



MESSAGE FOR CHRISTMAS 2017

Dear Confreres and Consoeurs,

We all need the hope that comes to us in the mystery of the Nativity of Jesus Christ. This world, marked by evil, most urgently needs this hope. Countries threatened by war need it, Christians in the Middle East who suffer persecution and risk their lives need it, the poor who die of hunger, immigrants who swim to a foreign shore need it, and the great nations of Europe built upon a Christian foundation, who seem to have forgotten piety and abandoned love, most urgently need the hope that comes in the mystery of Jesus' birth.

Christian hope prevents us from regarding history in a fatalistic manner and instead aids us in living our discipleship, in the world, with courage and trust. As Christians, we look to the future without fear because our hope is rooted in the very heart of God.

We do not only just celebrate “waiting,” but more poignantly the commemoration of the One who has already dwelt among us in the mystery of the Nativity. It is the incarnational certainty of Christ's presence, dwelling with us and walking with us. The Incarnation of the Son of God is ongoing and no earthly reality can stop it.

Hope, for the Christian, means the courageous expectation in every human being for a fulfilment of our profound desire to find happiness by virtue of the divine promise; it distinguishes itself from “optimism” which is an uncritical attitude with the unfounded belief that in the end everything will turn out for the best. “By annulling the tragedy of evil,” says Jean Danielou, “optimism is hope's worst enemy. By keeping human beings in the illusion of being able to free themselves, it actually diverts them from the one path of salvation.”

The dynamism of human hope, left to itself, takes shape in various forms of utopia and ideology and generates, according to the circumstances, presumption or despair, sadness and distraction, fatalism, or fury as it pursues its own agenda.

God, who personally has entered the dramatic context of humanity in Jesus Christ, reveals to us the unfathomable breadth of human destiny. The historical witness and commitment of present-day Christians finds its *raison d'être* in the fact that God became human in Jesus Christ. In our witness and commitment, we must not be accomplices in our secularised society's systematic

removal of the roots and signs of Christianity; a society rich in most everything, but frightfully poor in God. Despite adorning our houses and cities with multi-coloured lights, we remain impoverished of Christ, the light within. Pope Francis has said: "If we remove Jesus, what remains of Christmas? An empty party. Jesus is the centre of Christmas."

Let us celebrate Christmas, but not forget the true celebration: Jesus, the only one who gives joy and can make the heart burn within. (cf. Lk 24: 32)

Christmas is not just lights or friendship or winter or giving and receiving presents.

Do not let Christmas pass you by. Each of us must ask themselves, as in the Polish saying: "Even if Jesus had been born a thousand times in Bethlehem, what use would I have of Him, if he had not been born in me?"

In the memory of the late Grand Master, Don Carlos Gereda and thanking the interim Grand Master Francisco de Borbon von Hardenberg, it is my hope that the celebration of the Christ-mass of the Redeemer will fill all your hearts with joy and light. For you and your families I pray great thankfulness and copious blessings.

✘ Michele Pennisi, Archbishop of Monreale

Ecclesiastical Grand Prior of the Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem