

And today... as Ecclesiastes says: “There is nothing new under the sun”¹... violence, domination over the peoples in many places, war, rebellion, insecurity. We recognize that all of these human situations are not foreign to the **arduous path** of the Incarnation in our societies and even in our own hearts! But then again, neither are wonder and hope. The mystery of the Incarnation is an intimate part of the Assumption and of our personal lives. It is a mystery of transformation and conversion, of becoming and birthing.

Preparing a General Chapter puts us on this demanding path of the Incarnation. We are always moving towards “a fullness of time.” Let’s pray for the mix that we see in Joseph and Mary... **humility and audacity**: humility to listen to and carefully consider other voices, perspectives and insights as well as audacity to take other paths “by night.”²

Christ needs to be born anew in our hearts and in the Congregation. As we journey forward may we listen to the Wisdom figures in Scripture, in our own lives and in the histories of our peoples. May we be attentive to our own founding Grace and to contemporary voices as well. After all the available “compasses” have been consulted and signs of the times humbly read, may we too turn the adventure of walking “untrodden paths” into a commitment of Faith.

*Commitment is that quality of human nature that tells us not to count days or months or years, conversations or efforts or rejections, but simply to go on going on until “all things are in the fullness of time,” until everything is ready, until all hearts are in waiting for the Word of God **in this situation** to be fulfilled.*³

Sr. Diana
27 November, 2011



**Out of His fullness we have all received
grace upon grace. Jn 1:16**

¹ Eccl. 1:9

² Matthew 2: 14

³ Chittister, Joan. *40 Stories to Stir the Soul*. Erie, Pennsylvania: Benetvision Press, 2010. p.19

This picture is of an oil painting by the Indian artist Jyoti Sahi. The strong open hands of the mother are appealing to God, receiving from God and giving something to God. The child is more earthbound, a growing seed himself, feeding the earthbound birds with the new life given to him by his mother so that they gradually rise, gaining life and light and hope...⁴

In preparing our General Chapter we are giving a lot of consideration given to context. Given our reality, both inside and outside the Congregation, how is God calling us to gain more life, to grow, to expand our horizons? Attention to context is not new to us. But it especially struck me this year because of the political turmoil in the Middle East and other parts of the world as well as the economic chaos in Europe that will almost surely be felt soon around the globe.

Until now I hadn't thought much about the political and social context surrounding the registration decree by the Emperor Augustus, at the time of Christ's birth and subsequent flight into Egypt. But a very brief look at that historical context sheds light on different aspects of the infancy narratives and adds further insight and depth to our theological and spiritual reflection.

Herod's reign (4 BCE) ended in terror soon after the birth of Jesus. When the king fell ill just before his death, two popular teachers, Judas and Matthias, incited their pupils to remove the golden eagle from the top of the gate of the Temple. The eagle was a symbol of Roman power in the heart of the holy city. Herod ordered the teachers and the pupils (42 in all) to be burned alive. The story about the slaughter of infants of Bethlehem in the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew is not known from other sources, but it would have been totally in character for Herod to commit such a terrible act.

After Herod's death there was much agitation and rebellion in several parts of Palestine. One of the most serious occurred in Sepphoris where a man named Judas (also Theudas), and his group of desperados took the city, sacked the royal palace, and made off with the weapons and merchandise stored there. The reaction from Rome was not long in coming. *Quintilius Varus, the governor of Syria, set*

⁴ Butler, Barbara. *Open Hands: Reconciliation, Justice and Peace Work Around the World*. Bury St. Edmunds, England: Kevin Mayhew LTD Press, 1998. Introduction.

*off to regain control of Palestine. He marched directly to the Jerusalem area to take over the capital. It was a brutal action. He enslaved a large number of Jews and mercilessly crucified the most rebellious of them. Flavius Josephus says there were some two thousand in all. Meanwhile Gaius was sent to Galilee to repress the main hub of the rebellion. This was done brutally and with almost no resistance. He seized the city of Sepphoris and burned it. Then he terrorized the peasants by burning some of the surrounding villages, and carried off many inhabitants of the zone as slaves.*⁵ Sepphoris is five kilometers away from Nazareth.

Such was the political context of Joseph and Mary's life and the context into which Jesus was born and would live his whole life. They were subjects of the Roman Empire who ruled their homeland with an iron fist. Neither was the economic organization working for the common good of the country; instead it favored the growing well-being of the elite. There were heavy taxes for cultivated land. In Antipas' time, it might have come to 12 or 13% of total production. There was also a per capita tax. The fees must have been very steep to allow Antipas to rebuild the city of Sepphoris in only twenty years.⁶

Christmas card representations of the birth of Christ and Christmas carols which sing of "a silent and holy night where all was calm and bright" hide from us the insecurity that must have prevailed in Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem and then to Egypt. Their decisions to brave the hardships of those journeys were taken in a harsh setting, sustained only by Faith in the messages that they had heard. They focused on the well-being of the Child, the need to protect and shelter Him. Everything else was secondary.

But when the fullness of time had come,

*God sent his son, born of a woman,
born under the law, in order to redeem those
who were under the law,
so that we might receive adoption as children.*⁷

⁵ Pagola, José A. *Jesus, An Historical Approximation*. Convivium Press 2009. (Translated from Spanish)p.36-37

⁶ Idem. p.42

⁷ Galatians 4:4-5.