



diocese
of limerick
our catholic community

Christmas Message, Fourth Sunday of Advent, 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As we approach Christmas I greet you and wish you and all your family well.

It's been a year to remember, mostly for the wrong reasons because of COVID-19 but, in many respects too, for the right reasons also because of the resilience, humanity, charity and caring we have seen in response!

Most of the parishes of the Diocese are in Limerick so we finished the year with a great memory to take from it - winning of the McCarthy Cup was such a positive end to the year. But we are all mindful of the huge upheaval Covid-19 brought us this year.

We'll remember this year for many things - the now familiar images of masks and sanitisers, the new words 'social distancing' and 'lockdowns' (and many more), the grateful recognition of healthcare workers and the often hidden essential services, as well as the uncertainties brought by restrictions. But I think you'll agree that it's also a year when we learned to appreciate family in a new way.

It's been a year when so much concern was expressed for loved ones isolated in nursing homes or hospitals. Concern too for grandparents living on their own, cut off from their families. We often saw both heart-warming and heart-rending scenes of young children being brought to stand in front of a window greeting the elderly inside. It was a year when young people were challenged with no school to go to, exams cancelled and social friendship severely curtailed. We suffered with family members around us afflicted by mental health issues or battling addictions, victims of the social upheaval the Coronavirus brought with it. There's been the pain of families not able to grieve as family at times of bereavement. And, of course, we've all experienced the disruption of the normal routines of family life in recreation, celebration and ritual.

While I recognise this year tragically has seen a rise in the incidence of domestic abuse, for many, however, the COVID-19 crisis has helped us recognise with new gratitude in our heart how important family is in our lives. There have been many quality moments of life together as families.

For people of faith, we can hear the voice of the Lord speaking to us in this. In God's plan, the family is a masterpiece. No family is perfect but everyone belongs to a family and, in and through the family, God is at work in our world.

The Church calls the family the "domestic church", that is, the "family-church". Perhaps we need all of us to recognise this more. It can be a wish we can make this Christmas as we contemplate the family in the Nativity scene of Bethlehem.

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"Freely you have received; freely give" (Mt 10:8).

Jesus came two thousand years ago into our world and he lived in a family. Shepherds came to see him in the manger with Mary and Joseph by his side. Today too Jesus wants to come into our world. Each family can be a 'Bethlehem' for others to come, see and experience Jesus.

How? By the love we have for one another. It is what Jesus said: by this all will know you are my disciples if you love another.

Too often we have reduced the Church to the church building or liturgical functions or religious events or church organisation and structures. But this year, in particular, a year when we had various periods without public worship in church buildings, let's remember how much the Church is the day-to-day life in families.

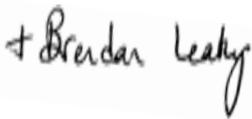
Soon the vaccine will be rolled out, COVID-19 will gradually recede. But before that happens, let's make a decision in our hearts to recognise how much the family is an expression of Church.

The Church is above all *life*, and that means, for most of us, the give and take that goes into family life. We are all baptised. Jesus has committed himself to us. Let's recognise how he is active in our families. It is in the family that we learn to share, that we learn to have patience with others. It is in the family that we learn to work together, play together and pray together. It is in the family we learn how to take care of the sick, look out for one another and comfort and help each other in times of trouble. If we look at all of this with the eyes of faith, we can see that all of this is Church, the living Church, the everyday Church, the Jesus-Church that continues Jesus' mission in the world.

This is a simple but I believe important thought I wanted to share with you as we approach Christmas.

Let's entrust our families to Mary, Mother of Hope and the Un-tier of knots, that she may help us open our eyes even more to the wonder that is the family, the living domestic church with Jesus living among us.

Every blessing for Christmas!



✠ Brendan Leahy

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"Come and see the works of God tremendous his deeds among us" - Ps. 66 (65)