



ORDO PRÆDICATORUM
CURIA GENERALITIA

4th Sunday of Advent
Rome, 20 December 2020

Prot. 50/20/614 Letters to the Order

*“What was from the beginning, what we have heard,
what we have seen with our eyes... and touched with our hand
concerns the Word of life...made visible;
Him we preach...so that our joy may be complete.”*

I John 1:1,3-4

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Christmas, whether in a time of pandemic or prosperity, is a celebration of the inscrutable nearness of God who **dwells** *within* and *among* us; a thanksgiving to our generous God who gives Himself as *gift*.

This year of the Lord 2020 is truly unexpected, unprecedented, unforgettable. Most of us celebrated the Easter Triduum, confined within locked doors; our hearts filled with anxiety about an uncertain future. But then, we turned our thoughts and set the eyes of our faith towards our Risen Lord who enters through locked doors, greets us with his peace and dares us not to be afraid.

Now we celebrate Christmas, still struggling against this virus, protecting ourselves and our loved ones by keeping charitable *distance* from one another. Our song of *Venite adoremus* is muffled by masks and face shields. St. Paul exhorts us to behold with “unveiled faces” (2 Corinthians 3:18) the glory of God. Yet this year, we adore the beauty of the newborn King with covered faces. While our celebrations may be sparse and simple, we take hope and consolation in commemorating the birth of the *Emmanuel*, the God who is “*closer* to us than we are to ourselves” (St. Augustine, Confessions III, 6, 11).

Our fondest memories of Christmas are from our childhood, when Christmas trees seemed to tower over us, when a few pieces of candy seemed like an abundance of sweet things in our little hands. When we grew older, we realized that Christmas is not about feasting on delicious food, but sharing food that feeds the hunger of our bodies and satisfies the hunger of our souls for fellowship and friendship; that Christmas is not about exchanging material gifts, but about the gift of presence, of time, of conversations, of simply being together as our brothers and sisters, with family and friends.



ORDO PRÆDICATORUM CURIA GENERALITIA

However, the question lingers: *How can there be Christmas Joy in a time of pandemic?* In many homes and communities, including some of our own convents, we have seats and spaces now empty, reminding us of loved ones we have lost this year. There would be no Christmas parties because money has been sparse due to loss of jobs and economic contractions. Because of travel and movement restrictions, the elderly would sorely miss the visits and embrace of their loved ones. Protective masks would hide the brilliant smiles of people singing carols, like “lights hidden under a bushel basket” (Matt. 5:15) which could not fully illuminate these dark December nights. *How can there be Christmas Joy in a time of pandemic?*

Our joy would be full, as the beloved disciple assures, if we preach *what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes... and touched with our hand, the Word of life...made visible* (I John 1:1,3-4).

This is eloquently depicted by the beautiful painting of Sister Orsola Maddalena Caccia – of **the Blessed Mother allowing Saint Dominic to see and touch the baby Jesus, like a proud mother letting a dear friend hold her precious newborn**. This is Dominic’s beatitude, the joy of preaching the One he has *heard, seen, and touched*, the Word Incarnate.

This Christmas, as we embark on our celebration of the centenary of the *Dies Natalis* of St. Dominic, we ask ourselves: how have we *heard, seen, and touched* the Word this year? In many places, the incessant sound of sirens became a remainder of the pandemic. But it also meant that health workers continue to help the sick.

I learned from a friar here at Santa Sabina about the beautiful German word for nurse: *krankenschwester*, which literally means “**sister of the sick**”. A sick person is not just a patient, but a family member, one of our *own*. In times of disaster, we always *see* people who help and care for people. When things fall apart, we must always look for the “helpers”, persons who make us feel that all will be well even in the face of adversity; they give us hope. Surely, it is good to see one of them when we look at the mirror!

In recent times, even before the pandemic, proximity and touch have been treated with suspicion. They could be signs of abuse. With the threat of COVID19, they have become acts of contagion and endangerment. Malice has tainted touch and rendered proximity as risky and reckless, tactile charity became taboo and terribly offensive. Paradoxically, maintaining safe distance as protection and prevention of viral transmission has been transformed into a sincere sign of our “nearness”, and genuine concern for the health and safety of others.

I am glad that in these trying times, we have *heard and seen* the manifold preaching and works of charity of our brothers and sisters, *touching* the hearts of so many.



ORDO PRÆDICATORUM
CURIA GENERALITIA

Christmas joy is a gift which awaits us when we preach the One we have heard, seen and touched. It is no wonder that from the earliest times of our Order, we prayed:


May God the Father bless us ,
May God the Son heal us,
May God the Holy Spirit enlighten us and give us
eyes to *see* with,
ears to *hear* with,
hands to *do* the work of God with,
feet to walk with,
and a mouth to *preach* the word of salvation with...

Once I came across a story of a teacher who asked his students: how can you tell that the night is over and the day has begun? A student replied: is it when from a distance I could see a tree and I can tell whether that tree is an apple or an orange tree? The teacher said, not yet. Another student volunteered: is it when from a distance I could see an animal and I could tell whether it is a cow or a horse? The teacher said, not quite. The students chorused, then tell us how. The teacher said, it is *when from a distance you could see a person and you can already see in that person the face of a brother or a sister. When that happens, surely, the darkness of night has ended and the brightness of day has begun.*

For us Christians, darkness ends when we see in our brothers and sisters, in everyone, especially the poor, the very presence of Jesus himself. This is the true celebration of Christmas - to proclaim our faith in the Emmanuel, the God-who-is-with-us, the God-who-is-in-each-and-everyone of us. The question for us this Christmas is not only "who is Jesus for us?" but "*where is Jesus in our fellows?*" He is *Emmanuel!*

May the **light of Christ** shine *through* us,
to dispel the darkness *around* us, *within* us.
A Blessed Christmas to you and all you hold dear!

Your brother,


Gerard Francisco Timoner III, OP
Master of the Order