



Christmas 2023

“When peaceful silence lay over all,
and night had run half of her swift course,
down from the heavens, from the royal throne,
leapt your all-powerful Word” (*Wisdom 18, 14-15*).

“The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light;
on those who live in a land of deep shadow,
a light has shone” (*Isaiah 9,1*).

Dear confreres,

Greetings of peace and
joy in the Lord Jesus!

Dazed by the tragic events of recent months and days that have darkened everyone's horizons, especially the poor and marginalised of the world, it is certainly not easy even to think of the possibility that the darkness that surrounds us will be torn apart, that “a great light” will appear and a voice heard announcing “a great joy for everyone” (cf. *Luke 2.9-19*). The news that reaches us through the media ‘slows down’ our hearts and dampens our enthusiasm.



Globally, we have repeated UN resolutions to mediate the various conflicts that tear apart many countries in the world. Even the land where Jesus was born is torn apart by violence, and we follow with apprehension the bloody and cruel conflict between Palestine and Israel and the attempts to reach a truce. Not to mention the other thousands and thousands of intimidations that develop into violence, that upset the lives of millions of people, reducing their freedom, and forcing them into a life of hardship.

Today, too, as it was at the time of the first Christmas, the world seems to be controlled and managed by the decree-laws, ordinances and resolutions of those who hold political and economic power. We remember how Joseph and Mary had to travel because Caesar Augustus wanted to know the number of his subjects so he could tax them all and enlist many of them in his legions. It really seemed as though he was moving the world.

Even today, in Europe (and elsewhere), there are decrees, ordinances and resolutions concerning the many, far too many people who are travelling or fleeing from war and poverty. We are expected to stop them, slow them down and manage their movements... And offering them hospitality is eventually defined as a “subversive act”.

Faced with so much violence, we ask ourselves what the meaning of life is and the reason for such great suffering, and we feel overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness and anger. Truly, this Christmas brings the full weight of our humanity before us.

However, once again, this feast reveals to us the madness of God's love: his decision to take a body in the Son. Let us be surprised by the language of a God who speaks through very humble signs. We would expect that the salvation he promised would come with a manifestation of power and thunder, but we must think again and learn that his plans are different and far from the paths we had in mind.

This is something wonderful and fills us with amazement. In the depths of the silence of the night, human and divine nature, being and non-being, The All (the Word of God) and nothingness (our human reality) are united in a wonderful exchange of life. The birth of Jesus lights a light in the darkness of the world's suffering. It is not a light that dazzles and solves everything with a miracle. It does not illuminate like daylight but helps us to see our way along the path.

God does not come straight down from heaven to resolve any crisis. The Christian faith does not live on magical expectations, but on a presence that accompanies us even in times of crisis. And it opens up glimmers of hope. But this faith becomes prayer and tenacity and so today we can relive the experience of the shepherds of Bethlehem, "who kept watch in the night" (see *Luke 2:8b*): "they saw a light", they heard "Good News", they believed in the promised salvation ("A Saviour is born to you" – v. 11), they banished the "great fear" that paralysed them (v. 9b), they freed themselves from their own fragility, they overcame their mistrust and found the courage to set out ("Let us go, therefore ... Let us see this event that the Lord has made known to us" – v. 15b).

They went and saw a 'God-child' wrapped in swaddling clothes, they contemplated the eternal Son of the Father, the eternal Word, who had become little – so little that he could fit in a manger. And they believed. And they returned to their usual life, but now radically different, "glorifying and praising God" (v. 20a).

No one else, other than the Word made flesh, can indicate horizons that surpass death. Only the cries of that child and later, as the Rabbi of Nazareth, his words of life and hope, scattered abundantly like good seed throughout the world, can illuminate like torches the daily steps of our earthly life.

A few weeks after the closing of the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops – "A Synodal Church in Mission", we can say that experiencing Christmas means putting Jesus back at the centre, listening to the many companions on the road, lay and religious, who, like us, set out following our only Master, rediscover the beauty of his Gospel and learn to live in synodality (at a pastoral, cultural, educational and socio-political level), constantly at the service of the common good, tireless heralds of "News of Great Joy" of salvation for all.

That this is the path we must and want to take seems to be confirmed by what is happening in our Institute. And, in fact, we have recently examined and approved some six-year plans of our provinces and districts. Reading those pages full of dreams and hopes for the future was an enriching experience for us. To the path of God who comes to meet us, becoming *Emmanuel* ('God-with-us'), we respond by moving away from the path of confusion, fears and loneliness to renew our sincere response to him by decidedly placing ourselves in the *sequela* of his son Jesus.

We think, in a special way, of our confreres and populations who live in contexts of violence, called to defend life on the front line with all their strength, with all their intelligence, with all their freedom, and with all the passion their love is capable of. Yes, because it is the 'passion of love' for others that allows us to transform our shortsightedness into a prophetic gaze and our resignation into hope.

May the grace of this Christmas help us, lift us up and set us serenely on the path of hope.
Happy Christmas!

The General Council