

Bishop Declan's Pastoral Letter for the Feast of the Holy Family 2013

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ

In the Gospel today, the Holy Family becomes a refugee family. Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus become displaced people because Herod is greedy for power. A family already some distance from their own home have now to leave their homeland and search for a safe haven in a foreign country and amongst another people. As Joseph sets out for Egypt the fear and anxiety he felt for his family must have caused him great stress. Where were they to live, how could he support them and how would he protect them? The Holy Family was put in a precarious and vulnerable situation. They were victims of someone else's decision. They were stripped of their dignity and identity. In many ways they became a 'non' people.

Unfortunately, the reality of refugee people is still very much part of today's world. We need only think of Syria. Many people staying within their own country are displaced having lost family, friends, homes and businesses. In addition there are 2.2 million Syrian refugees in other countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Of these it is estimated that 52% are children, many of whom are separated from their families. They have seen their homes destroyed and family members killed. Not surprisingly many of these young people as well as the adults are traumatised.

The Feast of the Holy Family is a time to celebrate our family life but it is also a time to be aware of those families who struggle in life. We may not have personally encountered refugee families but I am sure we know families where relationships have broken down and people have been hurt. Often in response to the hurt, people begin to doubt whether they can ever again trust anyone. Their response to life can be aggressive as a means of defence.

If the message of Christ, in all its richness finds a home within us, we cannot be indifferent or ignore the hurt of others. The Gospel message is: You must love one another as I have loved you. Jesus came as Saviour of the World but his message and his presence was particularly directed to those who are wounded in life so as to give them hope and restore their dignity.

Pope Francis has reminded us again and again that following the example of Christ, his disciples must be a Church for the poor and of the poor. This he tells us does not mean hectic activism but in the first place a growing awareness of how our decision making and our style of life affects the vulnerable members of our society. If we have that awareness our decision making may well be different and our way of life change.

In his Exhortation 'The Joy of the Gospel', Pope Francis writes: All Christians, their pastors included, are called to share concern for the building of a better world... we may not always be able to reflect adequately the beauty of the Gospel, but there is one sign which we should never lack: the option for those who are least, those whom society discards. (EG 195)

If the family of the Church is to contribute to building up the good of the human family, we need to pledge ourselves to practical ways of action, including the way we speak of others especially the stranger. We need to be careful of the language we use and deplore any suggestion of demonising other nationalities or groups. We need to look at the way in which we use our parish property and ask whether it could be better used for the common good. In 'Called to be a People of Hope', I suggested that each parish has two causes which it supports

– one locally and one abroad. It is not just a matter of giving money but an opportunity to become more aware of those who are in need of help.

Our faith is in Christ Jesus as Saviour of the World. We believe in him and we believe in his way. Pope Francis wrote that an authentic faith always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave the earth somehow better than we found it. We love this magnificent planet on which God has put us, and we love the human family which dwells here, with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses. The earth is our common home and we are all brothers and sisters. (EG 183)

As we look towards a new year we commit ourselves afresh to the way of Christ in all its richness. May God bless us all as we journey towards the Father with our brothers and sisters in faith, with hope and love.

With my best wishes and prayers

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