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BISHOP TOAL'S CHRISTMAS MESSAGE - 2020

In recent days, Pope Francis announced that the Church would celebrate a Year in honour of St Joseph, marking the 150th Anniversary of St Joseph's proclamation as *Patron of the Universal Church* by Blessed Pius IX. In doing so Our Holy Father has written a beautiful Apostolic letter, *Patris Corde*, offering some personal reflections on St Joseph, "*this extraordinary figure so close to our own human experience*". In extolling his greatness as spouse of Mary and legal father of Jesus, he acknowledged how St Joseph placed the whole of his life in God's hands and at the service of God's plan of salvation in a quiet, discreet way, unnoticed almost, but vitally important in caring for and protecting Mary and Jesus through the years he shared with them in Bethlehem, Egypt and Nazareth. His figure in our Christmas cribs portrays this quiet reassuring presence who lovingly looks down on the infant Jesus, accepting the vocation as father and guardian which God has asked of him.

Pope Francis encourages us to discover in St Joseph an intercessor, a support, and a guide in time of trouble, and reminds us that it is often those who appear hidden or in the shadows who play an incomparable role in God's plan for our salvation. Indeed he makes a comparison between St Joseph and the many wonderful people who have assisted us through the present time of pandemic, remarking that "*our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people, people often overlooked. People who do not appear in newspaper or magazine headlines, or in the latest television show, yet in these very days are surely shaping the decisive events of our history.*" We have certainly become very aware through recent times of how much we depend on the "*essential*" workers and volunteers in our society, and, in recognising in them a reflection of the generous and self-giving qualities of St Joseph the Worker, Pope Francis offers a word of recognition and gratitude to them all. I am sure we echo these sentiments as we hope and pray for the health and well-being of all who continue to suffer in our present situation.

As we ponder with Joseph and Mary, the shepherds and wise-men, the child in the manger, we place our hope in him as Our Lord and Saviour, and renew our desire to serve and love him in the fullest way possible with the help of his grace. He is indeed "*the loving kindness of the heart of our God, who visits us like the dawn from on high*" as proclaimed in the lovely prayer of Zechariah, the Benedictus, in St Luke's Gospel.

The Benedictus concludes "*He will give light to those in darkness, those who dwell in the shadow of death, and guide us into the way of peace*". May these words dwell in our hearts as we implore the Lord's blessing on all our loved ones, and indeed the whole of humanity. May the Lord grant us his peace this Christmas.

+ Joseph Toal
December 2020.