



## **Archbishop's Christmas Message 2017 The Family: An Icon of God's Love**

Christmas offers us all a share in the joy of the shepherds who rushed to Bethlehem as soon as they heard the Angel's news and found "Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in the manger" (Luke 2.16).

The shepherds found not only the Infant Jesus but also a small family: a mother, father and newborn son. God chose to reveal himself by being born into a human family and so the human family became a living image—an icon—of God!

That's why I have chosen for my Christmas card this year the icon of the Holy Family prepared for the World Meeting of Families in Dublin in August 2018.

It depicts the end of the gospel passage in which the twelve-year-old Jesus stayed behind in the Temple in Jerusalem unknown to his parents who, surprised and anxious, discovered him three days later conversing with the learned teachers gathered there (Luke 2.41-52).

A new conversation began as Jesus answered his mother who asked him to explain his claim that he had to "be in his Father's house" that is God's house (cf. Luke 2.49). The boy Jesus appears full of zeal for God and for the Temple. Still, he went back with Mary and Joseph to Nazareth and lived in obedience to them, growing in wisdom and age and grace.

It is a rare family even today that cannot identify with the confusion and shock of Jesus' parents at his words that placed a gap between the devotion he owed them in filial piety and the powerful attraction he felt towards a higher vocation. And perhaps all of us struggle to understand the divine element in daily life.

God took divine-human relationships to a new level by entering the messiness of human existence in the incarnation—in the Word of God taking on our human condition in the person of Jesus.

God, the Trinity, is a communion of love. Despite the obvious differences between the majesty of God and the created human person, the family too is a communion of love.

For the theme of our Pastoral Year 2017-2018 the Archdiocese chose that of the World Meeting of Families: "The Gospel of the Family: Joy for the World". The family is "good news" bringing joy to our troubled world!

By "family," we mean the family as it is today, with its problems, wounds, and need of healing—not the idealized family. It is this real-life family that reflects the gospel message and brings joy to the whole world, even though it suffers from individualism, relativism, and other "isms" around today.

Two friends of mine were speaking with me recently about the challenge to listen attentively as each child shares with one or both of them their experiences, questions, doubts, fears, dreams and accomplishments. Since they have a large family this can prove quite demanding. It is a set of conversations that seemingly need never end, even when the children become adults.

Children are a gift and a project of God, not the possession of their parents. Rather, following God's wondrous plan, the family is called to educate children in true freedom, which is precisely that of saying "yes" to God in order to do his will, just as the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph did.

Merry Christmas to you and to your family!

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