



Archdiocese of Southwark

Pastoral Letter for the Sunday after Christmas 2023 Solemnity of Mary, Holy Mother of God

To be read at all Sunday Masses on the weekend of 31st December 2022 / 1st January 2023

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ

It is a great joy to be able to greet you in this Christmas season and at the beginning of the new calendar year of 2023. I extend to you, and you families and loved ones, every blessing and good wish as we continue to celebrate the birth of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. I also assure you of my prayers and warm best wishes as a new year unfolds. Towards you, from my heart, I make my own the ancient words given by God to Moses: *'May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord uncover his face to you and give you his peace.'* (cf. Num 6: 24-26)

Today, we unite ourselves, in a special way, to the Mother of God, Mary most holy. In the small chapel at Archbishop's House there is a very beautiful statue of Our Lady. It is carved according to the Eastern Christian tradition of icons, the holy images of Our Lord, his Mother and the saints. There is a particular style of icon of Our Lady called the *Hodegetria*. This Greek name carries the meaning of *'Our Lady who points the way.'* Our chapel statue is based on this. Our Lady holds the Christ Child tenderly in one arm. She looks out towards us, while pointing with her other hand to the Lord Jesus. Through her loving gaze, she draws us close, but only so that she can direct us to Christ. This is her vocation as Mother of God, Mother of the Church and Mother of every disciple: to point us to Christ

St Paul recalls that we have each been adopted into a new life in Christ. We are sons and daughters of God, in and through God's Son. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, sharing one Heavenly Father. In a related sense, Mary is also spiritually our heavenly Mother. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we have God as our common Father. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we also share one holy Mother. There are no orphans in Christ.

What might it mean for Mary our Mother to point the way for us to the Lord Jesus? Of many possible answers, here are three simple responses.

First of all, Mary points the way to the Lord Jesus by showing us what it means to be disciples. By her own example, she teaches us to trust that all things are possible for God. Through her faith, she shows us how to allow God's plan and purpose for our life to unfold, just as she did for her own life. At Cana she told people to do whatever Jesus said. She could only do this because she believed he was the Son of God. She continued to believe in times of joy and in times of sorrow, always walking the pathway of hope. Mary points the way to the Lord Jesus by her own pattern of discipleship.

Second, Mary points the way to the Lord Jesus by teaching us to treasure the things of faith and to ponder them in our heart. She knows the importance of the inner life, of prayer and of contemplation. She invites us to know the Lord Jesus personally in our heart and to consider prayerfully the words of Scripture. How can we really be disciples unless the external practice of our faith is rooted in our interior living relationship with Christ? Mary points the way to the Lord Jesus by witnessing to the need to prayerfully reflect on the things of life in the light of faith.

Thirdly, and finally, Mary points the way to the Lord Jesus because she is our spiritual Mother. She prays with us and for us. She is our friend in heaven. We can ask her to pray for us, for our needs and our worries. And, while certainly praying for us, she always invites us to come to her Son with confidence. Mary only ever points beyond herself to the Lord Jesus. She helps us to find him, to know him, love him and serve him.

Dear friends, as the New Year opens we look to Christ, the beginning and the end of all things, to whom all time belongs. Whatever this year brings, we will face it with Christ. For her part, Our Blessed Mother points the Church, and each disciple, to her Son so that we can name him Jesus, the one who saves; so that we can name him Lord, brother and friend. With great faith, we step forward along the way towards the future, united with Christ and with Our Lady. Like her we are called to be disciples of joy, disciples who by their witness point the way to the Lord Jesus who always needs to be born anew through us to our waiting world.

With my prayers and every blessing
for this Christmas Season and the New Year
Yours devotedly in Christ

+ John Wilson

Metropolitan Archbishop of Southwark