



**PASTORAL LETTER FOR THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY
AND THE SOLEMN OPENING OF THE HOLY YEAR OF JUBILEE
28th and 29th December 2024**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This liturgical Feast of the Holy Family celebrates what an important place the family holds in God's plan of salvation. It was the will and design of God the Father that His Son, Jesus Christ, the Eternal Word made flesh, should be born in the heart of a human family, a family rooted in the faith, love and hope of Mary and Joseph; it is a family at the heart of a profound and beautiful mystery.

Yet the Holy Family lived, like so many other families, with joys and struggles, hardship and hope. Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus, experienced a period of exile and homelessness, they knew poverty and faced uncertainty. But throughout these trials their love grew stronger and the bond of faith which had brought them together, and the hope which united them, kept them true to God and to each other.

Perhaps this is why the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council came to call the family the "domestic Church" (Lumen Gentium, 11); it is the home and school of faith wherein we learn the virtues of faith, hope and love.

Today's Gospel reading from St Luke is the only passage found in all four Gospels which gives an account of the boyhood of Jesus. It is a text full of meaning and can help us to prepare to celebrate the Holy Year of Jubilee which begins this Sunday in dioceses across the world; a Jubilee which invites us to become 'Pilgrims of Hope'. Having described the infancy of Jesus, St Luke then begins to relate Christ's adult life and ministry by describing a moment in the life of the Holy Family when, he says, "The parents of Jesus went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover."

At that time, going on pilgrimage was very important for faithful Jewish families. The Torah required that they should make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year: in spring, for Passover; in summer, for Shavuot (or the Feast of Weeks); and in autumn, for Sukkot (or the Feast of Tabernacles). Many would travel long distances to make these pilgrimages, and they did so usually in large groups for safety and religious fellowship. Indeed, the distance the Holy Family would have travelled from Nazareth to Jerusalem was nearly one hundred miles, about five days on foot, and we know too from the Gospel passage that they were travelling with "their relatives and acquaintances."

Then, as now, pilgrimages create an opportunity for those who love God to demonstrate their religious faith and reaffirm their trust in Him. For those who have come to know and love God in Jesus Christ, and believe that He is our Way, our Truth, and our Life, making a pilgrimage helps us to renew our communal faith in Him, to show our love for Him, and to proclaim our hope in Him. Moreover, as Catholic Christians, we believe that through baptism, we become children of God and so become also brothers and sisters in Christ, members of one holy family of faith and extended members of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

In the Gospel today, we learned that following the visit of the Holy Family to Jerusalem, Jesus “went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them.” The experience of that pilgrimage helped the boy Jesus, as we heard, to “increase in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man.”

Sometimes family life is a challenge. It was a challenge for Mary and Joseph when they could not find Jesus on their journey home. But family life is a pilgrimage, a journey of faith, love and hope. It is a pilgrimage where children learn much more by seeing the example given by their parents and the members of their family, than they learn from their words.

When children see their parents and relatives living their faith with joy and confidence; when they learn to see how to love and serve God in simple and ordinary ways; when they pray with them and go together to worship in God’s holy house, just as Mary and Joseph did with Jesus; this will provide the precious moments of learning and personal growth in a child which parents can store up in their hearts, like the mother of Jesus, and treasure all their lives. This is why family life holds such an important place in God’s plan of salvation.

So as we start this Holy Year of Jubilee as Pilgrims of Hope, and continue in this beautiful season of Christmas, let us pray for the grace to grow in the faith, love and hope of the Holy Family, in our own families and in all our relationships.

I encourage you, together with your family if this is possible, to make a pilgrimage to one of the designated Jubilee churches in our diocese during the coming year. In that holy house of God we can pray for His blessing and seek the indulgence of His love and forgiveness.

May the intercession of Mary the Mother of God and the prayers of her husband St Joseph, gain from Christ Our Lord many graces for you, your family and all those you love and care for during the Jubilee, in the Year of Our Lord 2025.

✠ Marcus
Bishop of Leeds

Given at Leeds on 21st December 2024 and appointed to be read in the churches and chapels of the Diocese at all Sunday Masses on 28th and 29th December 2024, the Feast of the Holy Family.