

Religieuses de l'Assomption
Maison Généralice
17, rue de l'Assomption
75016 PARIS

Christmas Chapter 2014

18th December 2014



« For you who revere my name, the Sun of Justice shall arise, bringing healing in his radiance. You shall go out leaping like young calves to the pasture. » (Malachi 4 : 2)

The star from on high comes to visit us Jesus Christ, the rising Sun

Dear Friends and Sisters,

After more than a month visiting the Province of South-East Asia, we have just arrived back from the Philippines, the last of the countries we visited and the place where the visit was closed. Thank you for your prayers which accompanied us, and sustained the Philippine people during the passage of typhoon Ruby, which occurred at practically the same time of year as Yolanda last year, but was less destructive. For this we give thanks to God.

I am writing now to share with you a word from the Benedictus, which has been in my mind, challenging and encouraging me for some months: *“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace”* (Lk. 1:78) These verses that we pray each morning, echo in me as a desire and a question in the face of reality: what they proclaim is effective but it is not easy to see. They invite us to reconsider the whole of this beautiful canticle, on which they throw light in a wonderful way.

The Dawn from on high is also the Rising Sun, the radiant star of morning. His coming is the manifestation of the infinite mercy of God for all his children, especially for those who still lie in the shadow of death: a

“Sun of Justice” Malachi tells us. He comes to bring the Salvation so greatly desired, he comes so that justice may be done and peace established.

1. - The wait for Salvation

Turned towards the Sun of Justice

At the approach of Christmas we are hoping for the Salvation which God gives us in his Son, the awaited Saviour. We are longing for him with all our human brothers and sisters, and most particularly with those peoples who are walking, at this moment, in the shadows of war, of fear, of sickness and of death; we are awaiting Salvation with the families of those who have been kidnapped, tortured and killed, those who are far from their own countries, which they have left to seek for a better life for them and theirs. We hope for Salvation for all those victims of modern slavery, from which many in our countries suffer.

We believe it, the Dawn from on high comes to illumine our personal lives with his beneficent clarity, and the life of those who dwell in the darkness and the shadow of death: *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.”* (Is. 9:2)

The close approach of Christmas reawakens our desire for justice for all those to whom the contemplation of the Rising Sun guides us; for, turning our hearts to Him, we are also invited to turn towards others.

What does it mean “to wait for Salvation”, “to desire Justice”?

Our waiting cannot be passive, because Salvation and justice do not come from outside nor in an exterior manner. “The Dawn from on high” has chosen to dwell in our interior being. He comes to visit us from within, to put us on the road. He comes to us so that we will search the more for him, through the experience and practice of justice, in openness to others, by making them go first, in wishing them well, and first of all in desiring their well-being. The justice of God does not arrive in a blaze of publicity so as to be splattered everywhere.. It comes in the gentleness of love which awakens in the light; it comes as a fire which takes hold progressively, like the soft murmur of a breeze visiting us from within, like beneficent water flowing, penetrating us, refashioning us profoundly, and causing us to act. It bears fruits of tenderness through our deeds, our attitudes, our actions towards others, in particular those who are the most in need.

Yes, the real Sun of Justice has already come; he will come again to dwell in our hearts and to shine in our lives. His presence is an invitation to live, as Père Varillon suggests, with *“one hand on the beauty of the world, the other on the suffering of humanity, our two feet in the duty of the present moment”*¹.

The dawn from on high invites us to the truth

If we desire Salvation, it is because the Saviour and Sun of Justice has always desired us. At Christmas he comes to bury himself in our humanity, with its lights and shadows. A Child-God, but a child just the same, he unmask our desires for power and reminds us of our need for Salvation. A time for truth with ourselves, the reception of his light allows our poverty to appear, which, if we accept it, becomes a place and source of grace, an occasion to allow ourselves to be led, without wanting to master or control everything (time, space, others...) This poverty, expressed in our vows which *“emphasize attentiveness towards our*

¹ VARILLON François, *Beauté du monde et souffrance des hommes*, Ed. Centurion, p.320

*neighbour, a sober and austere style of life and a respectful love which believes in the strength of the encounter with the other*².

By his frailty, the Babe of Christmas, evokes the need for help and attention, and so the need for others which we all have. He calls on our compassion, our gestures of tenderness, on the sense of the welcome and care for the other that we must have. His presence puts us into a state of discernment How can we make of Christmas, a time of love manifested, of openness, of welcome, of sharing so as to make others happy? How can we make our desire for justice palpable and visible in this Christmas season?

We have written and we like to say that *“we wish to live simply that others may simply live”*. What does that mean for each of us, in particular and very concretely in our world of consumerism?

2. - The Price of Justice

Called to discernment

Many men and women, young people and children are looking for food, for dignity, for justice and for peace. Often we think that we cannot do very much in the face of great social injustices, *“the structures of sin”* and even of less complex situations which are near to us. But perhaps, without being conscious of it, we make ourselves complicit in certain injustices, starting with what we experience in the circle of our loved ones and our communities? Our justice being very different from that of God and our thoughts far from his, it takes very little for us never to pass from the desire for justice to the act which implements it. As Pope Francis underlines a *“sort of alienation”* touches all of us: *“We are sometimes hard of heart and mind, we forget, we are distracted, we go into raptures over the immense possibilities for consumption and distraction that society offers us”*³.

Moreover, perhaps unconsciously, we all want to be winners and that can make us lose sight of all those who do not know their rights or who no longer have the courage to fight to acquire them. Our need to please others can also lead us by tortuous paths of falsehood and injustice in all its forms.

To reconsider our existence starting from the call to live a form of justice requires that we become aware of our resistances so as resolutely to choose the camp of justice. The glaring injustices of the world, highlighted by the coming of the Sun of Justice may thus lead us to a real way of conversion and to fidelity to our vocation. So a time of discernment is established for us, a time when we must seek to recognise what is good, what corresponds to the will of God, what pleases Him (cf. Rom. 12:1-2).

The way of fidelity

If justice attracts us without always bringing about our concrete commitment, it is certainly because we have a presentiment of the price to be paid. The messenger of the justice of God and the precursor of the Just One par excellence, John the Baptist, has opened the way. His mission led him to die for justice, in other words, for Christ, the only truly Just One. He did not escape the lot which was going to be reserved for Him whose coming he came to announce. He went before Him once again, choosing to live the fidelity of God rather than to please human beings, daring to speak the truth to Herod (Mt. 14:4) and to preach conversion to the crowds who came to listen to him in the desert (Mk. 1:4). His life was the expression of a truth that of the very meaning of this life, a truth which St Paul would later explain when he would say: *“If*

² HAERS Jacques, *Vivre les vœux aux frontières*, Ed. Lessius, p.25

³ POPE FRANCIS, *The Joy of the Gospel*, n°177

we live, we live for the Lord; if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord." (Rom. 14:8)

Such an experience is not possible without a deep and proven love for Christ, a trusting faith in the Word of God and a foolish hope that change is possible and that conversion is indispensable. This *"hope beyond all hope"* goes beyond our own inconsistencies, as was the case for St Peter who, after confessing that Jesus was the Messiah, had wanted him to avoid the Passion. He will experience that to follow Jesus, we must deny self and embrace the Cross. Perhaps, like him, we do not want Jesus to suffer the Passion because we do not want to suffer ourselves.

The Precursor announces the visit of the Star from on high, by his acts and by his life as much as by his words; he exhorts us to welcome a better idea of justice, to strive to be consistent and to courageously face the consequences of our choices.

What justice?

Justice is the expression of divine wisdom. Moreover the Book of Wisdom opens with the words: *"Love justice, you who govern the earth, think of the Lord in goodness and seek him with sincerity of heart"* (Wis.1:1). But what is this justice which we must pursue with all the energy of our hearts? The justice of God is that of the Good Samaritan who was moved by the distress of humanity (Lk. 10:25-30). It is also that of the Master who hires people at all hours of the day, and who gives the same pay to the first workers as to the last (Mt. 20:1-16). The justice of God, which makes of us his children, is recognised by the fact that he *"Makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous"* (Mt. 5:45). Of this justice we are all extensively and freely the beneficiaries, without any merit on our part. Much more! For while we were still sinners, Christ died for each of us making us just by his grace. Thus He reconciled us to himself, he saved us so that we may have a part in his life. And this justice of God, given by faith in Jesus Christ, is offered to all those who believe, without exception (cf. Rom.5:8; Rom. 3:22,24). Divine justice is free, gift and mercy. Jesus, Light of the world, calls us to *"live like children of light"* (Cf. Eph. 5:8; Mt. 5:14), that is to say to play our part in the shining of the Sun of justice by carrying into the world sparks of this prodigality to our brothers and sisters. Like John the Baptist, we must be witnesses of the light and builders of peace.

3 - The work for peace

Seek peace tirelessly

We cannot ignore the fact that there is a link between justice and peace: *"justice and peace have embraced"* (Ps84:11). The peace which we seek is that which allows us to live a true and liberating fraternity. In the 47th message for peace and the first of his pontificate, Pope Francis presented fraternity as *"the foundation and path of peace"*. In his second message he insisted on the fact that we are no longer *"slaves, but brothers and sisters"*.

Already, in his Exhortation on the joy of the Gospel, he addressed this appeal to us: *"I especially want to ask the Christians of all the communities of the world for a witness of fraternal communion which becomes attractive and luminous"*⁴. It is a call to receive everyone as a brother or sister, in their full dignity, in all justice and charity.

⁴ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* No. 99

The choice which we have made as a Congregation to live communion as *“a way of being, of living our relationships and acting with others”* urges us to be tirelessly women and men of peace, as the psalmist invites us: *“pursue peace, seek for it...”* (Ps 33:15).

We can open the paths of peace, by living forgiveness, compassion and mercy.

To live mercy

The coming into this world of the Son of God is the proof of his great love for us: *“God so loved the world that he sent his only son, so that whoever believes in him will never perish, but will have eternal life”* (Jn.3:16). The radicality of his love must nourish merciful hearts within us, capable of giving and asking forgiveness of others, hearts sensitive to the pains of others and the sufferings of our world.

Only the love of God can give us the strength to show such tenderness. This is the way that we prepare ourselves to receive the One who comes, into our hearts, our communities, our families, which thus become homes of charity. So, *“when our communities become in the world, homes of God and visible signs of his transforming presence, places of pardon and peace, they will also become profoundly human places of prophecy and wisdom”*. (Cf. Leaflet on Communion General Chapter 2012)

Communion is strengthened by reconciliation, the effort to build unity, by our words, looks and attitudes.

Reflect the splendour of the Sun

If Christ is truly our rising Sun, we will hear the call of Paul to shine *“like stars in the universe, in holding firm to the word of life”* (Phil. 2:15-16). Christ, the Sun of Justice, will be able to shine brightly all through his way among us: *“I am the light of the world; those who follow me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”* (Jn. 8:12). Do we want to receive this light? This is the wish we can make for each other: that the light of Christmas may not be for one evening only, but that it will shine for eternity through the small sparks that we will know how to offer, confident that God’s justice is immortal. (Wis.1:15)

To greet the Sun of Justice, is it not to believe, too, in the newness of the One who comes and will arise in the world? It is He who is capable of changing our sadness into joy, our sufferings into rejoicing. The great Sun of Justice throws into relief all the little lights to which we are invited to be attentive. It is because they were contemplating the stars that the Magi found the Infant of Bethlehem... just as if they had perceived the secondary effects of this immense light before they had found its source. So, may we also let ourselves be led from star to star, towards the One who has the power to change our lives for good, *“the radiant star of morning”* (Rev.22:16), the One whose coming calls forth a new dawn.

The coming of Christ in the flesh re-orientates our lives to their original purpose, and now it becomes our unique project: to be in the image and likeness of God, to become more and more human, while being men and women of justice and peace. And Saint Marie Eugenie would be right to ask us: *“Are you really working to form in yourself the resemblance to Jesus Christ? Do all your efforts aim at this? Is it this that fills the dreams of your nights and the thoughts of your days? Is it the object of all your desires, of all your ambitions, of your preoccupations, of your reflections?”*⁵ Do you always bear within you this desire for the Light, which is the desire for Justice? This issue resonates strongly in this year of the Consecrated Life, to which I will return in the course of 2015. It is also heard in the context of the 5th centenary of the birth of St Teresa of Avila. With the Carmelites and all those who live the Carmelite spirituality, we give thanks to God for the gift of this great saint to the Church. The Sun from on high is made known through each of the stars which reflect his light: St Teresa of Avila is part of that constellation of luminous witnesses who have shone

⁵ MME, Chapter of 21st February 1875

as guides of the Religious Life right up to our own day. For St Marie Eugenie she was a source of admiration and inspiration, a star who has marked our contemplative life with a Carmelite colour. May the memory of her path of holiness strengthen us in the gift of ourselves for others, we who are of God. May she accompany us so that we may make the beauty of the consecrated life better known, especially in the course of this year! For in Him, the Sun, everything is becoming beautiful, finally permitting joy to flourish on earth. We are witnesses of this.

Wishing you a joyous feast of Christmas and a holy year in 2015!

Sister Martine Tapsoba
Superior General