

Religieuses de l'Assomption
Maison Généralice
17, rue de l'Assomption
75016 PARIS
Tel 00 33 1 46 47 84 56

16 December 2013

En route to Christmas, towards Bethlehem



Coptic Icon : The Holy Family

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds
said to one another,
“Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place,
which the Lord has made known to us.”
So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph,
and the child lying in the manger.
When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about
this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told
them.
But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.
The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God
for all they had heard and seen,
as it had been told them.*

Lk 2:15-20

When we consider what we have been living both in our local and the universal Church, the Year of Faith initiated by Pope Benedict XVI has been a blessing for the whole Church. Its closure on 24th November last, by Pope Francis, was at the same time the happy occasion of receiving with joy the apostolic exhortation “The Joy of the Gospel”. And yet our life of faith remains a path to traverse, a life to receive, a confidence to revive and a response to give day after day, in our journey towards the God of Love who is with us, leads us and awaits us. He so loved the world that He has made himself near in his Son come to live among us. *“And the Word became flesh and He lived among us!”* (Jn. 1:14) That was Christmas yesterday, and it is Christmas today!

From heaven to earth, the angels have made the same journey as the Son of God whose birth they came to announce, thus showing that the way and communication remain open between God and humanity. How can we consent to take the road again, to continue the struggle for life while we are haunted by all that our world is enduring: the consequences of typhoons Yolanda and Haiyan which battered the Philippines, and to a lesser extent Vietnam and other countries of Asia, with the loss of human life everywhere and considerable material destruction; Syria, which is bogged down in a situation of conflict so deep that we dare not even imagine the immediate and long term consequences; Iraq, which continues to suffer without many knowing; Central Africa, which has become a new battlefield, and the Democratic Republic of Congo where war and the toll it exacts seem no longer to disturb many people. So many events in our different countries, in each of our Provinces and in the world, assail us every day – touch us and revolt us. It is at the heart of this reality, perhaps no more dramatic than at the time of Jesus, that we set out on the road to Christmas, in the company of Mary and Joseph towards *“...Bethlehem to see this thing which has happened, and which the Lord has made known to us”* (Lk. 2:15) and learn from them to welcome Life and Salvation.

* * *

I – Towards Bethlehem

Since the memorable night of the birth of the Son of God, we can no longer go to Bethlehem without the shepherds, the first to have received the Good News and then the first missionaries of that Good News: *“They went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger.”* (Lk. 2:16) With them, we too want to welcome the baby, the sign of the goodness of the Father. With them, we too want to believe what the angels had told them; for the sign which they had been given was in fact *“not a sign”* as writes Benedict XVI. *“The sign is also a non-sign. God’s poverty is his real sign. But for the shepherds, who had seen God’s glory shining in their fields, this is sign enough.”*¹ They believed what the angel said to them, recognising the sign of the Infant and returned with joy, praising and glorifying God for what they had seen and heard. (Lk. 2:20)

Mystery of faith, mystery of joy! A marvel for our eyes and sweetness for our unquiet hearts where existential questions abound and, perhaps,



Icon of the Holy Family (St. Paul's Catholic Church, Juneau)

unacknowledged sufferings. A marvel because in Jesus, God has come into our human clay and into our history, in the humility of an infant, to give meaning and consistency to the human which is trying to cut a path in us. He leads us to the Father, re-establishing the communion between us and our Creator in the Spirit which cries his name within us: *“Abba, Father”* (Rom. 8:15). In contemplating the new-born in the manger we are contemplating the project of God for every man and woman, we are contemplating our own future and that of the world. The faith of the shepherds stimulates our faith and makes us capable of welcoming with hope this future that is presence and compassion, with the certainty that that Salvation joins us in the

actuality of our daily lives.

¹ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, the Infancy Narratives*, Bloomsbury, 2012, p. 79

Let us then receive with wonder this immense gift which God is making of himself in his Son. He is the Word which gives life and He is seeking our hospitality. To go towards Bethlehem requires the audacity to leave self and its securities behind, the courage to move, to live a crossing from self towards the other with their differences, to let ourselves be led in complete confidence to “the essential” that ‘beyond’ which places us on the side of God.

II – Mary and Joseph, guardians of the Mystery

The revelation of the Mystery to Mary (Lk. 1 :26-38) and to Joseph (Mt. 1:18-25) takes place in the silence of their hearts, a silence that only those who are pure of heart know how to live, those who are led to listen to the Word of God. Mary and Joseph are the guardians of the Mystery of God, they can teach us to live the silence of listening and of contemplation. This silence, which marked their journey of faith following Jesus, in the diverse events of his existence, is paradoxically a word: an incessant annunciation of He who comes, who is here and who dwells in our hearts.

Jesus himself will be immersed in this school of silence where he will learn the obedience founded on faith. Indeed to be capable of speaking with authority as he did during the three years of his public life, he had to go through the rite of passage of a silent contemplative life that lasted thirty years, in full communion with his Father, at a time when he had much to do to free his people from the yoke of Roman occupation. The silence of Jesus is also the great sign of his humility, a humility that kept him patient in the face of our difficulty in understanding the aim of his mission, in the face of our refusal to welcome the overflowing love that he came to manifest to us in making himself the Servant right up to the cross. Above all and by anticipation he has given himself humbly to us in the Eucharistic bread before being clothed in the silence of death, as he had already given himself at the beginning of his earthly life in Bethlehem, the “house of bread.”

We also have the experience that God speaks to us in the silence, a silence in which we can grow in our personal relationship with Christ. The

mystery of Christmas invites us to adoration, to openness of heart so as to welcome the Life that we are given, with great respect, a gentle peace, a holy joy; because it is in us that the Child really wants to make his home. Saint Marie Eugenie understood this so well when she said: *“our soul also, Sisters, is a heaven for God. Jesus Christ lives there by his grace...”* That is why we must learn to create from time to time a great silence in our soul, so that everything may adore God in silence.²

Like Mary and Joseph, and responding to the invitation of Marie Eugenie, this Christmas we can offer the Christ-Child the manger of our open hearts as a home. Let us welcome him in the silence, on our knees before the Manger. Let us contemplate him – so vulnerable and already delivered into the hands of humanity. This is where the imitation of Christ begins.

III – Witnesses of Jesus for our world

Mary and Joseph received from the Father the mission of watching over the Infant-God and of putting themselves at his service. They watch the Infant more than they look at themselves. They are centred on him and each of them has a personal relationship with the New-born, a relationship that they will maintain for the whole of their lives. Joseph, especially, keeps in the background



before this Infant who is entrusted to him: he the man of silence, of humility and of service, whom the Christian people have never ceased to venerate. The re-affirmation by Pope Benedict, and then Pope Francis, of the unique role of Saint Joseph in the history of Salvation³, challenges us to recognise his place at

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/perichorese-icomes/4802288181/>

² St Marie Eugenie, Chapter of 30th August 1883

³ The 1st May 2013 a Decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments required that the name of Joseph should be added to that of Mary in Eucharistic Prayers II,III and IV.

the side of Mary and their communion in the mission of the education of Jesus, the Son of God.

Poor and humble before the gift of God and his confidence in them, Mary and Joseph made neither great speeches, nor grand revelations. They were quite simply there with the baby who had become their unique *raison d'être*, surrounding him with their attention and love. So, loving him with their whole hearts, and loving each other in this bond that came from him, they did not keep him for themselves. They offered him to everyone who was attracted by his presence. In this they are the icon of human paternity and maternity.



Icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth Rachel Sim

By the witness of their lives they gave a true reflection of God made man. For us they are a vibrant invitation to allow ourselves to be illuminated by the divine Word, the greatest become the least.

The feast of Christmas gives us the opportunity to make Jesus truly the centre of our lives, to live from him and to give him to the world. For, *“today it is up to us to make the experience of the Church really accessible, to multiply the wells to which thirsty men and women are invited, so that they may meet Jesus, the true oasis in the deserts of life... Each of us is entrusted with an irreplaceable witness, so that the Gospel may touch the lives of all. This is why holiness of life is demanded of us.”*⁴

We receive the mission to radiate the light received from the Infant in the manger. The shepherds who, in the region of Bethlehem, were the first to contemplate the face of Christ, remind us that the Gospel is destined first of all for the poor. Christ, the king of humility, identifies himself with the poor. Today, the face of the poor opens for us a path towards Christ, *“because in the face of the poor shines the face of Christ himself.”*⁵

* * *

En route to Christmas we have made a pilgrimage to the source, we have followed the trail of an Infant bearing a message of Salvation for all people. Looking for him, we have allowed ourselves to be led in the direction of our

⁴ Synod 2012, Final Message, no. 3

⁵ Synod 2012, Final Message, no. 12

own humanity, in the acceptance of what we really are. The coming of the Infant to our earth authorises us to live in joy and peace, and to be its prophets in our world.

En route to Christmas we have hurried with the Shepherds, bearing in our hearts the joys, and pains, the sufferings and the hopes of our sisters and brothers, so as to lay them at the feet of the Saviour. We have walked with Mary and Joseph. In their company we have learned to interpret the signs which God gives us and to taste the joy of being with Jesus. From Mary and Joseph we have learned to admire, to contemplate and to penetrate the depths of God in the weakness of an Infant, and to recognise his presence in the simplicity of reality as it is given to us to live.

En route to Christmas, we have welcomed with joy the great gift of the Life of God in Jesus, this Infant-Saviour. From Bethlehem we are sent to proclaim the marvels of God for us in his Son. May Mary our Mother, Model of our faith and *“Star of the new evangelisation,”* accompany us by her maternal prayer and help us, *“ so that the Church may become a home for many, a mother for all peoples, and make possible the birth of a new world.”*⁶ May the memory of the experience lived at Bethlehem strengthen our faith and remain with us throughout the New Year we are approaching.

Wishing each of you a joyful Christmas 2013 and a happy and holy year 2014!

With my communion in prayer and my sisterly affection in Jesus our brother!

Sr Martine Tapsoba
Superior General

⁶ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation: Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, Nos. 287-288