

## CIRCULAR LETTER 8

Dear sisters and brothers,

***“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us ...”***

(Gospel, Third Mass of Christmas)

1 When I was a child, this was the “last” gospel. Proclaimed at the end of every Mass, it contained the promise and challenge which Christians carried forth from each and every celebration of eucharist. Today, the modern liturgy proclaims the special nature of the prologue of John’s gospel by proclaiming it only once each year, during the Christmas season. To medieval Christians, these were words of promise which they enclosed in precious lockets and carried over their hearts. Saint Francis, true to his age and his faith, was filled with wonder at the splendor of this fact:

*Oh, how holy and how loving, pleasing, humble, peaceful, sweet, lovable, and desirable above all things to have such a Brother and such a Son: our Lord Jesus Christ, Who gave up his life for his sheep ...* (The First Version of the Letter to the Faithful, 13).

2.1 The preface of the Mass for Christmas states: *“The Eternal Word has taken upon himself our human weakness, giving our mortal nature immortal value.”* Francis worshiped that “Eternal Word” enfleshed in “human weakness.” He served lepers, washing their bodies and ministering to their needs, thus worshiping the crucified body of his Lord Jesus Christ. He shared what he had with the poor because “alms are a legacy and a just right due to the poor, which our Lord Jesus Christ acquired for us” (The Earlier Rule, IX, 8).

2.2 If John understood so profoundly the content of the mystery of Christmas, Isaiah understood its **human significance**:

*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings, announcing peace ...* (Is 52 [First Reading, Third Mass of Christmas]).

Isaiah’s powerful proclamation of hope is all the more incredible when we realize that it forms the prelude to the Second Song of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh which the church will next proclaim during Holy Week. Jesus is our hope because he has *“become sin for us”* in order that we might become *“the holiness of God”* (2 Cor 5: 21). In assuming our weakness, Jesus has become our peace.

Imitating so completely “the Word made flesh,” Francis became “the holiness of God,” the one “who brings glad tidings,” announcing peace, reconciliation and reckless love to people who had lost a sense of brotherhood. He proclaimed love for creation to a world blind to its beauty.

2.3 Worshipping Christ revealed in human weakness and suffering ... imitating the Lord in his poverty and minority making our lives the good news of peace to our world, these remain also today our true celebration of the Christmas feast.

3.1 Yet Christmas should not overwhelm us with challenge, rather it should fill us with joy. Abbot Marmion defined joy as "the echo of God's life within us." Christmas causes me to pause and to listen with gratitude to that echo which sounds within our worldwide brotherhood.

3.2 See how they worship Christ revealed in human weakness and frailty:

- \* Brothers Vincent and Giles who serve our sick brothers in the infirmary of Altötting;
- \* The "Grupo de Ajuda para a Vida" in the AIDS hospice in São Paolo;
- \* Hundreds of hospital and prison chaplains in 90 countries of our world;
- \* The "Ciudad de los Niños" for street children of Lima, Peru;
- \* Hundreds of brothers who daily give bread to the hungry, welcome to the homeless, extend brotherhood to the emotionally disturbed.

These are the "**echo of God's life within us.**"

3.3 See how they strive to imitate the Lord in his poverty and minority:

- \* Bishop Jacob Acharuparambil, both legs amputated, his left side shaking uncontrollably with palsy, his right side paralyzed by a stroke, unable to speak but communicating courage and faith through eyes alive with tender love;
- \* Two thousand or more postulants, novices and simply professed brothers who continue to be inspired by the ideals of Francis;
- \* Hundreds of brothers one very continent who seek new ways of living among the poor.
- \* Capuchin Poor Clare Sisters whose simplicity, fraternity and deep contemplation testify to the life of God within.

These are the "**echo of God's life within us.**"

3.4 Rejoice with our brothers who strive to make their lives peace for the world:

- \* The brothers of Downpatrick (Belfast), in Northern Ireland;
- \* Brothers in Djibouti, Comores and many other Islamic lands who attempt to build bridges of understanding and human compassion;
- \* The Capuchin martyrs of Rochefort whose testimony of forgiveness and reconciliation is recognized only today – 200 years after their death.

These are “**the echo of God’s life within us.**”

4.1 The joy of Christmas is not merely intellectual or sensible, it is spiritual, embracing the whole person. It needs to be cultivated in our personal lives and in our fraternities. The joy of Christmas has its origin in faith and blossoms in hope and charity. If the prevailing atmosphere in which we live is not suffused with joy, then an essential ingredient is missing. In these days, when we claim responsibility for the physical environment, it is ironic that we sometimes act as if the “spiritual environment” is not our responsibility! Brother Francis reprimanded the brother with the sad face, urging him to take responsibility for his demeanor and take steps to change it. He would have no compromise with that sadness which he called “an abiding rust.” When joy fails, our witness fails – and everything else we do is in vain. Here are some steps we might take to banish sadness and cultivate spiritual joy: sincere meditation on the mystery of the Incarnation; availing ourselves of the sacrament of reconciliation; communal examination of the spiritual atmosphere of our fraternities; taking to heart St. Francis’ teachings on joy (especially 2 Cel 125-129); opening our minds and hearts to the Advent Liturgy in preparation for Christmas.

4.2 “*The Word became flesh!*” These words awaken memories of the joy of midnight Masses of my childhood. My parents taught me to genuflect with great reverence at these words of the last gospel. After Mass, they led me to contemplate with awe and excitement the vision of that reality in the parish creche. May the “echo of God’s life” within our brotherhood allow us to contemplate the Christmas crib with new eyes of faith and gratitude that even today “*The Word is made flesh!*”

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