

CHRISTMAS 2022

Sunday, 25 December 2022

Dear brothers and sisters in Rome and throughout the world, happy Christmas!

May the Lord Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, bring to all of you the love of God, wellspring of confidence and hope, together with the gift of the peace proclaimed by the angels to the shepherds of Bethlehem: “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those whom he favours” (*Luke 2:14*).

On this festive day, we turn our gaze to Bethlehem. The Lord comes to the world in a stable and is laid in a manger for animals, since his parents could find no room in the inn, even though the time had come for Mary to give birth. He comes among us in silence and in the dark of night, because the word of God needs no spotlights or loud human voices. He is himself the Word that gives life its meaning, he is the Light that brightens our path. “The true light, which enlightens everyone” – the Gospel tells us – “was coming into the world” (*John 1:9*).

Jesus is born in our midst; he is *God with us*. He comes to accompany our daily lives, to share with us in all things: our joys and sorrows, our hopes and fears. He comes as a helpless child. He is born in the cold night, poor among the poor. In need of everything, he knocks at the door of our heart to find warmth and shelter.

Like the shepherds of Bethlehem, surrounded by light, may we set out to see the sign that God has given us. May we overcome our spiritual drowsiness and the shallow holiday glitter that makes us forget the One whose birth we are celebrating. Let us leave behind the hue and din that deadens our hearts and makes us spend more time in preparing decorations and gifts than in contemplating the great event: the Son of God born for us.

Brothers and sisters, let us turn our eyes to Bethlehem, and listen to the first faint cries of the Prince of Peace. For truly *Jesus is our peace*. The peace that the world cannot give, the peace that God the Father has bestowed on humanity by sending his Son into the world. Saint Leo the Great summed up the message of this day in a concise Latin phrase: *Natalis Domini, natalis est pacis*: “the Lord’s birth is the birth of peace” (*Serm. 26, 5*).

Jesus Christ is also *the way of peace*. By his incarnation, passion, death and resurrection, he has opened the way that leads from a world closed in on itself and oppressed by the dark shadows of enmity and war, to a world that is open and free to live in fraternity and peace. Brothers and sisters, let us follow that road! Yet in order to do so, to be able to walk behind Jesus, we must divest ourselves of the burdens that weigh us down and block our way.

What are those burdens? What is that dead weight? The same negative forces that prevented King Herod and his court from acknowledging and welcoming the birth of Jesus: attachment to power and money, pride, hypocrisy, falsehood. These forces hold us back from going to Bethlehem; they exclude us from the grace of Christmas and they block the entrance to the path of peace. Indeed, we must acknowledge with sorrow that, even as the Prince of Peace is given to us, the icy winds of war continue to buffet humanity.

If we want it to be Christmas, the Birth of Jesus and of peace, let us look to Bethlehem and contemplate the face of the Child who is born for us! And in that small and innocent face, let us see the faces of all those children who, everywhere in the world, long for peace.

Let us also see the faces of our Ukrainian brothers and sisters who are experiencing this Christmas in the dark and cold, far from their homes due to the devastation caused by ten months of war. May the Lord inspire us to offer concrete gestures of solidarity to assist all those who are suffering, and may he enlighten the minds of those who have the power to silence the thunder of weapons and put an immediate end to this senseless war! Tragically, we prefer to heed other counsels, dictated by worldly ways of thinking. Yet who is listening to the voice of the Child?

Our time is experiencing a grave *famine of peace* also in other regions and other theatres of this third world war. Let us think of Syria, still scarred by a conflict that has receded into the background but has not ended. Let us think too of the Holy Land, where in recent months violence and confrontations have increased, bringing death and injury in their wake. Let us beseech the Lord that there, in the land that witnessed his birth, dialogue and efforts to build mutual trust between Palestinians and Israelis may resume. May the Child Jesus sustain the Christian communities living in the Middle East, so that each of those countries can experience the beauty of fraternal coexistence between individuals of different faiths. May the Christ Child help Lebanon in particular, so that it can finally rebound with the help of the international community and with the strength born of fraternity and solidarity. May the light of Christ illumine the region of the Sahel, where peaceful coexistence between peoples and traditions is disrupted by conflict and acts of violence. May that light lead to a lasting truce in Yemen and to reconciliation in Myanmar and Iran, and an end to all bloodshed. May it inspire the political authorities and all people of good will in the Americas to attempt to calm the political and social tensions experienced by various countries; I think in particular of the people of Haiti who have been suffering for a long time.

On this day, as we sit around a well-spread table, may we not avert our gaze from Bethlehem, a town whose name means “house of bread, but think of all those, especially children, who go hungry while huge amounts of food daily go to waste and resources are being spent on weapons. The war in Ukraine has further aggravated this situation, putting entire peoples at risk of famine, especially in Afghanistan and in the countries of the Horn of Africa. We know that every war causes hunger and exploits food as a weapon, hindering its distribution to people already suffering. On this day, let us learn from the Prince of Peace and, starting with those who hold political responsibilities, commit ourselves to making food solely an instrument of peace. And as we enjoy gathering with our loved ones, let us think of families that experience great hardship and those that, in this time of economic crisis, are struggling as a result of unemployment and lacking in the necessities of life.

Dear brothers and sisters, today as then, Jesus, the true light, comes into a world severely sick with indifference, a world that does not welcome him (cf. *John* 1:11) and indeed rejects him, as it does with many foreigners, or ignores him, as we all too often do with the poor. Today may we not forget the many displaced persons and refugees who knock at our door in search of some comfort, warmth and food. Let us not forget the marginalized, those living alone, the orphans, the elderly – who are wisdom for their people – who risk being set aside, and prisoners, whom we regard solely for the mistakes they have made and not as our fellow men and women.

Brothers and sisters, Bethlehem shows us the simplicity of God, who reveals himself not to the wise and the intelligent but to the little ones, to those with a pure and open heart (cf. *Matthew* 11:25). Like the shepherds, let us too set out in haste and allow ourselves to be amazed by the unthinkable event of God who becomes man for our salvation. He, the source of all good, makes himself poor, (cf. *Saint Gregory Nazianzen, Or.* 45) asking as alms our own poor humanity. Let us allow ourselves to be deeply moved by the love of God. And let us follow Jesus, who stripped himself of his glory in order to give us a share in his fullness (ibid).