



CONGREGATION OF THE PASSION OF JESUS CHRIST
P.ZZA SS. GIOVANNI E PAOLO, 13
00184 ROMA - ITALIA

The Superior General

Prot.n.2007.0321

CHRISTMAS 2007

Dear religious, sisters and brothers of the Passionist Family,

During Advent we are on a journey, as were Mary and Joseph, to celebrate with them the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. It is a saving event that we should live in a spirit of recollection and joyful contemplation because the Child is the promise of God made visible; he is his Word of love who became a creature while remaining the Son of the God; the Mystery of salvation that was kneaded as yeast into the world in order to transform it; the grain of wheat that was sown for new life: *“I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord...you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes.”* (Lk.2:12) The proclamation of the birth is not given to the powerful of the earth, as might seem more reasonable in order to insure greater visibility of the event and therefore better results as we too might have reasoned using the mentality of the world; however the powerful and the mass-media is far away. The announcement of salvation is revealed to some shepherds who were pasturing their flocks: *“The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them.”* (Lk.2:9)

The new standard of God will be revealed in the little ones and in the weak and He will make himself known as a newborn Infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger for animals.

As an adult in Matthew 25 he will identify with foreign immigrants, the incarcerated, the sick and the desolate that the world engenders by its injustices. He will be crucified among criminals and his mother, *“blessed among women”* will stand beneath the cross with John and the other women, perhaps also together with the sorrowful mothers of the two thieves who were crucified with her son. And she will pour out her heart outside Jerusalem, but she will remain firm in her faith: *“Do not be afraid Mary, you will conceive and bear a son and you shall name him Jesus...and he will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father...and of his Kingdom there will be no end.”* (Lk.1:3-33)

The Gospel of Luke reminds us two times, both in reference to the extraordinary and loving events of the birth of Jesus and following the loss of the adolescent Jesus in the Temple, *“Mary, his mother, stored up all these things in her heart.”* (Lk.2:19 and Lk.2:51).

On Calvary Mary will fully understand the reign that God was speaking about by means of the angel Gabriel and about the sword that would pierce her soul that the old man Simeon had prophesied in the presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple. (Lk.2:35) The plan of salvation would be revealed beneath the cross and in the afternoon of Good Friday, when the entire earth was in darkness; then the *“Glory to God in the highest”* that was sung during the holy night in Bethlehem would be take on its definitive meaning. (Lk.2:13) The cross will be

the glory of the Father as a manifestation of the love of the Son in whose name we would be given new life as grace through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We recall the particular fondness of St. Paul of the Cross who kept and venerated an image of the Child Jesus sleeping on the Cross.

At Christmas, with the simplicity of the shepherds who cared for their flock, *“let us go then to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place”*. We will find Mary, Joseph and the Child, a family, and we will return glorifying and praising God because in the Child we will have recognized *“the Lord of lords”* and finding him we will have experienced *“an encounter with the living God and thus an encounter with a hope stronger than the sufferings of slavery, a hope which therefore transformed life and the world from within.”* (Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *“Spe Salvi”*, #4). In fact, Jesus will be the grain of wheat in the cave of Bethlehem; he will be the handful of yeast that is placed in the sepulcher that by means of the resurrection will save mankind by conquering sin and death. His coming will be a revolution of love that, without social class struggles, will transform the world. We were waiting for him and finally he has arrived.

But with John the Baptist, although he had pointed him out as the Lamb of God, we are still assailed by doubts. John the Baptist was severe in his proclamation: *“You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming retribution?”* (Lk.3:7) For John, the Messiah who was near at hand, even already present in their midst, would act with great harshness, with *“the axe laid to the root of the trees”* to cut and throw into the fire every tree that does not bear good fruit... *“He has the winnowing fan in his hand to separate the grain from the chaff.”* Instead Jesus speak of mercy, he presents himself as the Good Shepherd who patiently searches for the lost lamb in the hills; he tells the parable of the Prodigal Son and announces his Passion. Is this Emmanuel, God with us? John is in prison and wants to overcome his doubts and point out Jesus to his disciples: *“When John heard in prison of the works of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to him with this question, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” Jesus said to them in reply, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them.’”* (Mt.11:2-5) The typical messianic works reveal a new reality of salvation in the extraordinary presence of God among us, he who is Emmanuel, the Good News of the liberation of the poor, the consecrated one foretold by Isaiah (Is.61:4) Yes, this Child that has been given to us is the innovation awaited for millennia; he is our only hope of salvation.

But we have to seize the uniqueness that his birth offers us and which we relive in the liturgical and sacramental mysteries. And even if historically, for more that two thousand years, the *“Word was made flesh”*, when *“a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled...when Quirinius was governor of Syria,”* He is present and we should have a part in the Good News and his uniqueness for the world. It is our mission to be alive and proactive with him.

The evangelists Matthew and Luke treat the events surrounding the birth of Jesus with restrained interest, although accenting different aspects: Matthew recounts the events more with the eyes of Joseph, with his doubts and his hesitations in light of the mysterious maternity of Mary, and then the decision to accept her as his wife and to welcome Jesus as his son; Luke describes the Nativity as if it were the memories of Mary. Together they complete and invite us to joyfully live the presence of God among us. If the encounter with Him is authentic, he challenges us to change and to conversion on a personal level and on the level of the Congregation. And it is in this context of renewal that we also want to live the process of Restructuring in which the entire Passionist family is involved. There are many elements and

dynamics that are part of the gospel accounts of the Nativity that are part of a reality that we must adequately address today so that we may be faithful to our vocation. Only if we are truthful and courageous can we communicate life and transmit hope to a world that always has less of it and that frequently lives in great isolation: improving ourselves, we improve the world.

Our Congregation was born to proclaim the Word of the Cross. The Founder clearly understood this calling of the Congregation and the very work of God. It was his conviction that we needed to grow and develop in order to be a vital force for the world, extending to distant cultures and lands. In fact, in 1758 he would write to Sister Rosa M. Teresa asking her to beg *“His Divine Majesty so that devotion to the Passion of Jesus be embraced by the hearts of all the faithful and so that the spirit be bestowed on our missionaries to promote it with great zeal and that this poor Congregation of the most holy Passion extend throughout the world.”* By clarifying what is our mission we are obliged to change in order to be faithful to the call of God and to the dynamic vision that our Founder possessed. And we must have the courage to dare, accepting the changes to which we are called by the Spirit and by the historical context of the Church and of the world and the status of the Congregation. It is necessary to be convinced that by beginning conversion in us and by the capacity to be new persons we can move the world toward change and conversion. God will work through us, even if we are poor instruments, so that we can communicate that strength that is born of the loving message of the Cross.

The capacity to renew one’s heart will also be the beginning point for change in the structures of the Congregation for a new vitality with communities that are capable of living fraternally and joyfully and with freer discernment, before God, of the meaning and the number of our various forms of presence in an area. The criteria should remain that of undertaking changes and choices that favor fraternal life in the communities and therefore the possibility of being effective in the mission: *“He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and everyone that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit.”* (Jn.15:1-2) The road to Restructuring is centered in this choice of life, as is the work of encouragement of the Coordinators of the seven areas of the Congregation and the celebration of the General Synod that will take place in Mexico in September of 2008.

Every year the events that we meditate on and which we live at Christmas invite us to “be reborn from on high” and to be willing, as was Joseph, to modify his first decision to *“secretly divorce Mary”* seeing that *“before they came to live together she was found to be with child.”* (Mt.1:19) He trusted in God who invited him, including with a sign that might seem to be weak such as dream, to *“not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit.”*

The Gospel called him a “just man”, but his description does not relegate him to a personal position of justice and therefore of truth; but it makes him flexible and willing to change his vision of the events in order to continue to be a “just man” in line with what God asked of him; including that in order to be a just man now means that he needs to change: justice is doing the will of the Lord.

Even Mary modified her plans and projects in light of the announcement of her maternity that would radically change her life. She tried to understand: *“How can this be since I have no relations with a man; the angel reassured her: “Do not be afraid Mary”* and she completely adhered to God’s plan and said: *“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, may it be done to me according to your word.”* (Lk.1:38)

The Magi left their secure situations and their country in order to adore the Child *“because we saw his star in the East and have come to adore him.”* (Mt.2:2)

Only by accepting the plans of God can we collaborate in changing the world. The “spirituality of change” of which Fr. Felicísimo Martínez spoke in the last General Chapter begins in our heart and with our courage. The “do not be afraid” that the Angel spoke to Mary, to Joseph and to the shepherds, is also repeated with insistence to us and this should reassure us on the road to Restructuring through which we are invited to initiate a “new way of reflecting” on our reality and mission; to search for a “new way of interacting” among ourselves, and to accept the possibility of “recreating” the structures and the institutions that are at the service of the charism.

Ours should be an enduring faith: God is offering us and the world something new and good and we want to be part of it, collaborating enthusiastically – men and women religious and laity of the Passionist family.

Christmas with the vibrant fidelity of Joseph, the amazing acceptance of Mary and the smile of the Child Jesus in the manger offer us comfort and hope. Why do we still doubt? Let us go with the shepherds “*to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.*” (Lk.2:15) The encounter with the Child in the arms of his mother Mary will open our mind and heart and we will be able to recount the wonders that the Lord is still working among us.

And as the Magi offered him their gifts, may we also place at the feet of the Child the gift of our conversion, be it on a personal or a community level, and let us reaffirm our willingness to work for his Reign proclaiming the Word of the Cross. Amen!

Merry Christmas 2007 and Happy New Year 2008 to everyone, especially the sick of the communities and of the Passionist Family and those that are experiencing difficult times in living their vocation faithfully in the monastery and in families. Merry Christmas and Peace to those who feel alone, misunderstood and marginalized and a word of encouragement to the young: may they feel that their youth and their formation is part of the plan of God. Peace to the world and to all people of good will!

Merry Christmas! Happy New Year! Peace! Also on behalf of the General Council I wish to send these greetings, to each one that is visiting the communities, the monasteries and the families of the 58 nations where the Congregation lives and ministers.

A BLESSED CHRISTMAS: MAY THE CHILD JESUS BLESS ALL OF US.

Fr. Ottaviano D'Egidio
Superior General, C.P.

To the Provincial Superiors
to the Vice-Provincials,
to the Regional Vicars
to all the religious