



Pastoral Letter for the Solemnity of the Mother of God
To be read at all Masses on
31 December 2022 and 1 January 2023

My dear friends in Jesus Christ,

I write this letter to you at a difficult time for the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle as you come to terms with the resignation of Bishop Robert. The Holy Father Pope Francis has appointed me as apostolic administrator to assure you that he has a special care for you, until he appoints a bishop for your diocese. My diocese, Liverpool, is over three hours journey from you, whether by rail or road, so I have appointed Canon Peter Leighton as my delegate. He and other delegates for specific areas of responsibility (the old episcopal vicars) will continue to administer the diocese along with the lay staff. I am sure they will serve you well. Also, I will meet regularly with Canon Peter and visit the diocese often to get a greater sense of how I can serve you better.

Today is the octave day of Christmas. It is exactly one week since we celebrated the birth of our saviour Jesus Christ, and it is also the first day of the new year. The celebration of the birth of our saviour continues into a new year. It is not over. Christ comes to us as Emmanuel – God with us, and that is true for all time. God is with us, and came to us as a human person, like us, to save us and give us life to the full. Mary's part in this is celebrated today as the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God.

Jesus's earthly life began and ended with Mary. He was conceived in her womb, and she was present at his death on the cross. But her involvement didn't end there; she was with the disciples in the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit descended on them, in other words her fidelity to Jesus and his Church is constant. Mary stays with us as Jesus's mother and therefore our mother.

One of the ancient saints of the church, Saint Athanasius wrote, "This was no mere fiction, as some have thought. Far from it! Our Saviour really did become man, and this brought about the salvation of the whole man. Our salvation is no illusion, nor is it salvation of the body only; the salvation of the whole person, body and soul, was really brought about in the Word

himself. What was born of Mary, was by nature human, the Lord's body was a real one – real because Mary was our sister, since we are all descended from Adam”.

Because of her closeness to us Mary has been a companion to many Christian disciples throughout their lives, and she will be a companion to us as we begin 2023. We are under no illusion that the coming months are going to be easy for us. Soaring energy prices and the rising cost of living has brought many people to the edge of despair, unable to make ends meet. Our food banks are under greater pressure than ever before, and people are beginning to use the ‘warm and cosy hubs’ provided by churches and local authorities. Mary is no stranger to these hardships as we learnt from the Christmas story and the account of the flight into Egypt with her baby son and Joseph. That is why we have a unique friend in Mary the Mother of God who is our mother too.

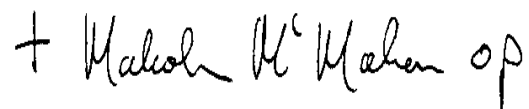
When Mary was given the title Mother of God it wasn't simply to give recognition for her part in our salvation. This doctrine is also about us. It tells us who we are. It gives us our identity as children of God. In our times the human person is so often devalued and degraded. People become commodities, like goods that are bought and traded. We see this with the exploitation of refugees and migrants. Nearer home, we buy and wear cheap clothes made by people who earn a pittance for their labour in sweatshops in developing countries. The current war in the Ukraine puts a low value on human life as many are slaughtered. Television brings into our homes the horrors of war and exploitation, and the resultant loss and degradation of human life. We believe as Catholic Christians that people matter, that all people matter, and that the whole person matters, body and soul. That's a powerful message we give to the world.

In declaring Mary as the Mother of God we are asserting that we are brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, Son of Mary and Son of God. We are therefore sisters and brothers of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, and that our dignity is given us by being created in love by our Father in heaven. If Jesus is our brother, then Mary is our mother too. This means that every person is very special to God – he has given them a special dignity as his child, yet we don't always see our fellow human beings in that way. Nor do we treat others with the dignity that they deserve. To treat others with more respect could be our first resolution for the new year. Just think of the difference that that would make to your personal lives and the lives of others. We should also try to be more like Mary, woman of faith.

Mary was probably from the poorest section of Jewish society in her day. They were called the ‘Poor of the Lord’. Living in poverty with no place in

society teaches you to be dependent on others and reliant on God. Mary who was from that group who wanted nothing for themselves yet relied on God for everything was chosen to fulfil God's promise made to his people. Can we realise how little we can achieve on our own and develop a strong sense of dependence on each other? Can we be more open to God's grace? The year ahead is a time of endless possibilities. Just think how different it would be if we could be just a little like Mary the Mother of God?

May the new year ahead be a time of unity, peace and health, and may the Lord bless you and your families.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Malcolm McMahon OP". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Rev Malcolm McMahon OP
Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle

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