



**PASTORAL LETTER  
OF THE  
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM  
THE MOST REVEREND VINCENT NICHOLS  
FOR  
THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY  
ON  
MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ

A little while ago, on an economy flight from Rome, the air hostess was very chatty in her announcements. She got sustained applause when she told us that a married couple on board was celebrating their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. Everyone appreciated their achievement. Sustaining a marriage for such a long time is not easy.

This appreciation is even more heartfelt for our Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, who celebrated their diamond jubilee so recently.

At those diamond jubilee celebrations, the Archbishop of Canterbury spoke about every marriage being an act of faith. When one thinks of the risks involved in making a life-long commitment to another person, marriage is indeed 'an extraordinary undertaking'.

Then the Archbishop spoke of marriage as involving another kind of faith or trust. He said that a couple undertaking Christian marriage express their trust not only in each other but also in God. They understand that there will be more than their own strength to draw on, more than their own capacity to love when they face difficulties. God will be there, and they will minister God's grace to each other.

Now this is an important truth. God is at the heart of the promises which form a marriage. God is there to strengthen and sustain that marriage, to bless it and protect it. Without the acknowledgement of God's presence, a marriage is only half the reality it's supposed to be.

We all know how fragile and easily broken a marriage relationship can be. We know how, at times, that relationship can be the shining light of two lives, and how, at other times, it can seem to be lost in a fog of indifference. Sometimes that relationship becomes the rock which threatens everything. Sometimes, tragically, a marriage lies in ruins.

But in all of this, God is still present. In some lives God's presence is entirely out of sight, because it was never understood or invoked. Indeed, the understanding that God is involved in a marriage, giving it a different kind of permanence, a different kind of depth, is so foreign to modern culture that we people of faith might be in danger of forgetting it, too. Yet marriage without God is no more than a matter of personal choice and personal satisfaction. In those circumstances, there is far less reason to work hard at a marriage when that initial satisfaction has gone and the personal choice seems to have been a mistake. Only the presence of God makes clear the true nature of marriage. Only God's grace can complete and renew such a relationship. Only then does a relationship become a sacrament.

This vision of marriage lies at the centre of the Church's teaching. Indeed, without the firm understanding and belief that God is at the heart of every marriage, much of that teaching seems unreasonable and out-dated. The permanence of marriage, which guides the Church's teaching towards those in second marriages, is rooted in the sacramental presence of God in a valid marriage. The call of the Church to a man and a woman to marry rather than simply live together in a private arrangement is based on the same conviction that God's acknowledged presence is essential for a truly mature human relationship of husband and wife. To fail to see this truth inevitably leads us to see marriage as a human value only and, in the last resort, disposable and replaceable.

In faith, we strive to fulfil the Church's teaching, doing our best to bring our lives into line with God's will, in all the ways open to us. We know that this is our best chance of fulfilment. This is a long and slow process. We need to encourage couples to make the journey to marriage. We must show acceptance and support to those who have experienced failure in their marriage. We are to encourage them in their life of faith, in all the ways the Church shows to us. We never give up, never abandon hope or effort, knowing always that the Lord is with us, drawing us in his own mysterious ways closer to himself and to those who truly sustain and guard us.

In today's Gospel passage we see Mary and Joseph, with the child Jesus, making their long and difficult journey to and from Egypt. In Jesus, they carry with them the hope of the world. They nurture him and protect him from danger. This Holy Family is an image of the Church. As we, the Church today, travel the hard journey of life we too carry with us that same Eternal Word, the same Jesus. Today, too, he is threatened. Yet today, too, he proves to be our Saviour, our Light, our Hope.

But this image also applies to each and every family. Every family, with a marriage at its heart, makes its journey with Jesus present in its midst. In our family life we carry Him with us. We show Him to each other. Day by day we spell out, as best we can, the truth that God considers every moment of this life worthwhile, that God is committed to our wellbeing and joy, that God will never desert us or turn away. This is the reality of faith we try to make present for each other. In this way we proclaim and pass on our faith.

To embrace this reality of God's presence within marriage and family life is to embrace a prospect that draws us into eternity. Marriage and family life are not just for now. Husbands and wives are committed to each other, and to their children, in order to get each other to heaven. Daily life is the ladder of our ascent. St Paul tells us so in plain terms: 'You are God's chosen race, his saints; he loves you and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins.'(Col.3.12) This is the recipe for holiness, a holiness of the home, the holiness of our shared journey to heaven.

On this Feast of the Holy Family, may the Lord bless the families of every parish, of every community. May all who are burdened find rest and new strength in Him. May He fill your homes with his peace and give you a joyful faithfulness to one another.

And may I wish you all a continuing peaceful Christmas and a happy New Year.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Vincent".

✠Vincent Nichols  
Archbishop of Birmingham

Given at Birmingham on the Feast of the Holy Family and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Diocese on the weekend of 29/30 December 2007