

Today's feast of the Holy Family is particularly poignant in a year when it has been impossible for families to be together as they would in normal times. Perhaps this serves to emphasise some of those things which can easily be taken for granted in family life and the value of our relationships.

The family is part of the natural world which God has created and entrusted to us. All living creatures exist in some sort of kinship, guaranteeing their continuity and sustaining the quality of their lives. Pope Francis reminds us that we need education in the care of the common home in order to help people understand that environmental problems are linked to human needs.

From the very outset of our lives the human needs on which we depend for life itself find their natural setting in the family. From the gift of life itself to the loving provision of food shelter and all the benefits of human contact, the family is the gift that keeps on giving. A new born baby becomes the focus of love and attention on the part of parents and family not because of anything it can do, but simply on account of its being.

With the birth of his Son, God the Father has revealed his unconditional love for each of us, irrespective of our ability to achieve anything in life or to merit God's love. St. Paul puts it this way: "It is proof of God's love for us that Christ died for us when we were still sinners...Whilst we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son".

We see this unconditional love in the Holy Family – even when its demands caused some perplexity. The Gospel of Luke indicates some of this in describing the journey of Mary and Joseph to the Temple in order to present him to the Lord. The evangelist says that "...the child's mother and father stood there wondering at the things that were being said about him".

Reflecting on this closing year, with all of its extraordinary ups and downs, we may not always have the sense of what was happening to us or our families. We may often have felt anxious or perplexed at the events unfolding around us, whether nationally or internationally. At times of crisis we tend to fall back on those things which are fundamental to our living and beliefs.

Hence the need for our family and our faith to be central to survival in the year that lies ahead. This year, we have missed those very special expressions of family life that continue to make Christmas an important season for the believer and non believer alike. I am grateful to our parish communities for the role they have played in supporting local families and communities in ensuring churches are open for worship and live streaming of services as well as the heroic efforts made in outreach to the poor in our midst. At the dawn of a new year, let us ask the Holy Child – destined to be a sign...so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare – to give us the courage to bring our innermost secret thoughts before God