

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER



Pastoral Letter for the Solemnity of the Holy Family 2020

My dear people,

This Solemnity of the Lord's Nativity is kept holy as we recognise Christ, the Light in our darkness, Christ, our Saviour. It falls at a particular time in our calendar but is relevant for the whole year. Christmas falls on 25th December but its gift should be opened each day of the year.

Over these past ten months we have been made aware of our frailty and our strength both as individuals and as a society. We know that the pandemic has landed more heavily on some than on others. We know that certain individuals can cope better under this pressure than others. We have been asked repeatedly to be considerate of others, especially the most vulnerable and those whose occupations or circumstances put them in the front line of this battle.

When a care worker, medic or teacher finishes their shift or their work for the day, what do they do? They go home. Home to what? For the vast majority, they go home to family, spouse, children, news of elderly parents, washing, shopping, cleaning, preparing meals, medical appointments, bills and hopefully time to relax. All this – and more - is what it means to live in this world.

There are others who, unfortunately, have lost jobs, and now are faced with the crisis of knowing how to pay their bills, even how to stay in their rented home. Other families are even less fortunate as they find themselves homeless. I imagine the distress of young parents who find themselves with children they struggle to provide with basic essentials due to the cruelty of fate, economics or 'luck'. I can imagine that darkness is sometimes welcomed because it helps to hide their plight, and yet, in this darkness they easily fall prey to anxieties that never take time off, robbing them of precious sleep and that most essential quality of human life, hope.

The Light that is Christ does not respect sin. He seeks out the darkest places knowing that these are the very places where He will find those for whom He has come, those who need Him most. The Church carries His light. The Church allows His light to shine through Faith and Charity. Prayer is something we can and must do in every time and every situation. With courage, prayer enables us to enter into the darkness of people's lives so that the Light of Christ can shine both for us and for those we find there.

Our Holy Father, Pope Francis has recently given us a beautiful Apostolic Letter, *Patris corde*, to mark the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of Saint Joseph as the Patron of the

Universal Church. It is something I ask your clergy to help make available in our parishes and schools. It speaks to us of the love of a father's heart and will help to bring us the light of hope at a time when it is greatly needed.

God the Father knows all too well that bringing light into our darkness is wonderful but not in itself enough. Beyond prayer, beyond belief there must be active Charity. This, too, is the vocation of the Church and of every Christian. We must overcome the darkness through our love of others. Too often we can be paralysed by the sheer enormity of the problems we face and the desperate difficulties faced by those around us. St. Joseph shows us what is still possible. A single individual can be given the gift of overcoming what others see as insurmountable problems.

The world is a big place, and the number of those struggling can be overwhelming. Where do I start? Start with those closest to you, your family. Start at home. I invite you to take this opportunity to renew your personal Faith, particularly if you are experiencing severe difficulties. Be aware of the light you were entrusted with at your baptism. It was given to you for your own salvation and also for the good of others. Your vocation is to carry that Light in these days even though they are days we would not have chosen. This is where Christ wants you to carry His love.

At Christmas people want to be generous to others. Many families actually go into debt in order to 'make' Christmas for their loved ones. Sadly, the most important element is missed; they ignore the reality of the Word made flesh in favour of joys that will not last. For us, Christmas is about a debt, a debt of love we owe to the God who has paid our debt owed due to sin. Note the difference; one household is plunged into debt by their Christmas whilst the faithful household is lifted out of debt by the Saviour.

As we begin the new year we pray above all for holiness. The Holy Family was not spared difficulties, and neither will we be spared. An abiding trust in the Father's love will enable us to overcome any darkness. With the prayers of Our Blessed Lady, Mother of the Redeemer, and of Saint Joseph, Patron of the Universal Church, may you be given a peace, joy and encouragement that only the Lord's coming can give.

With my blessing on you all,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+Paul Swarbrick". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

+Paul Swarbrick

Bishop of Lancaster.