

CIRCULAR LETTER 3

Christmas Message

Dear sisters and brothers,

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light”

(Liturgical text, Christmas Midnight, Is. 9:1)

As we approach the feast of the Incarnation, so precious to our Christian and Franciscan traditions, I wish to share with you some of my reflections and the content of my prayer for the Order during this Advent and Christmas season. Isaiah accompanies our journey through Advent to the crib of Bethlehem. He is the preeminent prophet of Israel because he knows his people. He knows their stubbornness: *“Their neck is an iron bar”* (Is 48: 4). He names their sin: *“The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand ... The whole head is sick, the whole heart faint”* (Is 1:1-18). He can taste and feel their suffering. The first reading of Christmas is addressed to the people of Zabulon and Naphtali, Jews whose territory had been annexed to Assyria thirty years earlier in a Kuwait-like operation. They are cut off from Israel, no longer part of the nation, cut off from the covenant, the promise, without identity, without hope.

Isaiah speaks to the very heart of Israel’s stubbornness, sinfulness, hopelessness and fear: *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”* To the people of Naphtali and Zebulon he promises no “Desert Storm” of liberation that will restore their political boundaries. Their freedom will rise from the very heart of their pain. Isaiah hints at something excitingly new: FROM THE VERY HEART OF YOUR DARKNESS, YOU WILL FIND AND NAME YOUR LIGHT.

“In those days Caesar Augustus published a decree ... ”

Luke has Isaiah’s feeling and sensitivity for the hopelessness and frustration of his people. Roman power was tightening its grip. The “Pax Romana” was a power rendering all equally powerless. It brought pain and dislocation to the likes of Mary and Joseph. It was anything but peace! Luke uses the very proclamation of suffocating Roman power to announce an event which had already taken place in which male power – epitomized by the “Pax Romana” – for once, had no part whatsoever: the virgin had conceived and was about to give birth to a son! Peace is proclaimed to shepherds ... those so insignificant that Roman power does not even bother to include them in the census! No one who comes to Bethlehem escapes Roman power ... but all are touched and visibly changed in the core of their being. Suddenly, the truth leaps down from heaven: FROM THE HEART OF YOUR DARKNESS YOU WILL FIND AND NAME YOUR LIGHT.

It was this insight that led Francis to Greccio. Francis wanted to take part in Bethlehem. He was not satisfied with beholding a spectacle as one views a game. He wanted to experience

Bethlehem – its sight, its sounds, its smells. He wanted to touch and even to taste! Celano describes Francis at Greccio:

*His mouth was filled more with sweet affection than with words.
Besides, when he spoke the name 'Child of Bethlehem' or 'Jesus',
his tongue licked his lips, as it were, relishing and savoring with
pleased palate the sweetness of the words*

(1 Cel 86).

Celano indicates that the promise of Isaiah was fulfilled, *"the night was lighted up like the day"* (1 Cel 85):

*The gifts of the Almighty were multiplied there, and a
wonderful vision was seen by a certain virtuous man. For he
saw a little child lying in the manger lifeless, and he saw the
holy man of God go up to it and rouse the child as from a deep
sleep*

(1 Cel 86).

Celano rounds off his account: *"each one returned to his home with holy joy."*

From the heart of your darkness, find and name your light. Personal conversion is the invitation and promise of St. Paul: *"God's grace has been revealed."* This grace will light up your darkness and give you power *"to give up all that does not lead to God."*

"You have nothing to fear!" (Lk 2:10): this is the angel's message when we are trapped in fraternal relationships burdened by bitterness, real or perceived injuries, alienation and stagnation. *"God's grace has been revealed!"* Embrace those in your midst gifted with reconciliation and forgiveness. Name your light!

When the aging of our provinces and the seeming inability of our gospel message to permeate the numbing indifference of our secularistic world robs us of hope, we hear with new ears the Christmas proclamation: *"A savior has been born to you, the Messiah and Lord!"* (Lk 2:11). With confidence and hope we begin with fresh vigor and enthusiasm to discover the light of God within the very secularism which oppresses us. Discover the light! Welcome the light!

Brothers and sisters, in the quiet of our personal prayer and meditation as well as in our fraternal conversations throughout this Christmas season, let us awaken within ourselves and within our fraternities a new Greccio experience; discover the light, live in hope!

"This day a savior has been born to you, the Messiah and Lord."

Br. John Corriveau,
OFM Cap. General Minister

Rome, 1 November 1994, Feast of All Saints