

PASTORAL LETTER OF CARDINAL CORMAC MURPHY-O'CONNOR

To be read at all Masses on weekend of

27-28 December 2008 – Feast of the Holy Family

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today is the feast of the Holy Family and I want to speak to you about marriage and family life. While I was thinking of what to say to you, the first thoughts that come to my mind are not immediately about family as husband, wife, father, mother, children. My first thoughts are about the wider family, for I believe that as children of God we all belong together and, indeed, the unity that we experience together through Christ is much more profound than any marriage bond. So I am thinking of those of you listening to me who are single, either from choice or circumstance and of how much God values your gifts and your participation in the family of the Church and of the world. I also have in mind widows and widowers, one-parent families and divorced people. I want you to know that all of you in different ways have a positive part to play in the family of the Church. I remember well the words of Pope John Paul on his visit to England when he said, “We must reach out in love – the love of Christ – to those who know the pain of failure in marriage; to those who know the loneliness of bringing up a family on their own; to those whose family life is dominated by tragedy or by illness of mind or body”.

However, it is very important to speak to you about marriage, today more than ever before. This is because the Christian vision of marriage is not an arbitrary set of moral rules. It is the clearest example we have of what it means to share your life with another and to express your belief about God and what He is like with that person. The heart of the Good News of the Gospel is that the Eternal Son of God,

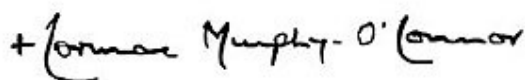
Jesus Christ, gave up His divine life to share our human condition and that though His human life was spent in showing truth and love to His fellow human beings, they rejected and crucified Him. Such love could not be defeated and through and beyond His death, God gave the Risen Christ back to us to be forever a sign of perpetual forgiveness and reconciliation. That is the pattern, namely, sharing, rejection, forgiveness, reconciliation, new life and above all, love. Christian faith declares that this is the fundamental pattern behind the universe in which we all find our way to fuller and eternal living. Now what Christianity has done is to take marriage, that natural, world-wide human institution through which most human beings pass their lives, and to say that at its best, as it is meant to be, marriage is a symbol of the image of God. It is a means by which we can grow more like Him and prepare ourselves to enjoy eternal life. The focal point of this vision is the requirement of mutual faithfulness, “till death do us part”. This mutual loyalty is completely unconditional. It is not a contract which says, “I will stay faithful to you as long as you are faithful to me”. It does not say that because God does not say that. Jesus remained faithful and loving and forgiving even though everyone forsook Him and betrayed and killed Him. Jesus’s love is unconditional and our love must be the same.

One of the happiest celebrations that I experienced during the past year was on May 10th when I invited those couples in the Diocese who were celebrating significant and jubilee anniversaries of their marriage during 2008 to come to the Cathedral and give thanks to God. After the homily, each couple faced each other and said, one after the other, “I, in the presence of God, reaffirm my commitment to you. I give thanks that you have shared my life. All that I am and all that I have I continue to share with you. Whatever the future holds I will love you and stand by you as long as we both shall live”. It was a deeply moving occasion and a wonderful affirmation and grace for the huge number of couples who came to pray and give thanks on that day.

Today, I am particularly aware of the special challenges that face so many families in today's climate of economic and social difficulty. Like the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, every family is a suffering family at some stage or another. But I believe that the family is the foundation of our society today and, in particular, our Catholic families are a special source of grace and witness within the Church and to the wider world. So today, on this feast of the Holy Family, there is an opportunity for married couples to renew their vows of fidelity and love. May God help each one of you in your family situation and bring about a renewal in family life. I love those words of St. Paul in his letter to the Colossians: "Be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another: forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins. The Lord has forgiven you, now you must do the same. Over all these clothes, put on love". (Col. 3:12-15).

Be assured of my prayers and kindest wishes for you all during the coming year. May God bless you.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cormac Murphy-O'Connor". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Archbishop of Westminster