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**Pastoral Letter to be read
on the Feast of the Holy Family 2015
Sunday, 27th December 2015**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This Feast day of the Holy Family gives us an opportunity to reflect on our own family and community life through the lens of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The source and foundation of their relationship was unconditional love, which reflected in a very human way the unconditional love of the three persons of the Holy Trinity. Such love needs to be the basis of our own human relationships too; firstly within our natural families, then in the wider family of the Church community, and extending to society at large. But we must never confuse unconditional love with mere sentiment or romantic feelings. True love is demanding and requires us to respect and honour each other, show sympathy and kindness towards one another, and support those who are weak and fragile, as the writer of the Book of Ecclesiasticus expresses so well in the first reading today.

In equally moving terms, St. Paul in his Letter to the Colossians spells out the values and attitudes which spring from such genuine love. He tells us that we “should be clothed with sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience.” He tells us that we must “bear with one another, forgiving each other as soon as a quarrel begins.” He concludes by reminding us that, “Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete them, put on love.”

It was into a human family that Jesus Christ was born, but as we pray before the Crib we shouldn't allow ourselves to indulge in sentimentalism or delude ourselves with romantic notions of that family. The Gospel reminds us with great clarity and perception that the Holy Family, rooted as it was in the love of God, experienced light and darkness, joy and sorrow. We have only to reflect on our own experience of family life, or community life, to know that the way of humanity is the way both of pain and sorrow, as well as the way of joy and blessing. Yet, we are reminded too that it was in the context of the stable and loving relationship of marriage, that Jesus grew in “wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and men”, and was prepared for his God-given task of bringing the healing gift of God's love to a world wounded by sin and suffering. He would bring the light of truth to a world of darkness and confusion, 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.

The perennial challenge of the Gospel is to live the truth revealed by Christ, and to live out that truth in lives of authentic love, of genuine faith and of firm hope – and to do so more fully and with greater commitment. And one of the fundamental truths is, in the words of Pope Francis, that “mercy is the beating heart of the Gospel”, and that as disciples of Christ we are all called to manifest that mercy in our relationships with one another, treating others with the respect and honour which is their due because they are images of God. These are the values we learn first in the context of family life.

Yet, during the recent Synod, Pope Francis and all the Bishops present openly acknowledged the reality that marriages sometimes fail. We too know, often from our own experience, that marriages can and do break down with all the tragic heartache that that brings to the family concerned. So especially in this Year of Mercy, we must have a special concern and care for those families which have been broken and grievously wounded through separation or divorce. The commandment that we must love our neighbour as ourselves puts a special obligation on us to reach out to them. For these particularly we must all have the greatest love, respect, gentleness and compassion. These are our brothers and sisters, deeply wounded and suffering. It is not our place to judge them. Rather the Gospel demands that we welcome them within the family of the Church and help them to experience the life-giving love and compassion which will in time, and with the help of God’s grace, lead to healing and new life.

It was in the loving relationship of the Holy Family, that Jesus 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, learning from the experience and wisdom of Mary and Joseph. May our homes and families shine out as “holy places”, rooted in the love of God, reflected in our love and respect for one another.

Wishing you every blessing for the Jubilee Year of Mercy,



Archbishop of Southwark

Given at Southwark 18th December, 2015.