



PASTORAL LETTER OF ARCHBISHOP GEORGE STACK
FOR THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY – 31st DECEMBER 2017

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

“The Secret Life of 4 and 5 Year Olds” must surely be one of the most profound and moving TV programs of recent years. This fascinating documentary takes us into the world of these youngsters as they navigate their way through friendship and fear, choices and conflict, responsibility and blame. Their insight and language skills are amazing. Their capacity to discern what is good or bad behaviour is enlightening. Their sensitivity to each other is extraordinary. The program reveals how the individual adult personalities of these young children are already being formed at this early age.

“*Christmas is a time for children*” we often say; and so, it is – but it is a time for adults too. Today’s Feast of the Holy Family is intimately linked with the birth of the Christ Child at Bethlehem. It speaks of the integrity, the wholeness, the holiness which lies at the heart of a fulfilled family life. It is no accident, though, that another feast of children is also kept during this Christmas season. The feast of the Holy Innocents is a reminder of the neglect, cruelty and abuse that children can suffer even in our own day. We are all familiar with the pain which results when families break down. We read daily of the suffering children experience when they are deprived or neglected. That is one reason why our Diocesan Catholic schools seek to help parents in the education of their children.

We also recognise that the family is under pressure in countless ways, not least in a climate which encourages under age children to 'choose' their gender. In the light of all this, parenting skills need to be nurtured, developed and sustained at all costs. Marriage needs to be prepared for in remote, proximate and immediate ways. It is a continual, lifelong process. The forthcoming Diocesan policy on preparation for marriage in all its aspects will be of enormous help to all who care for the well-being of marriage and family life.

Although not normally thought of as a Christmas story, today's gospel passage about Simeon and Anna tells us something important about the meeting between young and old, between two sections of society which are perhaps the most vulnerable of all. When life expectancy is at an all-time high - 90th birthdays are no longer unusual. I recently had the privilege of burying a nun aged 101. The medical advances which allow for a longer life bring with them questions such as quality of life, the economic demands to navigate the crisis in social care, the epidemic of loneliness amongst the elderly and the challenge of dementia. Forty years ago, Pope Paul VI spoke powerfully of the "*Civilisation of Love*" and the family as the 'School of Love'. This unconditional love should last from the womb to the tomb no matter what the demands and circumstances it makes on us. Reflecting on this gospel, Pope Francis said "*It is good for the elderly to communicate their wisdom to the young; and it is good for young people to gather this wealth of experience and wisdom, and to carry it forward ... addressing the challenges that life brings*".

Yet another TV program showed some four year old children who were allowed to share their lessons for six weeks with residents of an old people's home. The results were extraordinary. The transformational effect on the health and happiness of the old people was both beautiful and telling. By the same token, the exuberance and empathy of the youngsters for the elderly was equally so. 'Lessons for Life' can take place in many places other than the classroom.

Simeon and Anna are the models to whom Pope Francis refers when speaking of passing on wisdom. Simeon, an old man now, nearly blind, frail with age, near to death. He really did know what God was about even when all the others in the Christmas story did not – the shepherds, the Wise Men, perhaps even Mary and Joseph. But Simeon was blessed with deep wisdom because "*My eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see*". Anna, her

days of girlhood over, was now eighty-four years old and never left the Temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayer. The people came to the Temple in Jerusalem to see the sacrifices and join in the public worship. Both Anna and Simeon tell them that the child in the arms of Mary is the one to watch.

“Our children are the messages we send to tomorrow”. On this feast of the Holy Family it is good to reflect on what we wish to hand on to the next generation, not just in material things, but in physical and emotional well-being as well as spiritual identity. In doing so, we give thanks to God for parents who devote themselves to the upbringing and education of their children. We give thanks to God for grandparents who in so many ways continue to contribute to the welfare of their children and their children’s children. And we pray for those whose experience of family life is not ideal, that through the wider family of those who care they may experience something of the love that God has for each human person.

Pope Francis has written a profound letter celebrating the beauty and importance of marriage and family life. It is called *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia)*. In that letter, he recognises that the reality of the lives of so many of us is different from the ideals proclaimed by the gospel. Nonetheless, each person still belongs to the Bride of Christ which is the Church. No one should be outside the pastoral care and concern of the community of faith. At the beginning of this New Year, resolutions are often in our minds. What better New Year resolution than a prayerful and reflective reading of “The Joy of Love”?

With every blessing for 2018,

+George Stack

Archbishop of Cardiff