Dear Friends in Christ,

The Catholic Diocese of Sale is about to begin the first step of a diocesan program based on FAMILY EVANGELISATION that was set out in my Pentecost 2013 Pastoral Letter.

Beginning on the First Sunday of Advent 2013 (1st December 2013), and for 2014, the Diocese will be focused on fostering Family Prayer.

Following this Year for Family Prayer, the Diocese hopes to include four further steps in this focus on Family Evangelisation:

• Marriage and Family Life
• Nurturing Family - School relationships
• Nurturing Family - Parish / School relationships
• The Family / Parish / School in the World of today

Earlier this year I wrote to you on the theological – pastoral foundations of the diocesan pastoral program in my Pentecost Pastoral Letter – A PERMANENT NAZARETH – Family Life in the Mission of the Church (May 2013). By reading this you will be assisted in fully understanding this more specific topic now presented.

My aim in this Letter is to introduce you to the first focus for our reflections over the year beginning 1st December 2013. For 12 months from this date, the Diocese invites everyone to reflect carefully on the chosen theme: FAMILY PRAYER.

WHAT DO CATHOLICS TEACH ABOUT PRAYER?

Perhaps it is best to start with a brief overview of prayer in the life of the entire Christian family.

Christian prayer in general is a vast topic. Thankfully, in part four of the Catechism of the Catholic Church there is a wonderful summary of Christian prayer from the Scriptures and our Tradition (n. 2558-2865).

The catechism showcases Christian prayer from two foundations. First, there is prayer in Christian life. After summarising prayer in the bible, the catechism then considers different types of prayer: prayers of adoration, petition, intercession, thanksgiving and praise. Then there is a section on prayer in our Christian Tradition. The origins, the types and guides for prayer are then beautifully outlined. This is followed by the life of prayer with its different expressions: vocal, meditation, and contemplative prayer. A helpful guide to respond to the battles we all have in prayer is offered.

Second, the Lord’s Prayer (the Our Father) – the prayer that Jesus himself gave us – is examined in depth section by section.

May I suggest strongly over the next year you refer often and directly to the Catechism of the Catholic Church in the sections above. It is a goldmine of the rich treasures Catholics love regarding prayer over the last two thousand years. The Catechism can be purchased from most of your parish piety stalls or you can go online to access it ([www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/INDEX.HTM)). Other great publications, derived from the Catechism, in various differing forms are available too. For example, there is YOUCAT. It is published with an eye to young people. Then there is YOUCAT Youth Prayer Book.
IS FAMILY PRAYER A PART OF YOUR FAMILY LIFE AT PRESENT?

Priests, deacons and lay pastoral leaders are all aware of the great difficulties there are to pray in families these days. There are so many distractions.

Often both parents are employed in full time or part time jobs and the children participate in all sorts of sporting and special interest groups during or after school time. Our information revolution is fully alive in most homes. Digital TVs, internet, ipods, and so on, make family life and time very different from even a few years ago.

So often and regrettably, family prayer has become a casualty in the midst of this new world of family life today.

But family prayer, even if celebrated in a different or more modest manner today, can become a type of “glue” that unites a Christian family around Jesus. The family, in its many joys and the sorrows, can be given a real centre and depth when the family prays in some regular and appropriate way.

I remember listening to a wise and elderly priest in the Diocese of Sale sharing at a gathering of priests and deacons. He felt that the demise of family prayer today in so many families was one of the biggest and worrying changes that he had noticed in pastoral life. Amongst other areas, he highlighted that fewer vocations to the priesthood and religious life could be ultimately attributed to this demise. I think he is right.

So I want to encourage you all to examine this area more closely over the next 12 months. Even if you live on your own at home, you still have an important role to play. There is the importance of your good example and intercessory prayer, especially if you are a grandparent.

Let us begin. Let us start by making a little examination of conscience regarding family prayer.

What is the current state of family prayer in your home? What about in the homes of your children and grandchildren? When are prayers prayed at home? In the light of the descriptions of prayer above, what types of prayer are prayed? Do you see family prayer a priority? What distracts us from praying together as a family?

FAMILY PRAYER IN MY OWN FAMILY LIFE

I wish to share with you a little of my recollections of family prayer in my own family in my younger years. It might help you to reflect on your own family experiences of prayer.

In my personal reflections, I do recall that there was generally grace before meals. This happened especially when the meal was a special one. It is not that all the family gathered every night for a meal around the dinner table. However, a few nights a week there was a special time when we gathered for a meal. Then there was Christmas time or when a special visitor joined us for a meal. During all these special times, the television would be turned off and we would all try to make it a priority to be present at a certain time. We would enjoy each others’ company. Perhaps even a speech would be made to honour someone, especially on their birthday. At all these meals there would be prayer asking God’s blessing on us and the food we shared. My father would take special leadership enabling this to happen.

“So often and regrettably, family prayer has become a casualty in the midst of this new world of family life today.”
The Rosary was sometimes prayed together in my family. Perhaps it was our family turn to host the parish Marian Statue that visited different families on a weekly basis. Guests from the parish would be invited to our home to join us in the rosary. The time and place were advertised in the parish weekly bulletin. My father or mother would generally take on a role as pray leaders here.

Weekly Mass was a feature for all of us in the family. In time, we all had various roles to play in the local parish Mass. I was an Altar Server with my brother. Later on I became a Lector. We rarely all went to Mass together as one family. This was for practical reasons. There were eight of us in my family. But involvement in the parish was always a feature. Confessions were also a part of our prayer life.

I do remember seeing sometimes my parents praying together. As a child I sometimes saw them praying in their room. It was clearly a private matter for them. I respected that. But it left a very good impression on me regarding the importance of marital prayer. I did not know what they were praying about. Perhaps they were praying for me!

Every family has their different “rituals” regarding prayer. This was the case with the families of my Aunties and Uncles. For example, as a child we could never leave my Aunt’s home without her crossing our foreheads with holy water. She asked the Lord Jesus, Mary, St Joseph and the saints to protect us from all harm.

In all the homes there were crucifixes, statues of Mary and the saints to be seen in lounge rooms and bedrooms.

Fridays were a special day when only fish was eaten. Fridays in Lent were a particular time too. Perhaps The Angelus was prayed and other prayers for the particular liturgical season.

There were sometimes too, in my childhood, when the family made an annual pilgrimage to some shrine to celebrate a feast day or a time of particular liturgical importance. There would be a Eucharistic procession and special Litanies of Our Lady prayed.

What about you? Have my reflections above triggered memories in your heart too?

Can you recall, as I have, the “heritage” of family prayer that you have been given by your own family background? Try to list them in your mind?

Together let us thank the Lord Jesus for them. They have certainly given me spiritual strength and faith foundations today. They have truly evangelized me in my journey with Jesus. I will be forever grateful to my family for offering me such a prayer dimension in my earlier life. What about you?

How can they help us to look to the future? We do not wish to sentimentalise these past moments. We want them to help us focus on family prayer in the times ahead. Can we re-introduce them in some form even this year in our homes and parishes? Bible study groups are wonderful and found in most parishes and some families. Thanks be to God! What about other forms of family/parish prayer, exemplified above? Are they on a kind of “danger list of threatened species”?

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PRAYER IN THE HOLY FAMILY OF NAZARETH

It is perhaps in the Gospels of Luke (chapters 1 and 2) and Matthew (chapters 1 and 2) that we can learn most about prayer in the life of the HOLY FAMILY. Perhaps you may wish to read slowly these passages alone or with your families and friends over a period of time.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, has published a wonderful and accessible reflection on these Infancy Narratives in the New Testament. May I recommend you to purchase a copy of “Jesus of Nazareth – the Infancy Narratives” (2012).

We all realize that very little is known of the first 30 years of the life of Jesus. We do know that he lived with the Blessed Mother, Mary and St. Joseph in obedience in Nazareth. Despite this “silence” of Nazareth, using both the scriptures and the reflections of Benedict XVI, we can perceive a little clearer what family prayer may have looked like in the Most Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

To assist our reflections, I wish to offer two humble observations for your consideration.

…FAMILY PRAYER IS LED BY PEOPLE OF FAITH

First, whatever practical expressions of prayer may have taken place in the Holy Family of Nazareth, we know they were led by two people of great faith. In the scriptures both Our Blessed Mother, Mary, and St. Joseph are presented as fearless people of faith.

Consequently, in our efforts towards deeper family prayer, I call on parents, grandparents and guardians of children to a deeper conversion into the mysteries of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This will happen by prayer and repentance. I encourage you to BE what you ARE – people of faith! People of faith can best lead children into faith and prayer. Let us be more confident in this! It is a kind of vertical dimension to family prayer. Evangelisation begins deep in our hearts and then flows from it.

…EXAMPLES OF FAMILY PRAYERS FROM THE SCRIPTURES.

Secondly, such deep faith gives expressions to prayers of faith. In the Gospels, especially in St Luke’s Gospel, there are some truly beautiful prayers that were prayed by or to or about the Holy Family. We can repeat them slowly and prayerfully now and share with each other what they could mean for us today. They may form a part of the horizontal dimension to family prayer. Hopefully, this would lead to practical expression of love and charity, especially to the poor and oppressed of our world.

For example, there is the Hail Mary prayer, prayed in part by St Elizabeth to Mary at the Visitation (Luke 1:42).

Then there is the Magnificat, Mary’s response to Elizabeth’s greeting (Luke 1:46-55).

The Benedictus is the beautiful prayer of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, soon after the Baptist’s birth (Luke 1:67-79).

We must not forget the short and profound prayer of the “righteous and devout” Simeon as he held the baby Jesus in his hands and prayed in front of Mary and Joseph the following (Luke 2:29-32). This prayer is sometimes called the Nunc Dimittis or Song of Simeon:

As devout Jews, Mary and Joseph must have taught Jesus the Psalms. It is truly wonderful to pray the psalms that Jesus prayed. Some of my favorite psalms are: Psalms 23, 63, and 139, What about you?

In our Catholic treasury of prayer, a summary of the coming of Jesus into our world is called The Angelus.
Dear Friends, you will find attached to this LETTER a series of practical helps in deepening or starting FAMILY PRAYER in your family – or extended family. Please use them or other resources to assist you over the next twelve months to focus on FAMILY PRAYER and the overall theme of FAMILY EVANGELISATION. Your local parish family will encourage and assist you.

We pray:

Heavenly Father,

We pray your blessing on the YEAR OF FAMILY PRAYER.

We pray for a rich harvest of families encountering Jesus more deeply as the centre of their lives and families.

May all families be made strong in your love and mercy.

We pray for members of our families that concern us deeply for one reason or another. May you bless and heal them. Protect them from the evil one.

We make all our prayers through Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Saviour, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever,

AMEN

The Most Holy Family, PRAY FOR US

Our Lady of Perpetual Help, our Diocesan Patroness, and Star of the New Evangelisation, PRAY FOR US

St. Mary of the Cross MacKillop, PRAY FOR US.

+Bishop Christopher Prowse
IS FAMILY PRAYER A PART OF YOUR FAMILY LIFE AT PRESENT?

1. What are some of the great difficulties there are to pray in families these days? How can they be avoided or minimized?
2. A little examination of conscience regarding family prayer:
   • What is the current state of family prayer in your home?
   • What about in the homes of your children and grandchildren?
   • When are prayers prayed at home?
   • What types of prayer are prayed?
   • Do you see family prayer a priority?

FAMILY PRAYER IN MY OWN FAMILY LIFE

1. Can you recall the heritage of family prayer that you have been given by your own family background? Try to list them in your mind. How much of this heritage continues in your family life today?
2. Do you have religious pictures or crucifixes visible in your home? What significance do they have for your family?
3. Reflect/share about the times when your family prays together with deep faith:
   • Who brings the group together?
   • Do you use the Bible as a basis?
   • Do you create a special setting e.g. with a candle or crucifix
   • What other factors contribute to making these meaningful times?

PRAYER IN THE HOLY FAMILY OF NAZARETH

1. Reflect/share about the people in your life who have developed your ability to pray.
   • How did they do this?
   • How do you go about teaching your children or others to pray?
2. How does prayer affect the way you live your everyday life?

“I would like to ask you, dear families: Do you pray together from time to time as a family? Some of you do, I know. But so many people say to me: But how can we! Each one, with humility, allowing themselves to be gazed upon by the Lord and imploring his goodness, that he may visit us. But in the family how is this done? After all, prayer seems to be something personal, and besides there is never a good time, a moment of peace… Yes, all that is true enough, but it is also a matter of humility, of realizing that we need God, like the tax collector! And all families, we need God: all of us! We need his help, his strength, his blessing, his mercy, his forgiveness. And we need simplicity to pray as a family: simplicity is necessary!”

Pope Francis, Homily at Mass with Families for the Year of Faith, 28th October 2013
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FAMILY PRAYER.

+Bishop Christopher Prowse