



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

“A Wondrous Gift”

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I have always found Christmas to be a beautiful time of year. As Christians, we gather to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. In him, Mary's child, God has become one of us, one with us. When he came into the world, Jesus was born into a family. He has much to teach us about the dignity, the beauty and even the fragility of family life.

His birth into a family honours all families and highlights the importance of family relationships to every person. Perhaps this is why we strive to be together as families at Christmas time. I treasure the opportunity to gather for a few days with my own family. With my Dad, my brother and sisters, and their children, surrounded by memories and stories of my mother, I discover in them, yet again, that they are a wondrous gift from God. In his most recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, (The Joy of Love), Pope Francis writes, “It is a profound spiritual experience to contemplate our loved ones with the eyes of God and to see Christ in them.” (323)

The birth of Jesus also shows the solidarity of God with families who are suffering. It summons us to extend to them his mercy. This summons became very real for us in Alberta just this past year. For instance, many parishes, united with Catholic Social Services, reached out to welcome Iraqi and Syrian families. Like Jesus, Mary and Joseph so long ago, who became refugees in a foreign land after they escaped persecution and death, these families from the Middle East of today had been uprooted from their homes as they fled violence and destruction. Also this past year, many of our neighbours in Fort McMurray left their homes behind to escape great danger, like the Holy Family had to do. For me, what they received from fellow Albertans was a real sign of God's empathy and compassion. The response of Albertans was more than charitable. At times it was simply heroic. Albertans, our friends, families and neighbours, many of whom themselves may have been adversely affected by our present economic reality, did all this and more. As a witness to this, it made me proud to be one of Alberta's adopted sons. More importantly, I recognized in my neighbours a clear invitation from God to assure others in need of the real and enduring presence of Jesus in our world.

In Jesus Christ we discover what it means to be a human being. Since this season often brings loneliness to those who suffer most in our families, I ask every one of you to share this truth with those around you: Jesus's birth into a family makes clear that we are born for love and to love. To be human is to bask in the infinite love of God, and to offer our love to Him and our neighbours in return. It is truly beautiful to see Christ in others. Inspired by the meditations Pope Francis has offered us in *Amoris Laetitia*, I offer this prayer for and with our families:

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Holy Family of Nazareth,
grant that our families
may become schools of mercy,
where the sting of condemnation
is replaced with the tenderness of forgiveness.

Joseph, husband and father,
grant that all men
see in women and children
the dignity that is theirs, revealed in the light of Christ;
may they become heralds of kindness, virtue, and hope.

Mary, mother of God,
bless our mothers and sisters;
may they respond to Your Son's call
to serve, protect and cherish all creation;
help them to be beacons of charity, life, and love.

Jesus, Hope for all creation,
friend to the poor, the sick
the lonely, the foreigner and prisoner,
teach us to respect all human life,
at each stage and in every circumstance;

Jesus, Light of the world,
may our families,
from generation to generation,
be schools of communion and love.
Through them, may the world know of Your peace.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
hear our prayer.

Amen.

Merry Christmas!



Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
Archbishop of Edmonton