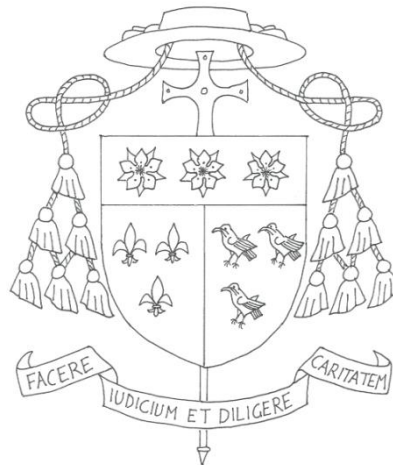


DIOCESE OF NORTHAMPTON



PASTORAL LETTER FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE HOLY FAMILY

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I hope that Christmas at home and in the parish is going really well. During this holy season, we celebrate the birth of Jesus, God becoming man, so that we might share in the eternal life of God.

As the days and weeks of our lives fly by, we are invited to open our hearts to that mystery. How much richer our lives can become when we walk in the company of Jesus. Our thoughts, our words and our actions have a deeper meaning when they are our response to God's love for us.

During this Christmas time, we hear how Jesus embraces our own human experience, and walks with us, in his birth, and as a member of the Holy Family. In our own uncertain times, it is good to remember how Mary and Joseph fled with Jesus from the threat of persecution, and how they lived as refugees in Egypt before returning home.

And Mary and Joseph had to wrestle with the mystery of their Son. Like all parents, they agonise when he goes missing on their journey back from Jerusalem. When they find him in the temple, they must have been perplexed, if not hurt, by what Jesus said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know I must be busy with my Father's affairs?" Yet he goes down with them to Nazareth and lives under their authority, while Mary stores up all that had happened in her heart.

As we listen to the story of the Holy Family, our thoughts turn naturally to our own families. All of us have our ups and downs, our failures and our sufferings,

our successes and our tragedies. No family is perfect. As I have mentioned before, I have an alcoholic brother and a lovely niece who got married in a hotel and whose two boys have not been baptised. Yes, there are so many influences that take those we love and cherish away from Christ and his Church.

What must we do? We must continue to love and cherish one another within our families. Embrace them whatever their situation. And in our parishes we must find ways constantly to pray for and celebrate Sacramental Marriage with the renewal of vows and special anniversary blessings. Week by week, we should try to support one another in our families, those recently arrived in the parish, young families, one parent families, couples coping with children leaving home, and couples in old age, and those who are widowed, and those who are separated and divorced. And do not forget those of us who are single, living out our precious vocation.

Is the parish involved in preparing couples for marriage, encouraging them in the early years of marriage and continuing to support them? Is there a care for parishioners whose marriages have broken down and those in second marriages? This should not be another job for "Father" but, with his blessing, perhaps there is some small initiative you could take, to build up marriage ministry in the parish. To support us, we now have a Diocesan Marriage and Family Life Commission and a Project Worker.

From the beginning the union of one man and one woman has been God's plan. It is the school of love and faith. It is the building block of our society and, at a time when there is so much marriage breakdown, marriage ministry is a priority. There are times when we are dismissed as irrelevant. But what could be more relevant than a community supporting marriage sensitively and with compassion?

A new year lies ahead. Let us place ourselves in the heart of the Holy Family that, whatever the year brings, we may seek to be like them, trusting in God and trusting in one another. That call to trust and live with integrity is a big "ask" at a time when there is little trust and everyone claims their own truth. Through the intercession of Mary and Joseph, may we become more like Jesus, growing in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and with one another.

Happy New Year!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Peter". The plus sign is simple, and the name "Peter" is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bishop of Northampton