



## MESSAGE FOR CHRISTMAS 2023

Dear members of the Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem,

This year marks the eight hundredth anniversary of the creation of the first living nativity scene by St. Francis of Assisi in Greccio. On December 25, 1223, many friars arrived in Greccio from various parts of the world and men and women also arrived from the farmhouses in the area, bringing flowers and torches to illuminate that holy night. When Francis arrived, he found a child, an ox and a donkey in the crib with the hay. The people who came there showed unspeakable joy at the Christmas scene.

If we allow ourselves to be touched by this message, we too, like the shepherds and the Magi, are overwhelmed by a great joy, which makes us overcome our fears and gives us the certainty that even the most atrocious pain can become a place of love, even the abyss of our misery can welcome mercy, and even the blackest despair can be transformed into the most daring hope.

The nativity scene arouses so much amazement because it manifests the tenderness of God, who became a child to tell us how close He is to every human being, in whatever condition they find themselves. The Child Jesus, showing Himself with his weakness and poverty, does not want to force anyone to accept Him by force. He makes himself a gift for anyone who wants to accept Him.

As we contemplate the scene of Christmas, we are invited to set out on our spiritual journey, attracted by the humility of the One who became man in order to encounter every human being. And we discover that He loves us so much that He unites with us, so that we too can unite ourselves to Him.

This child is the only Saviour of the world, who came to free us from the leprosy of sin, from the drug of selfishness, from the dark tunnel of death.

Christmas is the good news of salvation that concerns each one of us. If we do not take Christ's Nativity seriously, we risk remembering an anniversary and celebrating a feast without knowing who the birthday boy is.

While I rejoice in your commitment, carried out with great generosity on behalf of lepers and other sick people, on the occasion of the forthcoming Christmas holidays I hope that each one of you and your families will welcome Jesus Christ with great faith in their heart, and recognize Him as being present especially in the little ones and the poor, so that they may be builders of a new world in which justice reigns, alongside solidarity and fraternity and peace.

***Christmas 2023***

***+ Michele Pennisi***

***Archbishop emeritus of Monreale***

***Ecclesiastical Grand Prior of the Military Hospitaller Order of St. Lazarus***