



MINISTER GENERALIS
ORDINIS FRATRUM MINORUM CONVENTUALIUM

Prot. N. 950/19

Rome, December 25, 2019

Dear brothers,

May the Lord give you peace!

I write this Christmas message wishing to be closer to each of you and to each community, Province, Custody, Delegation and mission. I also hope to be closer to each of the initiatives you carry out, to be closer to the difficulties and challenges you face and the projects you embody. Christmas is traditionally a celebration for the family, and that's what we Conventual Franciscans are! Therefore, let us celebrate the Life of the Lord who comes to make all things new. Moreover, let us renew our own vitality in the Life of God.

Today I can affirm that there are many signs of vitality in the Order. In some places, our numerical vitality is evident (young presences that are growing). In other places, our vitality is represented by our maturity of religious life, the result of many decades of serious ongoing formation. This has given rise to a serene expression of our charism. Still, in other places, our vitality takes the form of creativity and courage, especially in relation to the New Evangelization and the way in which our communities try to give a "Franciscan" response to the maelstrom of socio-political changes afflicting our world. At the same time, setbacks and limitations often arise within our fraternity. This does not surprise us, but it does motivate us to take action. Life itself is complex, but as religious we are called to react with lucidity and serenity, with learning and conversion.

The liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany celebrate the ever-present mystery of God, a mystery that continually enters into our concrete history, into life as we find it. We celebrate the coming of God in the flesh, but in an eschatological anticipation filled with hope. We anticipate the day of the Master's return, when everything will be clear in the Lord. In our own historical and eschatological time, we invoke the help of the Most High in order to face the challenges of each day without being disturbed, with a spirit of vigilance, with evangelical wisdom and with love.

In the context of the holy seasons of Christmas and Epiphany, I would like to offer some simple reflections to confirm what we believe and profess.

1. *Awakening to Do Works of Light*

Those of us who already have several decades of life under our belt understand that conflict is part of history and that it is one of the great mysteries of the world. At one time, this same world overcame wars, genocide and dictatorships; it declared human rights and grew in democratic and participatory awareness. Now, like a dog going back to eat its own vomit, the world is regressing to re-propose the same dehumanizing dynamics, dynamics that unfortunately seem planned and programmed by some center of power.

The same culture that once knew how to welcome Christ, now seemingly chooses to re-establish itself in the denial of the transcendent meaning of life and, more specifically, in the systematic rejection of Christian humanism.

Analyzing these swings of history and their causes may discourage us, but faith can enlighten us. We know and believe that *the Lord brings all peoples together and shall judge between the nations* (cf. Is 2:1-5) and that *the day is at hand*. In this certainty, the Lord asks us to *awaken to do works of light* (cf. Rom 13: 11-14); to be awake to the faith in order to generate and witness the works of His Light.

As believers, our response to the world is not simply based on our own analysis of reality, but on the Light generated by Christ. Christ is the New Humanity and he precedes us. We believe that he illuminates every reality that we must responsibly face. Awakening also implies positioning ourselves in the world with faith-filled and evangelical luminosity. The challenge for us is to collaborate humbly, but also effectively, in order to bring forth the “new” from the Lord’s Justice. Perhaps our first “work”, our first commitment as Franciscan friars, is to move away from, not add to, the dark dynamics of our day. Indeed, we are called to live evangelical transparency in order to give witness to the Light that comes from the Most High.

2. *The Mystery of Hope*

Evangelical transparency is a humble but luminous sign of vitality and carries hope for the world.

It is always prophetic to speak of “hope”. For believers, however, hope does not arise from a “voluntaristic” or naive vision of reality. Rather, it is a gift from God, a theological gift. Jesus saves us and calls us to persevere in hope (cf. Rom 15:4-9), hope which is the free fruit of our salvation. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

I am not sure that, as an Order, we are guided by strong prophetic desires. Perhaps we need to grow more in the prophetic vision of personal and communal holiness, in the prophetic vision of martyrial giving (following the example of our brothers who shed their blood as martyrs); in the prophetic vision of being “evangelically alternative” in the face of worldly temptations; in the prophetic vision of rejecting systems of injustice that dominate nations; in the prophetic vision of “being a counterproposal” against any cultural imposition; and in the prophetic vision of encouraging dialogue and tolerance among those who perpetuate religious or racial discrimination.

Invoking God’s gift and persevering on the path of the Gospel help us remain lucid in prophetic hope. The Lord, who continually enters into the world, makes his words clear: *let the wilderness and the parched land rejoice, our God comes to save us* (cf. Is 35:1-6, 8-10); *Repent and believe in the Gospel* (cf. Mt 3:1-12).

Doing something new is not the principal strategy here. What is needed is one’s “believing attitude” and the humble acceptance of the style of Jesus. Let us ponder and assimilate the Gospel in community, for this is a *possible source of novelty and hope* for us all.

3. Making Our Way: Mission and Life as Processes

Throughout the Christmas holiday cycle, we constantly hear the traditional call to be patiently resolved: “Be patient. Make your hearts firm because the coming of the Lord is at hand” (cf. Jas 5:7-10). I am pleased to see that the Order is growing in the awareness that the mission does not translate into “events” but into “processes” developed over short or long periods of history. This history, moreover, is not a mere sequence of events, but a continuous process, a “path”, a “way”; it is life on the journey.

Evangelization is not based on proposing “levels” but on offering “paths”. The same is true for our entire religious life. It is not constructed as a sequence of steps, stages or the ascent up a ladder. Rather, it is the path of a disciple. Beginning with initial formation, we are always on the path of conversion. Discipleship is mainly a journey. It is a journey motivated by faith and oriented towards the Kingdom.

The fullness of the Kingdom will only occur at the end of time. Meanwhile, our role is *walking towards* and *making our way* in Christ, as our sister Clare of Assisi teaches us: “Therefore the Apostle [writes]: Recognize your vocation (cf. 1 Cor 1:26). The Son of God has become for us the Way that our blessed father Francis, His true lover and imitator, has shown and taught us by word and example” (St. Clare of Assisi, *Testament*).

Discipleship is a journey of acquiring and developing “evangelical knowledge”, in particular, knowledge of the humanity of Christ. The humanity of Christ restores our relationships and renews our mission. The times call us to be *credible paths of humanization in the faith*; paths of encounter with the Jesus of the Gospel made Church.

4. The Implications of the Nativity: Celebrating in Order to Change

A virgin will conceive the God-with-us (cf. Is 7:10-14). He was descended from David according to the flesh (cf. Rom 1:1-7). Jesus will be born of Mary, from the lineage of David (cf. Mt 1:18-24).

The arrival of the Son of God in history created a “before” and an “after”. Similarly, the sacramental celebration of His birth motivates us to change, especially to change our lives. Every sign, every Christmas theme, becomes an experience for us. I would like to propose some Christmas “themes” (taken from masters of spirituality and pastoral ministry) that can help us in a practical and concrete way.

“Expectation” is one of those themes. The Virgin “expects” her Son. That “expectation” illuminates the “expectations” of the world, of our times, the expectations of those who yearn for a better world, the expectations of the Church itself and of our Order. The question is: what are we expecting? What do our young people expect? What does the world expect from us? Mary offers the Savior to the world. What do we offer to humanity today?

“Peace” is another typical Christmas theme. The problem that underlies world peace is daily bread. In this type of peace, we are certainly called to be reconcilers. First we reconcile ourselves and then we reconcile the community and society. Reconciliation involves difficult and complicated issues such as the pacification of our “flesh”, our affectivity, our style of relationships, and the “way” that we propose ourselves to the “other”.

Mary is the womb of a new humanity. In the image of Mary and the Church, our communities are themselves called to be “wombs” of this new humanity. For this, we are called to humanize our hearts.

Jesus was born of a Virgin. Like Mary, the Church is called to become a mother while maintaining her “virginity”. Yet what does it mean to live virginity? Surely we can say it means not being mired in dark powers or any form of corruption; not getting mixed up in “murky” situations, in other words, not adopting the logic of this world.

5. *The Manner Makes All the Difference*

Jesus not only came into the world, he came in humility. “Brothers, look at the humility of God, and pour out your hearts before Him! (Ps 62:9). Humble yourselves that you may be exalted by Him! (cf. 1 Pt 5:6; Jas 4:10). Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, so that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally!” (St. Francis of Assisi, *A Letter to the Entire Order*). The “modality” with which we live our discipleship of Jesus is relevant because we could hardly be examples of the transparency of Christ if we did not embody in ourselves the style that he himself assumed in history. The humility of Christ grants “authority” to the entire construction of our life and mission proposal.

Brothers, I wish you a merry and motivated Christmas.

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