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**Pastoral Letter to be read
on the Feast of the Holy Family 2014
Sunday, 28th December 2014**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“He then went down with them and came to Nazareth and lived under their authority... and Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature and in favour with God and man.” That little passage from St. Luke’s Gospel reminds us that Jesus did not suddenly emerge from nowhere, so to speak. He grew up as a human being within a stable, loving family, in a particular neighbourhood, and within the tradition and culture of Judaism in first-century Palestine. It was in that same context that Jesus was prepared for his God-given task of bringing the healing gift of God’s love to a world wounded by sin and suffering. To a world overshadowed by darkness and confusion, he brought the light of truth. And after his Resurrection and Ascension, he poured out the Holy Spirit of Truth on the infant Church so that his mission would continue down through the ages.

In giving us the gift of his Son, God has given us the gift of life and the gift of love. He has also given us the gift of truth, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to enable us to understand the origin, meaning and purpose of human life. Enlightened by that same Spirit we believe that life is God’s gift. And precisely because it is God’s gift, human life and authentic human relationships have infinite value and dignity. When human relationships break down, when they become fractured and dysfunctional, not only do individuals suffer, but there are inevitable consequence for others in terms of peace, justice and the common good.

The Church has consistently taught that the best context for learning about, and being nurtured in authentic human relationships, is within marriage and the family. And the evidence from report after report in recent years indicates very clearly that even from a secular point of view, marriage between a man and a woman provides far and away the best place to bring up a family and educate children. It is within that stable, loving context that children learn to develop spiritually, emotionally, physically and intellectually. It was within that context that Jesus learned to live under authority; it was there that he learned from the experience and wisdom of Mary and Joseph. It was there that he had his first human experience of being loved, of being held, of being listened to and nurtured so that he could fulfil all his human potential.

But what ultimately gave Jesus direction in his life, what sustained and supported him through thick and thin was his abiding relationship with God, his Father. In that respect, the Holy Family is indeed a wonderful model for all of us, and reveals a deep truth about our humanity and our human relationships. Our homes should shine out as “holy places”, a communion of life and love rooted in our relationship with God and reflected in our love for one another.

In our own day, the Church’s claim to know and to teach the truth is often dismissed on the basis that such a claim is illiberal, restrictive and authoritarian! The Church’s proclamation of the truth about God, about the value and dignity of human life, and about what it means to be truly human, is often regarded as at best irrelevant, and at worst, arrogant. Yet how often these days do we hear the cry that society is breaking down, that there is total confusion about morality and the meaning of life? How true were the late Cardinal Hume’s prophetic words, spoken on the last Ash Wednesday of his life: *“All is not well. A society without a common understanding of what it is to be human, and without a shared morality is in danger of gradual disintegration.”*

Jesus never hesitated to speak the truth in the face of moral confusion and social evil. But he did so as the Good Shepherd, full of mercy and compassion, especially for the poor, the needy and for those who had gone astray. As we prepare to face another New Year, I exhort you to take seriously the challenge to make a fresh start with God, a fresh start at home and a fresh start for the world's poor. We are called to be people of deep compassion and kindness, treating others with the respect and honour which is their due because they are images of God. In particular we need to give a new start to those families which have been broken and grievously wounded through separation or divorce. For these especially we must all have the greatest love, respect, gentleness and compassion. These are our brothers and sisters, deeply wounded and suffering. Let no one judge them. Welcome them within the community of the Church and help them to experience the life-giving love and compassion which, please God, will in time lead to healing and new life.

With my prayers and blessing for the New Year,



Archbishop of Southwark