

ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE,
WESTMINSTER, LONDON, SW1P 1QJ



7/8 June 2014
Pentecost Sunday

My brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ

Today we celebrate the great Feast of Pentecost, the event so vividly described in the Acts of the Apostles. Wind and fire are the images used for the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the group of apostles, closed in on themselves in the upper room. A burst of energy, of languages, bewilderment and astonishment follow as the doors are thrown open and the disciples emerge to preach boldly about the 'marvels of God.'

How often Pope Francis echoes this message, telling us not to be shut in on ourselves, but to go out and meet others, especially those who are in need. When we are gathered together, the Holy Spirit gives us all we need. The same Spirit sends us out to bring all we have received to our needy world.

Today I invite you to see Pentecost as a feast of the family. In the eyes of faith, marriage and family life are essentially the work of the Holy Spirit. They are a vocation, a call from God, through which God brings stability and new life into His world. The strength of love holding a family together is a gift of the Holy Spirit. So too is the instinct to go out and care for others. Family life does not find its fulfilment by being shut in on itself. The love of every family is strengthened when it is open and generous. That is the story of strong families and of the Church too. It is the work of the Holy Spirit.

This afternoon / Yesterday in the Cathedral we celebrated the annual Mass for Marriage. This is now the seventh time we have done so. The Cathedral was once again wonderfully filled with over twelve hundred husbands and wives, celebrating significant anniversaries of their wedding day. Between them they represented over twenty thousand years of married life.

The mood in the Cathedral on this occasion is always one of joy and thanksgiving. Afterwards, I meet couple after couple who speak of their continuing delight in each other, of how the years have flown by and of how their happiness outweighs all the difficulties they have encountered. There is strong realism in their stories. They acknowledge the cost of such faithful love. Yet they are filled with a deep appreciation of the priceless treasure of family life built on the Sacrament of Marriage.

Theirs is an important voice to hear. It is testimony to the vision of the Church about the fundamental truths of marriage, a vision rooted in our human nature and realised with the power of God's grace.

I am sure that every husband and wife present in the Cathedral knows exactly what is meant when the Church speaks of sacrificial love being at the heart of marriage. Within love, concern for oneself gives way to a willingness to put others first: one's spouse, the children, their grandparents. In this way married love demonstrates the abiding truth that the best of life is to be found in self-giving love, a truth proclaimed in Christ's sacrificial death on the cross and in his glorious resurrection.

Such love is at the heart of the lasting unity of a marriage. Such love is at the heart of the fidelity which is the hallmark of marriage. Such sacrificial love is drawn out when children are born and the family circle enriched.

This love points to the deeper understanding of human nature which can so enhance our public culture. It reminds us that every person is born out of the love of God, a love which bestows eternal dignity and destiny upon every person. This same love, taking flesh in Jesus, accompanies us every day and makes possible within us the realisation of our deepest yearnings. Sacrificial love is the pathway we are to take. It is the pathway to heaven. Without that perspective, self-interest will always catch us out and leave us unsatisfied.

In the coming months the challenges faced by the family will be given much attention in the Church as preparations go ahead for the forthcoming Synods of Bishops. The voices of many are being rightly heard, including those who speak of the pain of marriage breakdown, the sense of failure they carry, and their hopes for care and acceptance within the community of the Church.

During this time we must all look again at how, in everyday living, we encourage marriage and family life; at how our parishes support all who are married, or who are approaching marriage; and at how the bonds of care and friendship should not be broken by disappointment and failure. There is so much to be done, so much to learn about the pastoral response to the challenges facing families today. There is also much help at hand.

Returning to the wonderful celebration of Marriage by all those married couples in the Cathedral, I invite those of you who hope to set out on the pathway of family life, or indeed have already done so, to listen to their voice as they tell you of the joy and satisfaction they have found within the Sacrament of Marriage. It is there that you receive the grace of God to help you to fulfil your greatest hopes. Do not neglect the grace of this great Sacrament.

Please pray that the Holy Spirit will guide the Church in this important time. May we all grow in our understanding of human love as a participation in the very life of God and a witness to the unfailing love God has for each of us. May the Holy Spirit teach us how to combine mercy and truth, forgiveness and faithfulness, so that we may make our journey to God together in peace and a hope that is ever new.

Yours devotedly

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vincent Nichols". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster