



## **PASTORAL LETTER FOR THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Only last Wednesday, Christmas Day, we were with Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. Today the story of that small family unit moves on. With the Christ child, they become refugees. Like so many refugees today, they flee from danger and violence. The Gospel at today's Mass ends with Mary and Joseph returning with Jesus to their homeland and settling in Nazareth. Of course, the reference to Jesus being a Nazarene throws the shadow of the cross over the family – Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews is what was written on the cross above Jesus' head.

How important to Jesus must have been the love and devotion of Mary and Joseph in his early years. They accompanied him with love and gave him security as he grew up. Mary pondered and prayed the mystery of her Son, and accompanied him all the way to the cross.

In the same way, our families are vital for our flourishing. We can get mixed up in our families, but they provide us with our identities. Yet, our secular society seems to want to deconstruct our understanding of marriage as the union of one woman and one man in a life-long partnership of accompaniment. But, for us, marriage is a vocation, a call from God sealed in the Sacrament of Matrimony.

I hope that we can find ways of promoting this sacrament in our parishes and encouraging and supporting people thinking about marriage. The thought of commitment is not appealing or fashionable in our fast-changing world. Yet, the loving sacrifice of two people accompanying

one another till death do they part provides a secure base for the upbringing of children and for the wider community.

Until a new bishop is named to succeed me – and please keep praying for that – I am the Chair of the Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life. It is a challenging brief because everything around Marriage and Family Life touches all of us deeply and in different ways.

Pope Francis is very keen that we walk with one another in the ups and downs of marriage and family life, in its successes and failures, in the complexities of separation and divorce and remarriage, and now in the tricky area of gender issues. Remember that we all belong in God's family.

As parish communities, we must embrace one another, wherever we are, and not be frightened or overwhelmed. None of us are perfect. None of us know all the answers. At the same time, the Church's teaching must not be diluted.

I hope that you are enjoying these days after Christmas. I hope, too, that you are savouring time with family and friends, or remembering family and friends, giving thanks for husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, who have accompanied us as Mary and Joseph accompanied Jesus.

With every blessing for the New Year,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Peter". The plus sign is on the left, and the name "Peter" is written in a cursive style to its right.

**Bishop of Northampton**