be in complete control, yet God always sees the bigger picture".

As we come to the end of this year, a year of such pain and difficulty, try to see this 'bigger picture': that our lives are in the hands of God; that our Church is constantly consoled by the presence of the Holy Spirit; that our world is God's work of art. As we enter the New Year, we place all this before the Lord, knowing that He, who 'steers our course', will bring each one of us, and the whole of creation, to completion, in the fullness of time.

May God bless 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