



**PASTORAL LETTER
OF THE
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM
THE MOST REVEREND VINCENT NICHOLS
ON THE
FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY**

On this Feast of the Holy Family there is a phrase I want to put before you. It is this: 'Home is a Holy Place.'

In what sense is this phrase true?

Well, we know it is true of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Obviously, we think of Jesus Mary and Joseph as a perfect family, especially as we celebrate this Feast. We probably acknowledge that ideally this statement should be true of every home. But we may well think that saying 'home is a holy place', like so many religious expressions, is no more than wishful thinking. It is simply not true of home life today.

Yet what exactly do we mean when we say that 'home is a holy place'?

We are not saying that all must be well for home to be holy. Holiness is not about having successful children, a tidy house, or even a very solid marriage. Nor is holiness simply about having a routine of family prayer, although that helps.

What do we mean?

Holiness is about having eyes for God. It is about being ready to respond to God's presence in ways that are generous and brave. Holiness is about seeing beneath the surface of daily events and having the courage to know that God is at work in them even if they don't make sense to us. Holiness is walking every minute with God. Seeking holiness is tough going.

Seeking holiness in our homes is particularly difficult. Often it's far easier to be kind to strangers than to those with whom we live, who may have just finished off the milk, taken the last packet of crisps or jumped the queue for the bathroom. It's far more difficult to accept the failures of those whom we love and to whom we have tried to give everything.

Everyone starts off with the hope of being the perfect family. But then reality sets in. All of life's difficulties begin to emerge. It's only when we realise that we are not perfect, that we are never going to be perfect, neither as individuals nor as a family, that the real work of holiness begins. When we accept that something

has really gone wrong, when we have that terrible feeling in the pit of our stomach, then we can begin to discover what it is to rely on God, to have eyes for God, to walk each minute with God.

The great joys of life, especially in a family, bring us together. It is the knocks, the disappointments, the tragedies of life that leave us stunned and shaken, the façade of our respectability seriously dented. Yet these cracks and gaping holes in the fabric of our lives are precisely the spaces through which the light and love of God enter. These are the opportunities to become holy.

This experience of fragility and failure is shared by so many. Indeed the qualification we need to come to church, to sit in these pews and join in these prayers and hymns, is that of knowing our need, our weaknesses and our failures. That is our starting point.

The family is a place where we experience this vulnerability very sharply. The family is also a place where we can experience a love that sustains and nurtures us. This is why the home is a holy place: because here we meet not only our need for God but also God's love for us. God created families so that we can participate intimately in God's creative life and love. This happens not only when new life is born into the family, but in every single act of love and kindness which sustains and protects us.

The pathway to holiness in our homes is the pathway of St Teresa of Liseux. It is her 'Little Way', the constant effort of doing the ordinary things in an extraordinary way: as best we can. This is the way by which the home becomes a holy place. It is a pathway each of us can walk, day by day.

All that I have been saying is summed up in the Gospel passage we have just heard. Jesus leaves his parents, staying behind on his own in the Temple. He provokes a real family crisis. Mary and Joseph are beside themselves with anxiety. Hard words and misunderstanding between parents and youngster follow. But out of this distressing incident we know that Mary grew in her understanding, so that eventually she would stand by the cross of her Son, lovingly sharing in his sacrifice. We also read that Jesus, at this young age, 'went down with them to Nazareth' where 'he increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and men.' (Lk 2.52) It was this that made the house in Nazareth a holy place.

Your home is a holy place. Please do keep this phrase in mind. In your home God is with you. In your family life God is inviting you to know him, love him and serve him. There, in everything that happens between you, are the opportunities to please God in all that you do. You walk the path of holiness in your kindness, patience, forbearance; in your search for fairness and peace between you; in your struggle for understanding and tolerance; in your faithfulness and honesty; in your self-sacrificing love, each time you give up something you want personally for the good of the family. Everyone in a family has their part to play, as a parent or a grandparent, as a child or brother or sister. In all these ways God is drawing you to himself in holiness.

Over the coming months, the Catholic Church in England and Wales will be reflecting on this theme. Today is a starting point. I hope you will hear much more about the home being a holy place and receive much encouragement in your family life. I know that through your regular presence at Mass and through your own life of prayer, God will certainly give you the gift of the Holy Spirit to strengthen you in this calling, on this pathway to holiness.

May the Lord bless us this day. May God bless our families, no matter where they may be. May God draw us closer into the mystery of life through the love we have for each other. Amen.



✠Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Birmingham

Given at Birmingham on the 20 December 2006
and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Diocese on the weekend of 30/31 December 2006

NB More help and resources can be found online at www.homeisaholyplace.org.uk