



SUPERIOR GENERAL'S CHRISTMAS MESSAGE 2021

**My dear Brothers, Sisters and Friends in the Passionist Family,
My sincere greetings to you all from Rome!**

The feast of Christmas is a moment to contemplate the wondrous **GIFT of God's Self**, expressed in the birth of the person of Jesus of Nazareth – God choosing to be born into the human family in order “*to save God's people from their sins*” (Mt. 1:21). The consequence of God's choice means that God is always with us: *Emmanuel* (Mt. 1:24). Speaking at the recent inauguration of the nativity scene in St. Peter's Square, Rome, Pope Francis said: *the Nativity scene remains a symbol of hope that God “never tires of us” and that he chose to dwell among men and women “not as one who stands on high to dominate, but as the one who stoops low, small and poor, to serve”*. More than ever, we need to find strength and comfort from this truth in living the historical moment of our times.

We are living in a time of history which engenders great uncertainty and anxiety, our lives and relationships affected and shaped by the influence of the corona virus pandemic and its variants. After more than two years of finally getting some control over the pandemic with the strong push for vaccinations which allowed for the relaxation of restrictions and movement, our hope seems dashed as the world is once again experiencing the resurgence of the virus. Threats of new restrictions and questions about the effectiveness of the vaccines in the face of new variants makes life so uncertain from day to day and is a real cause of fear, worry and anxiety for everyone. Each one of us knows what this means for us personally and we can, hopefully, empathise with the response of others in their illness, physical isolation, psychological disorientation, social disconnection, loneliness, sense of despair etc.

While we are rightly preoccupied with the pandemic, so much other suffering also continues to abound in many parts of our world. These are the product and result of wars, greed, oppression, abuse of power, racism, injustice, natural disasters, environmental and ecological destruction. It is understandable that because of this situation, millions of people are fleeing their homes and even their countries in the hope of finding a better and safer future, only to sadly end up being displaced as migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, lost, and stranded in ‘no-man’s land’ (if they make it), unwanted, stateless, their dignity reduced to mere victims and numbers. The consequences of their quest are dire and hopeless as it only brings bitter experiences of homelessness, famine, inequality, hatred, and rejection. In all these situations, we who are on God’s side and contemplate the Christmas story of the birth of Jesus, know of **God’s solidarity**: God understands, God suffers, God cares, God-is-with-us! But is this sufficient? Or are we left with some pangs of conscience to act?

Pope Francis reminds us: *‘For it to be truly Christmas, let us not forget this. God comes to be with us and asks us to take care of our brothers and sisters, especially the poorest, the weakest and the most fragile, those whom the pandemic risks marginalising even more.’* Yes, while God is with us, God wants our action.

Considering this, the following reflection of Pope Francis following his recent visit to Cyprus and the island of Lesbos (Greece) to show his solidarity with the migrants and refugees, struck me as being valid and possible for us to adopt **compassionate action** wherever we are. The Pope proposes that the best way to overcome indifference to the suffering of migrants and refugees is **to look in their faces**.

He said:

In Cyprus, as in Lesbos, (Greece), I was able to look into the eyes of this suffering. Please, let us look into the eyes of the discarded people we meet, let us be provoked by the faces of the children, children of desperate migrants... Let us allow ourselves to be drawn into their suffering in order to react to our indifference; let us look at their faces, to awaken us from the sleep of habit.

Like some of you, I, too, can look back and reflect on the experience of my family’s migration to a new country and among a people very different from our own. It is a scary experience! I remember us feeling somewhat like ‘aliens’ in a strange land. This sense and feeling are even more compounded when both we and others stare, mumble, point, avoid, look away – because of difference – not confident in how to engage. But what made all the difference was the **‘transcendence of difference’**: the recognition and contact initiated by fellow human beings; the smile, greeting and

word of welcome; the effort to understand and make allowances; the looking at our face and into our eyes and relating as equals. This is what made us feel 'at home' and made all the difference for everyone. Space was made in hearts to welcome and accommodate difference.

This is what we celebrate in the feast of Christmas: the Divine Heart choosing to enter and dwell within the human heart. God-is-with-us! Difference is fused, absorbed, and accepted as a gift to be embraced, not something to be feared.

During the time of Advent, we have been preparing our hearts to welcome Christ: "Come, Lord Jesus!" In the carol, Joy to the World, we will sing: "Let every heart prepare Him room". Making room for Christ is costly; it means embracing him and inviting him into all aspects of our daily life. The best way we can prepare room and make a welcome space for Christ in our hearts is by evoking acts of compassion and charity. **Loving compassion** is about making friends with those who suffer, seeing life through their eyes, entering their world, becoming involved in their lives, and spending quality time with them. In this way the experience of the truth that God-is-with-us is emphasized and given credence.

As Passionists, our charism invites us to show compassion to all those who suffer physically, materially, economically, emotionally, and spiritually. In the words of St. Paul of the Cross:



Let your hearts be full of compassion for the poor, and lovingly assist them, because the name of Jesus is engravened on their countenance. When you have not the means of helping your neighbour, recommend him fervently to God whose sovereign dominion holds all creatures in His hand.



This Christmas time, let us appreciate once again in the birth of Jesus a message of hope that in the uncertainty, fear and suffering it is God – *Emmanuel* - who comes to be with us and live among us. We will never be alone. JESUS is LOVE born in our world. He is at the very heart and centre of our lives and the source of our HOPE. *“Let every heart prepare Him room.”*



**I wish you all
a blessed
Christmas and
peace-filled New
Year!**

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "J. Rego, C.P." with a stylized flourish at the end.

~ Fr. Joachim Rego, C.P.
Superior General