From the heart of the State

The Governorate tells its story

Vatican City

Year 2 - N. 4 - december 2025

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YEAR 2 - N. 4 - DECEMBER 2025

On the Front Cover:

Christmas Tree and Nativity in Saint Peter's Square

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Let us celebrate, then, the birth of the Lord ...

"Let us celebrate, then, the birth of the Lord with the manner and mood of celebration that it deserves (...) Rejoice, you righteous: the one who justifies you has been born. Rejoice, you weak and sick: he who heals you has been born. Rejoice, you captives: the one who redeems you has been born. Rejoice, you servants: the Lord is born. Rejoice, you who are free: he who sets you free is born. Let all Christians rejoice: Christ is born." (Sermon 184, 2)

For Saint Augustine, Christmas cannot be understood without joy. Yet, in order to experience that authentic joy which only the Prince of Peace, Emmanuel, can give, one must have a humble heart. It is necessary to cultivate an interior attitude that allows one to recognize one's own fragility and to place constant trust in the mercy of God.

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn 1:14), John affirms in the Prologue of his Gospel. What clearer expression of God's infinite mercy can we find than in the birth of the Child in Bethlehem? He, the Almighty, became incarnate and made himself visible to human eyes. For this reason, on that Holy Night the angels were filled with gladness as they announced the birth of the Lord on this earth to the shepherds.

That same joy characterizes Christians of every latitude, thanks to their awareness of God's love for his creatures. Joy, moreover, is contagious and leads to hope, that virtue which has animated the Jubilee that is now drawing to a close.

It is hope that sustains the communities that gather around Christ in every part of the world, as an expression of walking together. A Church marked by hope is a living community that walks alongside people, shares their difficulties and expectations and bears witness to hope.

The reading of the reflections and testimonies of the pastors of the dioceses on every continent, of the rectors of Shrines and of contemplative communities scattered throughout the world—who willingly enriched the publication of the Governorate of the Vatican City State dedicated to Christmas—expresses how hope is lived in daily life, especially through the enculturation of the Gospel.

In the Mystery of Christmas, we are all invited to experience joy and hope, welcoming the invitation of Saint Augustine: "Behold, we have before us the Christ Child: let us grow together with him" (Sermon 196, 3).

15 December 2025

Leo PP XIV

The Geography of Hope

There is a geography of hope that runs through every nation and land on our planet. It is the geography that traces the presence of Christians, because wherever they are, hope is born and grows.

There is no doubt that to hope is an intrinsic element of being a disciple of Christ, for it is the foundation of the proclamation of the Gospel, of the passion, death, and resurrection of the Lord. In particular, Christ offers the certainty that hope finds its reason for being in a historical event of universal significance: the Resurrection.

For this reason, on the occasion of Christmas, the theme chosen for the final 2025 issue of the Governorate's magazine is Hope. It connects with the motto of the Jubilee and seeks to emphasize that the birth of Jesus is the foundation of hope, because it reveals God's love for His creatures.

As a reflection of Christ, every small Christian community — even the most remote in space and time — represents a beacon of hope, an invitation to trust, for peace and fraternity. Indeed, the most evident sign distinguishing the disciples of Christ is mutual love, which finds its nourishment in recognizing one another as brothers and sisters, children of the same heavenly Father.

Christian communities are also a sign of hope because they recognize in Christ the superabundance of mercy. They are certain that every sin finds in Him forgiveness and reconciliation. With this assurance, Christians live their relationship of trust in the Father with confidence, fully engaged in the events of the world.

One of the most immediate expressions of divine mercy is the celebration of the Jubilee Year, opened by Pope Francis on December 24, 2024, and concluded by Pope Leo XIV on January 6, 2026. The chosen theme is precisely: "Pilgrims of Hope."

This phrase refers not only to a physical journey but also to an inner path of faith and hope toward redemption. Throughout this year, both Pope Francis and Pope Leo have invited the faithful to recognize the signs of Christ's presence in daily life and to become builders of a world founded on hope, where there is no longer room for war and violence.

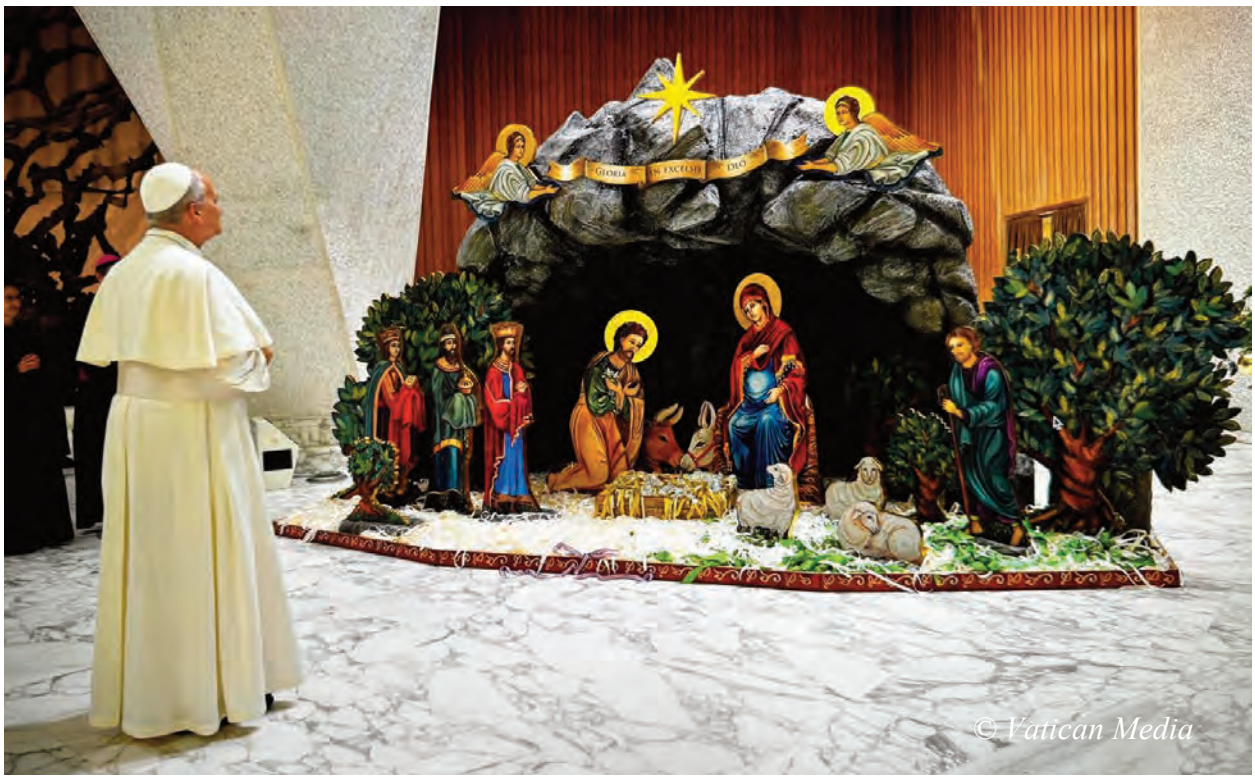
There is no doubt that the Jubilee has helped people to recover hope, often weakened by everyday struggles and major dramatic events such as wars, epidemics and environmental disasters. The Jubilee has been an occasion and opportunity to strengthen and share this virtue.

During the Holy Year, moreover, the faithful have been encouraged to promote acts of charity and to experience pilgrimage as a moment of reflection and prayer. Hope, indeed, opens the heart to solidarity and sharing, especially toward the most vulnerable — migrants, the elderly, the abandoned, the displaced and the poor.

Starting from the conviction that even the smallest Christian community is a ray of hope in the midst of the world, this issue gives voice to Pastors of the Churches — including those living in countries with a Christian minority — to contemplative communities of both men and women, to rectors of various shrines around the world, and to a significant representation of the Franciscan Order, as we approach the 800th anniversary of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi.

With the image of this geography of hope, we wish everyone a Blessed Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Nicola Gori
Editor



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A Christmas of Hope

The birth of Christ is proof that God does not remain distant from our fragility, but passes through it with the light of His presence. The same attitude is revealed in the Risen One: not a God who dominates or takes revenge, but a God who manifests Himself with tenderness and closeness, bearing in His body the signs of the love that saves. From this springs the hope celebrated in the Jubilee Year.

If Easter reveals the victory of love over death, Christmas represents the beginning of that same hope: it is the moment when God chooses to share our fragile, sin-marked humanity, deciding to dwell among us.

The words of Pope Leo XIV on hope, spoken during his Catechesis of Wednesday, 15 October 2025, on the theme The Risen One, Living Source of Human Hope, can be fully understood also in the light of Christmas.

The hope of Christians, in fact, does not derive from power or success, but from the certainty that God walks beside humanity, especially in moments of confusion and weakness. In the Child laid in the manger, we see a God who chooses vulnerability as His language of love. It is a hope that is born of silence and humility, that springs forth in hidden places—just as in the grotto of Bethlehem or in the stillness of Easter morning.

Through his words, the Pope invites us to let ourselves be reached by this living and concrete hope, capable of transforming pain into forgiveness and wounds into peace. At Christmas, God draws near to the wounded; at Easter, those wounds become signs of healing and new life. In both feasts, the same promise shines through: divine love never grows weary, but always begins anew and restores trust.

To celebrate Christmas with this awareness means to embrace the mission that the Risen Lord entrusts to His own: to spread peace, reconciliation and mercy. Christmas is not only the remembrance of a distant event, but an invitation to be reborn within, to believe that every darkness can open to a new light.

With this conviction, this issue of the Governatorate's Magazine, dedicated to Christmas, presents a series of articles expressing the universality of the Church.

This confirms that the Vatican City State, though tiny in territorial extension, has a significance that transcends its borders, being intimately linked, from its very origin, to the service of the Pope's ministry. One could say that the size of the State is inversely proportional to its reflection in the world. It is like a lighthouse seeking to spread the Gospel by placing itself entirely at the service of the Successor of Peter.

In respect and recognition of the universality of the Pope's ministry, Cardinals, Bishops, Abbots and Abbesses, Priors and Prioresses, Rectors of Sanctuaries, as well as General and local Superiors of the Order founded by Saint Francis of Assisi, have accepted our invitation to write an article on the theme of hope in a world often without peace.

Each author has interpreted this theme within their own context, offering us their experience and valuable insights for reflection. The result is a portrait of how ecclesial communities, in the most diverse regions of the world, are able to bear witness to the Gospel of hope despite trials, difficulties, sufferings and hostilities.

This collaboration is also a sign and a tribute to Pope Leo XIV, through contributions born from lived experience, meditation and the desire to participate in the good of the universal Church.

Christians know that peace is a gift from God and must be implored from above, yet they are also aware that it must be promoted and cultivated through every human effort. From the reflections gathered in this magazine, we discover how the richness of faith can change the world and spread a culture of peace.

The Vatican City State takes part in this ecclesial reality, which gathers in communion around the Pope and recognizes in Christmas the beginning of a new era.

For this reason, with deep and heartfelt gratitude, I wish to thank all those who accepted our invitation and devoted their time to enrich this issue of our publication with their precious testimonies.

With the promise of offering for everyone this Christmas, a prayer at the Tomb of the Apostle Peter — a symbol of unity and charity.

Sr. Raffaella Petrini, F.S.E.
President of the Governorate
of Vatican City State

Hope That Remains: the Fruits of the Jubilee

The Jubilee of Hope comes to its close, yet what ends is certainly not our spiritual journey. Hope never stops: it is a seed that, once planted, continues to grow through gestures, relationships, and in the hearts of those who have welcomed it.

During this Jubilee year, the entire world has been invited to look beyond the shadow of fear, war, and violence. Hope has spoken through the faces of those who did not give up, through the hands that continued to serve, and through the steps of those who chose to forgive. It has not been a naïve hope, but a concrete one—embodied in everyday life, capable of suffering, waiting, and building.

Pope Francis, in his Catechesis during the General Audience of Wednesday, December 11, 2024, reminded us that "Hope is not an empty word, nor a vague wish that things might turn out well: hope is a certainty, because it is founded on God's faithfulness to His promises." And he added: "The Christian cannot be content with merely having hope; he must also radiate hope, be a sower of hope." These words help us understand that hope is a call to action: a virtue that urges us to intervene, to welcome, to build.

Likewise, Pope Leo XIV, in his Catechesis during the General Audience of Wednesday, September 17, 2025, emphasized that "Christian hope is not born in noise, but in the silence of an expectation filled with love. It is not the offspring of euphoria, but of trustful abandonment. The Virgin Mary teaches us this: she embodies this expectation, this trust, this hope. When it seems to us that everything is at a standstill, that life is a blocked road, let us remember Holy Saturday. Even in the tomb, God was preparing the greatest surprise of all."

Christian hope, indeed, promises and fulfills, because it stands opposed to a superficial optimism that can disappoint. During the Jubilee of Youth, held on August 3 at Tor Vergata, the Pope recalled the words of Saint Augustine, who, reflecting on his intense search for God, asked: "What, then, is the object of our hope? … Is it the earth? No. Something that comes from the earth, like gold, silver, trees, crops, water? … These things are pleasing, beautiful, good." (Sermo 313/F, 3) And he concluded: "Seek the One who made them; He is your hope." On that same occasion, addressing young people from around the world, the Pontiff reaffirmed that "our hope is Jesus."

Before some five hundred participants in the Jubilee pilgrimage of African ambassadors, dedicated to the theme "The Hope of Peace in Africa" and held in St. Peter's Basilica on Monday, May 26, Pope Leo XIV urged the diplomats to be signs of hope for humanity and for the entire world. His words remind us of our responsibility not to "consume" hope as a disposable good, but to live it as a gift and a mission.

Today, as the Jubilee comes to an end, we can say that hope has left deep traces: more united communities, more open hearts, and a renewed desire to believe that goodness is possible. This is the most beautiful fruit of the Jubilee: a rediscovered trust in humanity and in God, who continues to make all things new.

Hope, indeed, is not a fleeting feeling but a living force, a spring that flows even when the ground seems dry. It is the light that remains lit in difficult days, the thread that weaves peace and solidarity.

And now, as we draw near to Christmas, the mystery of hope takes on a face: a Child born in the night of the world to tell each of us that no darkness is stronger than the light of God. Christmas is the most tender and powerful proof that hope does not disappoint, for it has a name and a face: Jesus.

The Jubilee ends, but hope does not. It continues in the small gestures of daily life, in the dreams that still dwell within us, in the promise contained in every dawn. For where there is hope, there is life. And where there is life, God continues to write the story of His love.

We invite all those who are part of the Governorate of the Vatican City State to fervently safeguard that call to be sowers of hope to which we are all summoned—to transform the strength of the Jubilee into a daily journey: with patience, with generosity, and with the courage to believe that every person has dignity and that every community can be a "place of hope," a source of goodness for those who belong to it and for all who look upon it and are inspired by it.

Archbishop Emilio Nappa
Titular Archbishop of Satriano
Secretary General of the Governorate of the Vatican City State

Being Reborn in Trust: The Value of Hope in the Time of Work and the significance of Christmas

The Jubilee, now coming to an end, leaves behind an inheritance of reflection and grace. It has been a time in which faith has urged us to look deeply within ourselves and to renew our gaze upon the world, so as to discern—even amid the hardships and uncertainties of the present—the signs of a possible future.

Christian hope is neither a passing emotion nor a simple invitation to optimism. It is born from the living experience of God's love, which never abandons humankind, and it is revealed in the ability to believe that goodness, even when it seems hidden, is stronger than any difficulty. It is a force that sustains us in daily life and gives meaning to our efforts, even in moments of weariness or trial.

In the world of work, this hope finds one of its most concrete expressions. Every person who works contributes, with their hands and intelligence, to the building of a more humane social fabric. Work is not only production or profit: it is relationship, responsibility, service. It is the place where human beings collaborate in God's creative work and, at the same time, grow in their own dignity.

The Jubilee has reminded us that no community can progress while leaving the most vulnerable behind. Economic crisis, insecurity, and technological transformations can generate disorientation and fear. But Christian hope invites us to transform these challenges into opportunities for renewed solidarity. Building a just society means recognizing that every worker—whatever their role—carries a unique and unrepeatable value.

Now that Christmas is approaching, our attention turns to the simplest and greatest sign of hope: a Child born in poverty, bringing into the world the light of a boundless love. From that light we can draw the strength to begin again, to resist discouragement, and to rediscover that every act of dedication and care helps make life more humane and more just.

The period following the Jubilee is not an ending but the beginning of a new journey. The hope we have celebrated must become concrete commitment: in political decisions, in the economy, in workplaces, in everyday relationships. It is there that faith is translated into justice, fraternity, and attention to the dignity of every person.

May the coming Christmas remind us that God continues to be born in the hearts of those who offer their time, energy, and love in service to others. In that silent and radiant presence, we find the strength to build a future founded on trust, respect, and solidarity.

Only in this way does hope become life rather than just a word.

Atty. Giuseppe Puglisi-Alibrandi
Secretary General of the Governorate of Vatican City State

The Nativity Scene of the Diocese of Nocera Inferiore-Sarno for the Jubilee 2025

"You Come Down from the Stars"

At the heart of the Jubilee of 2025, the Diocese of Nocera Inferiore–Sarno, in Campania, offers to Pope Leo XIV and to pilgrims from all over the world the Nativity Scene displayed in St. Peter's Square. The work, a symbol of the faith and cultural identity of the Agro nocerino-sarnese area, will be set up between November 7 and early December 2025, following the directives of the Governorate of Vatican City, and will remain on view until mid-January 2026, when dismantling will begin. The initiative is led by Monsignor Giuseppe Giudice, Bishop of Nocera Inferiore–Sarno, who entrusted the design to architect Angelo Santitoro, director of the diocesan Technical Office and his team. The chosen theme — "Tu scendi dale stelle [You Come Down from the Stars]" — pays tribute to Saint Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori, author of the beloved Christmas hymn and a spiritual figure deeply rooted in this land, whose remains rest in the Basilica of Pagani. The project weaves together architecture, art, and spirituality in a network of symbols and references to local history. Three architectural structures dominate the scene, each representing a symbolic site of the region:

- The Early Christian Baptistery of Nocera Superiore, keeper of ancient memories of faith;
- The Helvius Fountain of Sant'Egidio del Monte Albino, surmounted by the coat of arms with the walnut tree — emblem of the ancient University of Nocera dei Pagani;
- A typical courtyard house of the Agro nocerino region, inside which sits Saint Alphonsus at a harpsichord, absorbed in contemplation of the Mystery of the Incarnation as he plays his hymn to the birth of Christ.

Through these images, the Diocese seeks to make visible the spiritual and cultural richness of its land, creating a dialogue between sacred art and popular tradition.

In the foreground, to the right, the Helvius Fountain pours forth a stream of clear water: a woman draws from it, symbolizing the living water that springs from the Mystery of the Incarnation. On the nearby pillar stands the coat of arms with the walnut tree, emblematic of the Nocera dei Pagani territory. From a staircase begins the journey of the figures: a shepherd, depicted with the features of the Servant of God Don Enrico Smaldone, ascends accompanied by two children — representing the educational mission and the centrality of Christ in the formation of humankind.

Next to it rises the courtyard house, a typical structure of the Agro area. A wooden canopy shelters the animals, while a small semicircular balcony softens the façade. The large gray tuff portal of Nocera leads into a warm and intimate domestic setting, dominated by a painting of the Virgin of the Three Crowns of Sarno, crafted by the flower masters of Casatori. Beneath the painting, on a Neapolitan sideboard, sits Saint Alphonsus at the harpsichord, intoning "Tu scendi dale stelle," accompanied by two children listening in awe.

In the room, a pendulum clock stands out — recalling the Saint's habit of reciting a Hail Mary at each chime, with his well-known saying: "Time is worth as much as God is worth." On the upper floor, a woman leans out from the balcony, gazing in wonder at the scene unfolding before her eyes. In the background lies the technical compartment serving both the Nativity and the Christmas tree.

To the left opens the heart of the composition: the Nativity itself, set within a section of the Early Christian Baptistery of Nocera Superiore. Twelve columns with Corinthian capitals support the remains of the dome, painted lapis-lazuli blue and studded with shining stars, from which descend the angels announcing divine glory. At the center, Mary and Joseph adore the Child, flanked by the ox and the donkey. The Magi kneel to offer their gifts, while a shepherdess lays before the Holy Family the fruits of the land: vegetables, artichokes, walnuts, cipollotti nocerini (local spring onions), and San Marzano and Corbarino tomatoes. Two pipers enliven the scene with the sound of the Christmas tradition. Between the house and the baptistery advances another shepherd, inspired by the Servant of God Alfonso Russo, leading a sick man toward the Child — symbol of hope that transfigures suffering. In the distance, a fisherman holds a large anchor and points to the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica, sign of the faith that does not disappoint — Spes non confundit.

Behind the baptistery, an Angel appears to a sleeping shepherd and his young helper, proclaiming that "The Word became flesh." A staircase with a wrought-iron gate that slowly opens represents the passage from the old life to the new life in Christ.

Above all shines the comet star, with a long luminous tail ending in an anchor — a reminder of Bishop Giuseppe Giudice's message: "As pilgrims of hope, we are invited to follow the star of faith that guided the Magi and continues to guide the Church, immersed in humanity and anchored to heaven, builders of the civilization of hope." Every element is the result of complex craftsmanship: wooden panels, metal structures, EPS components, decorative finishes, and special plasters — all designed to withstand weather conditions and ensure safety and stability. The figures, inspired by the 18th-century Neapolitan Nativity tradition, combine classical and modern techniques: the terracotta parts were scanned and reproduced through 3D printing with resin materials, then painted and mounted on mannequins made of wood, straw, and wire, according to tradition. The Helvius Fountain, measuring 160×100×70 cm with a 45 cm deep basin, is decorated with historical motifs; its pillars, over two meters high, alternate stone and red plaster; the wrought-iron gate, 230 cm long, marks the symbolic threshold of salvation. The house, structured in multiple volumes, reaches a height of 5.25 meters and includes a technical compartment; the baptistery features twelve 3.10-meter-high columns and a 3.60-meter dome decorated with shining stars. Lighting is provided by LED spotlights that enhance both the main scene and the interiors, while lanterns and soft lights bring warmth to the setting. Behind the fountain, a lighting system and a pump keep the water in motion — a symbol of life. A sound system harmoniously accompanies the lighting with the melodies of "You Come Down from the Stars," "The Heavens Stopped," and "When the Child Was Born," guiding visitors through an immersive experience of art, faith, and tradition.

Every detail — from the structural components to the decorations, from certified materials to the applied technologies — has been conceived to unite beauty, safety, and spirituality.

The Christmas Tree in St. Peter's Square

From the autonomous province of Bolzano, in Trentino–South Tyrol, comes the roughly 27-meter-tall Norway spruce erected in St. Peter's Square in celebration of the Christmas Season. It was donated through the joint collaboration of the municipalities of Lagundo and Ultimo. The tree originates from the alpine valley of Ultimo, a 40-kilometer-long valley located in the western part of South Tyrol, ending at Lana.
In addition to the spruce chosen for St. Peter's Square, other smaller trees will also be brought to the Vatican, likewise from Lagundo and Ultimo. These decorated trees are displayed in offices and buildings of the Holy See and the Vatican City State.

The Nativity in the Paul VI Hall

Nacimiento Gaudium is the theme chosen by Costa Rica for the Nativity scene in the Paul VI Audience Hall. Created by Costa Rican artist Paula Sáenz Soto, this Crèche aims not only to highlight the Christmas message of peace but also to launch an appeal to the world to protect life from the moment of conception.

The Nativity features a figure of the Virgin in a state of pregnancy and a collection of 28,000 colored ribbons, each representing a life preserved from abortion thanks to the prayers and support provided by Catholic organizations to many mothers in need.

The Crèche measures five meters in length, three meters in height, and two and a half meters in depth. While respecting tradition—with the presence of Joseph, the Magi, the shepherds, and the animals—the work introduces an original element: two different and interchangeable representations of the Virgin.

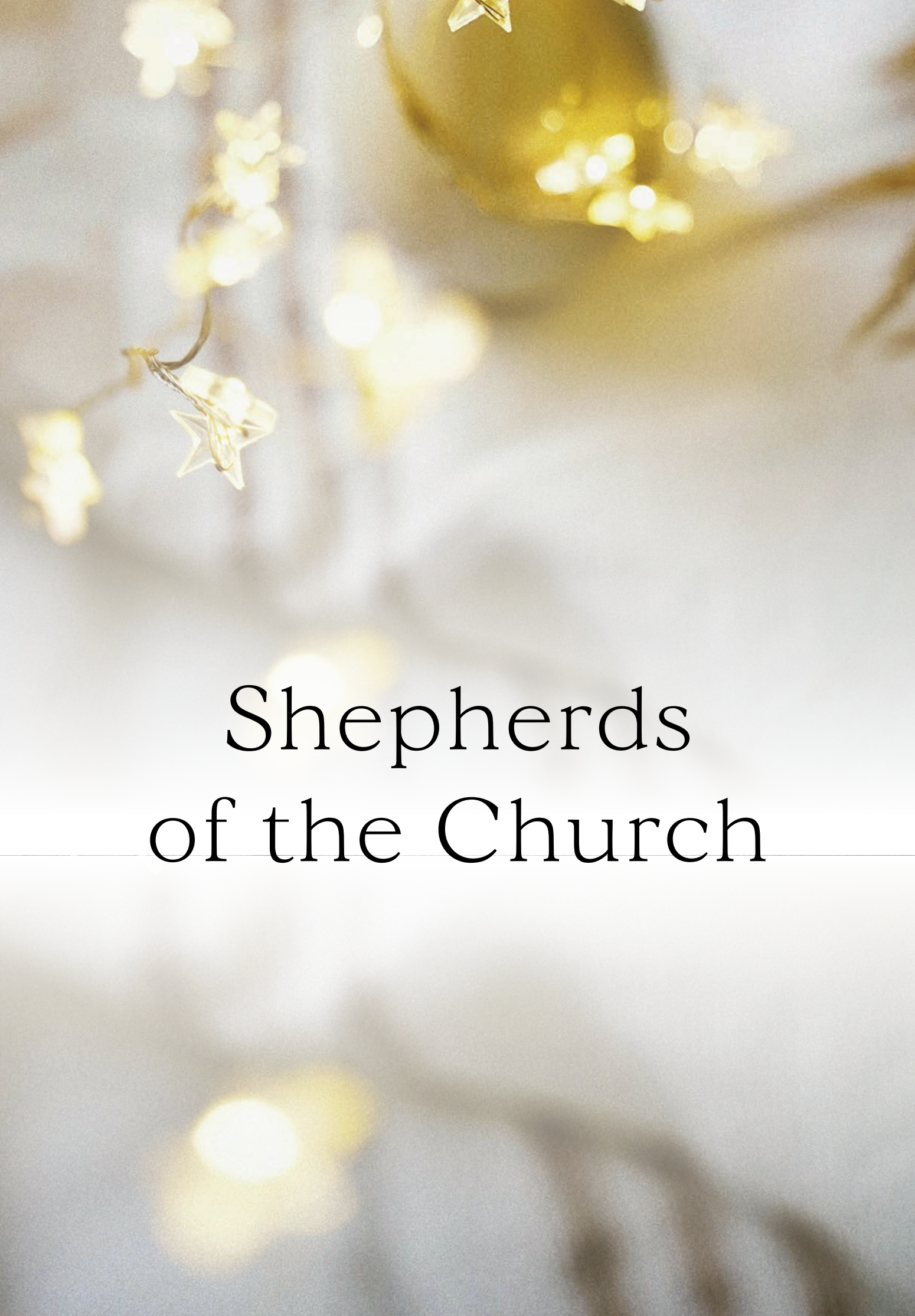
During the Advent season, a statue of Mary pregnant with child—symbol of expectation and hope—will be displayed; on Christmas night, it will be replaced with an image of the Virgin kneeling in adoration of the newborn Child.

Beneath the Nativity scene, among moss and straw, 28,000 ribbons will be placed, a tangible testimony to the lives saved thanks to the "40 Days for Life" initiative and to the assistance provided by the Costa Rican Institute for Women's Integral Health, which supports pregnant women in vulnerable situations.

In the cradle of Jesus, 400 ribbons with prayers and wishes written by the young patients of the National Children's Hospital of San José will also be placed.

The artist's passion for sacred art was born after what she herself describes as a miraculous experience: the birth of her long-desired son. After that event, she left her career in advertising design to devote herself entirely to artistic creation inspired by faith.

The Nacimiento Gaudium Nativity initiative was promoted by the Embassy of Costa Rica to the Holy See.



Shepherds of the Church

The Paraclete becomes the source of a river flowing with grace

Leonardo Cardinal Sandri
Cardinal Bishop of the Title of Saints Blaise and Charles at the Catinari
Vice-Dean of the College of Cardinals

The Jubilee is drawing to its close; soon the Holy Doors of the Papal Basilicas will be shut — the last being that of Saint Peter's, behind which the bricks and plaster will be placed to seal it until 2033. Yet our hearts will not be closed, for they have had the chance to be immersed in the ocean of the Father's mercy, which the Pesach of Jesus has poured open upon the world.

In the Gospel of John we read these words: "Whoever believes in me, as scripture says, 'rivers of living water will flow from within him'" (Jn 7:38). This image — which the text itself links to the gift of the Spirit — risks being understood as mere information, a kind of report, rather than in its real consequence: the event that unfolds in the fulfillment of that promise of Jesus. The Paraclete who has been given to us becomes the source of a river of grace that transforms both the one who receives it and the one who encounters it.

As I think back on my fifteen years as Prefect of the Dicastery for the Eastern Churches, several images return vividly to my mind and heart, making me aware of how true and continually fulfilled the promise of Jesus is. I think first of my initial visit to Iraq, in December 2012, on the occasion of the reconsecration of the Syriac-Catholic Cathedral of Baghdad. The church had been desecrated on October 31, 2010 — only a few days after the conclusion of the Special Synod for the Middle East — when nearly sixty people, including several children, were killed as they gathered in prayer.

The Christian rite naturally provides for a new dedication of a sacred place violated by the fury of human terror; yet in truth, the bloodshed by those witnesses was worth far more than any anointing with holy myron (chrism), fragrance of incense or light of candles. Their bodies themselves had become luminous, reflecting the light of the Lamb. The hope of God reached that community also through the martyrdom of those brothers and sisters: the Amen we so often repeat in the liturgy had been pronounced by them with their lives, not only with their lips.

Still in Iraq, during a stop in Kirkuk — where the present Chaldean Patriarch Raphael Sako was then Archbishop — we were celebrating the Divine Liturgy and about to pray the Our Father when we heard the blast of what later proved to be seven car bombs exploding across the city. Instinctively, one might have expected the celebration to stop and everyone to seek shelter, yet when I looked into the eyes of

the faithful gathered there, they did not move an inch. Instead, with eyes shining even brighter and voices strong, they began to sing the Lord's Prayer in Sureth, the Aramaic language very close to that spoken by Jesus.

I began to understand more deeply how the "blessed hope," which we perhaps repeat too mechanically in the liturgy, can truly enter into the real life of each of us and of our communities — communities that become pilgrims of hope not only by coming to Rome and passing through the Holy Doors, but by living and celebrating their faith in humanly difficult contexts.

A third and final image of hope comes from one of my many visits to Lebanon, a country Pope Francis chose to visit among the first at the beginning of his pontificate. It was January 2014, and Lebanon had already begun to receive thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing from the conflict — a conflict which only in recent months seems to have given way to a new phase for the people of Damascus. After crossing the entire Beqaa Valley, we arrived at a camp organized by the AVSI Association [Associazione Volontari per il Servizio Internazionale]. Together with the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, and the AVSI staff, we simply began to walk among the tents in the mud.

At one point, a man took my hand and led me to the tent where his family was staying. He brought out his three children, all blind because of an untreated illness at birth, and motioned for me to place my hand upon their heads. He was Muslim, yet he simply asked me to bless his children with a gesture.

One cannot help but recall what Pope Francis wrote in the Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee: "All people hope. In the heart of every person lies hope, as the desire and expectation of good, even without knowing what tomorrow will bring." There is a dimension of the pilgrimage of hope that embraces every member of the human family, especially when faced with grave trials — like that Syrian family I met in the refugee camp. May each of us have the humility — as in so many episodes of the Gospel — and the courage to ask for help, to acknowledge our need to be under God's protection, to let go of our illusion of self-sufficiency.

At the same time, may we discover the grace of being, for one another, instruments of the Father's blessing. The Eastern Churches — which have safeguarded and preserved the gift of faith amid war, violence and persecution, and now face the challenge of diaspora — continue to be a sign of blessing for our Western contexts, at times weary or turned inward, while also asking that we remain close to them so that hope may not fade.

Bow Before the Beauty and Love of God

In the Vatican

Arthur Cardinal Roche
Prefect of the Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacramentsi

Every time we listen to the story of Christmas, we enter a world that does not belong to the famous or the wealthy, but to the hidden and the needy. We come face to face with perspectives on life that we do not often find on the front pages of our daily newspapers or on television.

The evangelists who wrote the story of Jesus' birth draw our attention away from the centers of power of their time to a small town—Bethlehem—nestled among the hills of Judea. They shift our focus from the world of Emperor Caesar and King Herod to a homeless young couple, somewhat frightened and in great need, and to others like the shepherds, whose names we do not even know. As we move deeper into this story, we find ourselves contemplating a fragile newborn baby, wrapped like a small parcel and laid in a manger borrowed from the animals of the stable. This is the beginning of a New Testament—an unbreakable and visible covenant of God's solidarity with His people.

What a contrast, if we compare it with the beginning of the Old Testament! There we see another couple—Adam and Eve, the first human beings created by God—reaching for great prizes and lofty titles. We hear the serpent whispering in their ears: Go on, don't be afraid, you too will be like gods, having all knowledge and control over your lives! It was a tempting offer, and Adam and his wife stretched out their hands to grasp what belonged only to God—but they fell back down again to the hard reality, to the earth from which they had been made.

Today, if you and I were to visit the church built over the place where our Lord was born in Bethlehem, we would have to crouch down, to bow, in order to enter that great basilica through a small doorway. The once-grand triumphal entrance has long been blocked to prevent bandits on horseback—and in more recent times, military tanks—from entering.

The feast of Christmas invites each of us to step down from our pedestal, to bow low, to turn our attention away from the world's centers of power and wealth, and to discover—in the fragile child lying in a manger—the God who lives among us. The high positions we sometimes occupy in life are often illusory and fragile, devoid of honesty

and humility.

What a great opportunity was lost during the First World War—and how differently things might have gone—when, on Christmas Eve of 1914, simple British and German soldiers laid down their weapons, ignoring their generals' orders, and in the no man's land between their opposing trenches, sang together, shared cigarettes and photographs of loved ones, and even played football together. The small and important things of life united those whom the politics of power and control had divided. It could have been the perfect moment to end all hostilities—but it did not happen, because—as with all humanity—we are prone to pride and to reaching for what is beyond our grasp, making life more complicated.

Christmas reminds us never to forget the need to bow before the beauty and love of God. Our faith tells us that through baptism, God dwells deep within each of us. We may not be the most perfect homes in which to dwell, but we need not fear our poverty or our need, for Jesus knows these humble surroundings all too well and is happy to make His home deep within us.

The Good News is that Christ's message has much to offer our world. You and I, like the shepherds of Bethlehem, may come and go from the stage of this world; our names may never be known to future generations or to anyone else. But God knows our names. And even if our lives are poor, let us pray that we may not be like the innkeeper who found no room for the Lord—neither in his soul nor in his home.

May the love of God, in this fragile Child born this night, be born anew today in our fragile lives. And may the God of hope, who fills us with all joy and peace in faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, be with us all! (cf. Rom 15:13).

Christmas liturgy reassures us that the "light" is there

In the Vatican

Marcello Cardinal Semeraro
Prefect of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints

"This will be a sign for you: you will find a child" (Lk 2:12). These are the words proclaimed on Christmas night. Once addressed to the shepherds, today they reach us as well. To discover God's presence among us, we do not need to seek signs of power, strength or wealth. To find the One of whom nothing greater can be conceived, we must allow ourselves to be guided by the signs of smallness: a child! In Jesus, God lowered Himself so that we might reach Him; His greatness was entirely concentrated in a child so that we might embrace Him… "Therefore," urged St. Bonaventure in his Lignum vitae, "embrace now, my soul, that divine crib, press your lips to the feet of that Child, kiss them both…". He who will return at the end of time as Judge now comes in the sign of fragility: this means that we find the Lord when we draw near to a person who needs care, comfort, lifting up… We find Him because He is already there. There is no need to go anywhere else, for He has come "to bring good news to the afflicted, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners" (Is 61:1).

In the Mass during the Night we also hear: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who lived in the land of gloom a light has shone" (Is 9:2). The Prophet describes the condition of a people using the image of wandering in a shadowy land. In our current human condition, we hardly know whether it is truer to speak of walking (for

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the human being is, in his deepest constitution, a homo viator) or of being immersed in darkness. In this latter condition, no one is able to move easily: we are not "bats" capable of orienting themselves in absolute darkness. When this happens to us, we grope about, afraid of striking some obstacle and fearful of hurting ourselves—perhaps irreparably.

Today, human beings walk a great deal… Never before have we moved as quickly as now. In our globalized world, distances matter very little. We are all in motion, even when we remain glued to our chairs. We flip from one TV channel to another, leaving one space and entering another; through the internet we make connections and then break them. We do not truly know whether we are tourists or wanderers, visitors or voyeurs… In our immobilized speed, we risk having no friendships, no stable relationships—only connections. In moments, our computers can place us anywhere; we have fewer and fewer reasons to remain in one place rather than another, and in the end we no longer have a place where we truly feel at home. Having become like extraterritorials, we ask ourselves: yes, we are walking, but toward where? Questions like these cast great darkness into the human heart. Some teachers have told us that such questions are useless, or at best questions to which no certain answer can be given. We must therefore be content with lightness, with fluidity… From this comes even an educational approach that teaches our children and young people to live according to what is temporary and fleeting.

Once, speaking to prisoners in a jail, Pope Francis told them that when entering a tunnel, the real problem is not whether there is darkness, but whether one can see the light at the end—the way out. All Christmas liturgy reassures us that the "light" is there. In its Christmas prayer, the Church proclaims: "This night is radiant with the brightness of Christ, the true light of the world." This light is not a spotlight that blinds in the night and brings death, but a lamp shining in a dark place. This is enough for us.

We can therefore pray with the words of St. John Henry Newman, declared Doctor of the Church last November 1 by Pope Leo XIV; words he wrote in a moment of confusion and illness. I quote them as the Pope recalled and commented on them in his Homily: "The reference to the darkness surrounding us recalls one of St. John Henry's best-known texts, the hymn 'Lead, kindly light.' In that beautiful prayer, we realize we are far from home, that our feet are unsteady, that we cannot clearly decipher the horizon. But none of this stops us, because we have found the Guide: 'Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom, lead Thou me on! – Lead, kindly Light. The night is dark and I am far from home. Lead Thou me on!'"

The announcement of hope

In the Vatican

Lazarus Cardinal You Heung-sik
Prefect of the Dicastery for the Clergy

It is said that every time a child is born, it means that God has not yet grown weary of humankind. Every birth is a breath of hope that fills the world. Life continues, stronger than every adversity. If this is true for every child born into the world, what must it mean when God Himself becomes a child?
During Advent, the liturgical season that prepares us for Christmas, we hear again the words of Isaiah: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!" (Isaiah 63:19). The prophet gives voice to the conscious or hidden longing of every human heart. The sin of Adam seemed to have closed the heavens forever. How many prayers, how many desires rising up from our humanity seem to crash against a thick, impenetrable barrier that separates us from heaven. Unheard. "I cry to you, but you do not answer me" (Job 30:20); "My God, I call by day, but you do not answer;
by night, but I have no relief" (Psalm 22:3).

How often we are overcome by a sense of powerlessness before life's small or great trials. Can one still hope in the face of endless wars and conflicts? Of hatred and bitterness that poison our society? Of glaring injustices, of the scandalous, abysmal divide between rich and poor, of forced and tragic human migrations? A cry of helplessness rises even from the everyday struggles of life—never small for those who endure them: injustice at work, family discord, loneliness, illness, the death of a loved one… But is there anyone who listens, who can come to our aid in our weakness? Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down, that you would hear our cry! And behold, in answer to this heartfelt plea, comes a message of hope:
"Mercy and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss. Truth shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven... The earth will yield its increase."
The heavens open to let mercy and justice descend: God's love becomes once again present among us. He loved the world so much that He finally sent His Son. God's love becomes living, tangible—it takes on flesh: Jesus is born upon our earth, Em-

manuel, God-with-us. God is no longer distant, inaccessible, hidden: He walks once again among us, as in the beginning, when He came down into the garden of Eden to dwell with man and woman. God is born like every child—naked, fragile, helpless, in need of everything. He truly became one of us. He became weak with us, like us, to give us His strength. He became poor to make us rich. He became powerless—He, the Almighty—to work within us. He became cold to ignite His fire. He seemed to become useless, as we sometimes feel ourselves, in order to be the one thing truly necessary. He became a curse for us, to redeem us from every curse (cf. Gal 3:10). Crucified in weakness, He lives by the power of God. So we too, weak in Him, shall live with Him by the power of God (cf. 2 Cor 13:4).

This Child restores our hope: we are no longer alone—God is with us! He is our peace (cf. Eph 2:14–18). He brings peace between us and God by breaking down the barrier that separates heaven and earth—sin. He bore our sins in His body on the wood of the Cross, so that we might live in righteousness (cf. 1 Pt 2:24), and so that we might not die in our sins (cf. 2 Cor 5:21). He brings peace between peoples, between one person and another, for on the Cross He took upon Himself every division and destroyed all enmity.

He has completed His work, leaving it to us to continue and make it present in our time. Indeed, in coming down from heaven, He needs a land ready to receive Him and to let Him take root: "Truth shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven... The earth will yield its fruit."

The first good, fertile soil in which the seed of the Word became flesh, took a body, and became a child, was the Virgin Mary. Her openness and receptivity were total, without hesitation: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38).

Can we too become, like Mary, good soil—free of stones and thorns—that receives the Word and allows it to bear fruit (cf. Mk 4:1–9)? Can we too be mothers of the Word and bring Him to the world? Yes, Jesus said so: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it" (Lk 8:21). By living the Word of God, we are called, like Mary, to bring Jesus to birth in every environment of our lives, so that He may continue to be the hope of the world.

Dialogue is a Path of Hope

In the Vatican

George Jacob Cardinal Koovakad
Prefect of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue

As the Jubilee of Hope draws to a close, Christmas comes to us as a quiet yet powerful invitation not to cease believing and hoping. After a year in which so many have passed through the "holy doors," carrying in their hearts questions, struggles, and desires, we understand that hope is not a fragile or naïve sentiment: it is founded on the certainty that God continues to walk beside us, even when the world seems to have lost the path of peace, building a future on "rearmament" and reshaping the world through a war-driven economy.

In various parts of the world, we are living days marked by wars and violence, by wounds that affect peoples, entire families and individuals—especially the most vulnerable, such as children and the elderly. In fact, in a globalized world these tragedies touch everyone. Faced with so much suffering and pain, the contemplation of the Nativity scene leads us to see it not as a merely identity-based symbol, for it calls us back to the essential: a God who comes to us through humble gestures, who chooses to reveal Himself in smallness, fragility, simplicity, and in the poverty of a "migrant" family that crossed borders seeking safety as they fled from a persecutor. God does not come with the power of the mighty, but with the disarming strength of love. It is there, in a cave, that hope becomes visible: a Child is born and cries, and in that cry heaven opens upon the earth, uniting the divine with the human.

The celebration of Christmas reminds us that God has not grown tired of humanity. Even when we lose ourselves—as happens when we are at war, or when violence and despair assail us—He continues to come among us. His presence does not erase the evil wrought by the insatiable desire for power and wealth, but it teaches us not to let ourselves be overcome by it. Christian hope is not a consoling dream but a fire that urges us to build, to forgive, to begin again.

In particular, as Pope Francis reminded us in the recent Apostolic Exhortation Dilexi te, "the heart of the Church, by its very nature, is in solidarity with those who are poor, excluded, and marginalized, with those who are considered 'discarded' by society. The poor are at the very center of the Church, because it is from 'faith in Christ who became poor and who is always close to the poor and the excluded [that] the concern for the integral development of the most abandoned in society' derives."

And thus it is there that hope is nourished and lived, not only according to a merely human perspective or quality: "toward the poor, in fact, God shows a special love. To them first of all is directed the word of hope and liberation of the Lord, and therefore, even in a condition of poverty or weakness, no one should feel abandoned. And the Church, if it wishes to be Christ's, must be the Church of the Beatitudes, a Church that makes room for the little ones and walks in poverty with the poor, a place where the poor have a privileged position (cf. Jas 2:2–4)."

But hope—as a spiritual gift and as a message—is offered to all; it is for believers and non-believers alike, for Christians and for followers of other religious traditions. It is a gift that comes from Christ, from God-with-us, a mystery of salvation for all. During this jubilee year, we have had special opportunities for interreligious encounter—special because the Jubilee has also been a call to reflect interreligiously on the theme of hope, resulting in a great human and spiritual enrichment expressed in various contexts and settings. Ultimately, the teaching of the Declaration Nostra Aetate of the Second Vatican Council, sixty years after its promulgation, has been put into practice, and we enjoy its fruits—even if not yet fully mature, they are surely significant and important. Dialogue, in fact, is a path of hope that can contribute to peace, freedom and integral development among peoples. Dialogue does not remain on a theoretical level; when carried into practice, it can lead to a transformation even of religious experience itself. It is therefore a path of hope in which we experience our incompleteness together, trusting that God will bring the work to completion.

At the conclusion of this jubilee year, we carry with us the grace of this journey: the certainty that every small act of goodness, every word of peace, every choice of welcome is part of a new world that God is already bringing forth. Christmas asks us to be sowers of this concrete hope—hope that does not give up and does not hide.

May the light born in Bethlehem continue to illuminate our nights and give new courage to weary hearts. For only those who continue to hope can truly build peace.

Christmas in Québec and in Colombia

In the Vatican

Marc Cardinal Ouellet
Prefect Emeritus of the Congregation for Bishops and President Emeritus of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America

"God More Wonderful Than Dreams" is a collection of some messages I addressed to the faithful of Québec when I arrived as Archbishop in January 2003. Anne Sigier, the publisher, had found this title, which perfectly captures the wonder of faith that I was then seeking to rekindle in the hearts of my people. In truth, this expression sums up the experience of faith from my childhood and throughout my entire life, which is bound to the mysteries of Christmas and Easter. Before discerning my priestly vocation and becoming captivated by theology, I had been formed within a large farming family who gave me unforgettable Christmases in my small village in northwestern Québec. As far back as my childhood memories reach, I can still hear the bells of the horse-drawn sleigh that carried us to church for Midnight Mass at twenty degrees below zero. For us, Christmas means winter, snow, the icy air that burns the lungs, but also the warmth of a glowing hearth and of a shared faith.
The liturgy began with the famous Minuit, chrétiens by Adolphe Adam, which even today moves me deeply whenever I hear it sung in different languages. It was the time of the three Masses, well before the Council, during which numerous hymns drew the congregation into a praise that made a long divine service feel short. Once back home, the celebration began: the réveillon with meat pie or turkey, the gifts at the foot of the decorated tree, the singing, and the father's blessing reserved for New Year's Day. All these memories are imbued with grace and poetry for me; they remain the unchanging foundation of my Christian conscience. I still live from them today, after the journeys of my life that have taken me from Québec to Bogotá and from Montréal to Rome, according to the providential twists of my missionary vocation.
During my mission, my first Christmas away from home was in Colombia. No snow and no Christmas pie, but a warm and fraternal human closeness toward those far from their families; I learned other songs in Spanish which cannot equal the emotions of my childhood, yet which still joyfully sing the mystery of the Child Jesus. Christmas there is prepared beginning on the eve of the Immaculate Conception, when the entire country lights up with candles and songs to the Mother of God. Then comes the Advent Novena, celebrated in procession from one Nativity scene to another, from neighborhood to neighborhood, until reaching the church. It is a popular Christmas among the poor, where people enjoy seasonal fritters, natilla—a sweet custard made with coconut milk—and sugarcane water proudly called "the champagne of the poor."

How many memories I have of Christmas missions in the heights of the Andean cordillera, bringing the sacraments to small communities visited by the priest only once a year. I am moved to have personally experienced the ministry that Pope Leo XIV carried out for so long as an Augustinian missionary in Peru. For me, it was a school of courage and abandonment to Providence, for we traveled on steep roads overlooking deep ravines; and sometimes the drivers of those rudimentary, overcrowded buses were a little too fond of brandy! Blessed be God for this missionary experience that allowed me to discover the mystery of Christmas from the viewpoint of the poorest, from the peripheries so loved by the dear and much-missed Pope Francis.

Men and women of our time remain captivated by the mystery of Christmas despite the commercial clamor that steals from us the silent love before the Nativity scene: Mary and Joseph contemplating the Child adored by the shepherds of Bethlehem and the Magi from the East. How can we truly sing with ordinary words this most holy mystery that Sacred Scripture itself narrates with the song of Angels? We need poets who, in a few stanzas, immortalize the emotion of their encounter with the eternal Child who became our brother.

On December 25, 1886, a disillusioned young nonbeliever went to Notre-Dame de Paris to attend the Christmas services. He recounts that during Vespers, as he listened to the Magnificat sung by the students of the minor seminary of Saint-Nicolas du Chardonnet, "the event occurred that has influenced my whole life. In an instant my heart was touched, and I believed. I had suddenly felt the wrenching sensation of innocence, of the eternal childhood of God, an ineffable revelation." The poet Paul Claudel dedicated his writer's life to bearing witness to this moving mystery. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, Doctor of the Church, teaches us—one hundred years after her canonization—to contemplate the Nativity with the eyes of a child, who believes that God who comes to dwell among us is our Savior, a God more wonderful than dreams.

Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to people whom He loves!

Yes, Prince of Peace, come to grace us and bless us, come to protect our land from the scourges that devastate it!

Merry Christmas 2025 and Happy New Year 2026!

A Pilgrimage of Proximity

In the Vatican

Fernando Cardinal Filoni
Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, Prefect Emeritus of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Gran Chancellor Emeritus of the Pontifical Urbaniana University

What can we say today about the Land of Jesus, at the close of this Jubilee Christmas, having witnessed the suffering of so many people in Israel, Gaza, and Palestine?
Our thoughts turn to Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jerusalem—the places where Jesus was born, lived, and died. For some time now, they have been deprived of the pilgrimages that have always characterized them, and to the few visitors of today they appear empty, due to the senseless and tragic violence that has shaken the region over the past two years. The parish priest of Gaza told me about the dramatic poverty in which people live daily; and yet the same is true of Bethlehem and other parishes where hundreds of Christian families, deprived of work, could not survive without the help provided by the Patriarchate, the Custody, and organizations such as Caritas. Since ancient times, becoming a pilgrim in the Holy Land has meant returning to the origins of the Christian faith—almost a touching, a seeing, as Saint Francis of Assisi said, of the places where one can feel the Lord's presence, hear His word, and touch the hem of His garment like the woman with the hemorrhage, to be healed of our unbelief. For this reason, Saint Francis wanted his friars, in humility and peace, to dwell there, guarding the places of Christian memory. And one day, on Mount La Verna, the Crucified rewarded him with the gift of His stigmata. To make oneself a pilgrim today still means believing that there is hope in those regions. We may not be the architects of peace, but perhaps we can be humble workers, drawing near in thought, in prayer,

and in support of those who no longer have a home, those who have lost loved ones, children without schools, the sick without care, those without work who can no longer imagine a dignified life for themselves and their families. Becoming pilgrims in the Holy Land is the invitation repeatedly extended by the Latin Patriarch, and taken up by the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem—not only among its members, but also, why not, among those who work generously and faithfully within the Governorate. I would like to add that it would be wonderful if many could say: Let us also go to Jerusalem! Without fear. A bit like the Holy Family went there from Nazareth for Passover, bringing the child Jesus with them. To make oneself a pilgrim is a beautiful gesture of concrete solidarity, and at the same time to pray in the very places where the mystery of the Lord's Passion, Death and Resurrection was fulfilled; but also in Bethlehem, where God's incarnation was manifested in the reality of a small child; or in Nazareth, in the humble place where Mary said her "Yes" to God and with Joseph and Jesus lived the hidden thirty years of her Son, who was both hers and God's.

When Paul VI visited there in January 1964, he said that it was like - as simple children - going to the school of the Holy Family to learn the true science of life and the higher wisdom of divine truth. And finally, to become pilgrims in that Galilee where Jesus the Master taught, drew the crowds, multiplied the loaves and fishes, and entrusted Peter with the keys of the Kingdom. I like to think that from the heart of the Vatican City State—from the Governorate—one might tell how beautiful it was to have become pilgrims in the Holy Land after 2025, already looking ahead to 2033, the Year of Redemption. In short, a movement of hope and renewal in the spirit, for becoming pilgrims in the land of Christ is like undertaking a course of itinerant spiritual exercises. I also like to think of a charity not of almsgiving but of closeness; no different from the nearness of the Good Samaritan, who, coming down from Jerusalem to Jericho, bends over the unfortunate man abandoned on the roadside; or like that received by the two disciples walking the road to Emmaus, disheartened by the inglorious end of the Master on the cross, who meet Him along the way and recognize Him in the breaking of the bread, receiving faith as a gift.

As Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre—entrusted by the Blessed Pope Pius IX (in 1847) with supporting the "Mother Church" of Jerusalem and continuing that mission—I wish, through this special issue of the Governorate's magazine, to extend my encouragement for a pilgrimage of proximity, confident of the good which that closeness will bring to each of you, to the whole Church, and to the Holy Land.

What is Christmas?

In the Vatican

Angelo Cardinal Comastri
Vicar General Emeritus of His Holiness for Vatican City

Franz Werfel, an Austrian writer who died in 1945, once said: "I know only one decisive question: WHO IS JESUS? Everything depends on the answer to this question."
And here is the wonderful answer:
Jesus is God who revealed Himself, who had mercy on lost humanity, who became man and made Himself kin to every human being — good or bad, saint or sinner!
Why? Because He came to reach out His hand and lift us out of evil, which is the only cause of unhappiness. With Jesus, it is possible to become Saint Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Saint John Paul II, Carlo Acutis, and Pier Giorgio Frassati.
Is this good news credible? Does faith in Jesus have a solid foundation?
Observe this: this Child split history in two — even though He entered quietly, "born in a stable." Humanly speaking, how is that possible?
Born in a stable, He provoked the jealousy of a palace. But it was the stable that triumphed, not the palace. Humanly speaking, that is paradoxical! But in Jesus, everything is paradoxical.
For the first time in history, He proclaimed that before God, all human beings are equal, all possess the same dignity — starting with children, the smallest, even slaves. A revolutionary message for the society of then and now! He declared that violence is not the force that ca n change the world. The force that can change the world is LOVE — disarmed and disarming goodness. Paradoxical!
He gave His disciples an astonishing commandment:
"Love one another as I have loved you… that is, to the point of giving your life."
The Christian heroes are the martyrs (those who give their lives), not the kamikazes (those who take the lives of others).
Jesus placed into the world the premise for condemning all violence and all war.

He said:
"Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors, that you may be children of your Father in heaven, who makes His sun rise on the good and the bad."
The world's awareness of peace entered history with Jesus.
Jesus chose as His collaborators simple, uneducated, unprepared men and sent them into the world for an adventure beyond their strength, carrying a countercultural message.
Once again — paradoxical!
And these men sowed the Gospel with their blood.
One of them betrayed Him, one (their leader) denied Him, and the others fled.
And Jesus allowed Himself to be nailed to a cross — the punishment of slaves.
If He had been only a man, everything would have ended on Calvary.
But instead, it was the beginning of everything!
Once again — paradoxical!
After Calvary, Jesus rose and became the protagonist of history.
Why?
Because He is God made man!
Listen to what some famous figures have said about Jesus:
Friedrich Nietzsche, sworn enemy of Jesus, once admitted:
"Jesus flew higher than anyone else."
Ernest Renan, who also fiercely attacked Christianity and the Church, called Jesus
"an exceptional person," and added:

"Jesus will never be surpassed. His worship will forever be renewed; His story will draw endless tears; His sufferings will move the noblest hearts; every century will proclaim that among the sons of men there has never been one greater than Jesus."
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, also an enemy of Christianity, wrote:
"I confess that the holiness of the Gospel speaks to my heart. Look at the books of the philosophers, with all their pomp! How small they are compared with the Gospel."
And listen to what a young Karl Marx once wrote:
"Union with Christ brings inner elevation, comfort in suffering, serene certainty, and a heart open to love of neighbor. Union with Christ brings joy — a joy that uplifts and makes life more beautiful."
Immanuel Kant declared:
"The Gospel (that is, Jesus) is the source of all our civilization."
And Benedetto Croce exclaimed:
"The Gospel is the only true revolution in history."
Napoleon, on the island of Saint Helena, rediscovered faith and said:
"Between Christ and the founders of other religions there is an abyss: CHRIST IS UNIQUE."
Why? Once again, the answer: because He is the Son of God made man.
Tiziano Terzani, contemporary journalist and writer, keenly observed:
"There is no doubt that in recent centuries we have made enormous progress. We have learned to fly like birds, to swim underwater like fish, to travel to the Moon and send probes to Mars.
And yet, with all this progress, we are not at peace with ourselves or with the world around us. Indeed, man has never been so spiritually poor as since he became so materially rich."
What is missing in today's world?
It is Jesus — the only Light that illuminates the path of our life.
Let us draw the consequence and take Holy Christmas seriously!
We all have much to learn!
And let us remember: when the Jubilee ends, the presence of Jesus does not end.
He is our Hope — the Hope that does not die and cannot die!può morire!

The Hope That Dwells in Christmas

In the Vatican

Fernando Cardinal Vérgez Alzaga
President Emeritus of the Governorate of the Vatican City State

Every year, Christmas presents itself as a time of light and renewal. It is the moment when the history of humanity once again meets the face of God, who chooses to share our fragility. In that Child born in the poverty of Bethlehem, a message of trust is revealed that echoes through the centuries: despite everything, it is worth believing in goodness.

The recent Jubilee of Hope has invited us precisely to this—to rediscover that hope is not an abstract word, but a way of living, a gaze capable of recognizing God's presence even in the most ordinary days. Now that the jubilee journey has come to an end, the question becomes: how can we bring that hope into the places where we spend much of our lives, such as our workplaces within the Governorate?

Work, with all its challenges, can easily become arid ground. Pressures, worries, and the strain of balancing everything can threaten to suffocate trust. Yet the Gospel teaches us that hope blossoms precisely where it seems most difficult. It is born from the awareness that every gesture, even the humblest one, has value in God's eyes. Every task carried out with love and dedication becomes a way of participating in His plan of salvation.

In this sense, Christian hope is not naïve optimism, but the certainty that goodness is stronger than disillusionment and resignation. It is a strength that renews relationships, inspires the pursuit of justice, and transforms competition into collaboration. The conclusion of the Jubilee must not be seen as an endpoint, but as an invitation to let what we have celebrated take root in daily life.

A workplace community that lives by hope is one that knows how to value people, to listen, to forgive and to encourage. It is a community that does not abandon the weakest, that chooses to place human dignity before profit. In this context, Christmas becomes a school of life. It reminds us that God's presence is not revealed only in churches or liturgies, but also in office corridors, workshops and construction sites. Wherever a colleague extends a helping hand, wherever a group works together in unity—there the God of Hope continues to be born.

The message of Bethlehem does not end with the holidays. It is an ongoing promise: God walks with us, even amid deadlines, meetings, and fatigue.

Let us therefore live this Christmas as an opportunity to renew the way we look at work and at others, recognizing in every encounter a fragment of the mystery of the Incarnation. This is what Christian hope truly is: the certainty that, even when the world seems uncertain, the light of God never goes out. And if we carry that light with us into our workplaces, it can truly change everything.

Savior of the Urbe

In the Vatican

Enrico Cardinal Feroci
Rector

The beautiful expression of Saint John Paul II, who called the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Divine Love the Virgin Mary's "country home", invites us to explore what Mary's presence on this hill in the Roman countryside has meant through the centuries for generations of Romans.

The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Divine Love [Divino Amore] stands on a lovely green hill in the Roman countryside, at the 12th kilometer of the Via Ardeatina. The church that houses the fresco was built in 1744, dedicated on May 31 of the Holy Year 1750, and is located within the heart of the ancient castle dating back to the 14th century, then called Castrum Leonis, owned by the Savelli family. On one of the towers was painted the fresco that we now venerate in the Sanctuary.

That iconic image, placed on the outer walls—before the eyes of those who came up from southern Lazio toward Rome, so that they might see it and remember its meaning—raises many questions. The work dates back to the early 14th century. Historians have conducted investigations and proposed several interpretations. One of these, the most compelling, has been supported by research. At that time, Rome had only 25,000 inhabitants. The Pope was living in Avignon, and powerful families were struggling for control of the territory. The violence had become so great that a desire arose to look one another in the eye and stop the fighting.

In 1337 (the document, still accessible, is kept in the Municipality of Subiaco), the warring families gathered in Velletri—along with the leading figures of southern Lazio—and signed a document that formally declared peace among the rival families. To demonstrate the sincerity of this reconciliation, they placed on the tower of the Savelli castle, along the road, a fresco-icon bearing the religious emblems of each of the families involved. On one side were the Savelli. The central image depicts the Madonna and Child—an icon of the family kept in the church of Santa Francesca Romana (with the Child on the right)—and on the other, the Caetani family (the angels recall the Caetani, vassals of the Angevins). Above, one sees the dove—the same that, in the Bible, symbolizes peace between heaven and earth. It was an ex-voto to commemorate the peace achieved.

The image of the Madonna remained there over the centuries, solitary on the southern tower of the castle. Before it, shepherds and charcoal burners would stop at certain times of the year, on

their way to Rome, to recite the Rosary. Until, in 1740, a traveler who had lost his way and was attacked by a pack of ferocious dogs looked up at the image and cried out, "Grace, Madonna!"—and immediately peace was restored between man and beasts. The story spread quickly, sparking an extraordinary popular devotion. The Sanctuary was built and in it the Madonna's image was placed for veneration and has since been called "Our Lady of Divine Love."

Centuries of fervor and neglect followed. In 1931, Don Umberto Terenzi was assigned to the Sanctuary, reviving its spiritual life. It is worth recalling June 4, 1944. The Holy Image of Our Lady of Divine Love had been brought into the city because of the approaching dangers of war. L'Osservatore Romano wrote: "Dozens of thousands gathered in prayer for the Pope, for Italy, for Rome, for peace… It was the Marian triumph of love, reaching an unparalleled grandeur for the number of pilgrims and their devotion—a simple, heartfelt, fervent devotion, with invocations that moved hearts and stirred tender emotion: 'Long live, long live, always live—Thank you, Our Lady!'"

Among all the pilgrims, the most august was the Pope himself—the Roman Pope. On June 11, Pius XII went to the church of St. Ignatius to solemnly give thanks to her who is proclaimed the "Savior of the City." (L'Osservatore Romano, June 12–13, 1944). Indeed, on June 4, 1944—"At the very moment," as the periodical Amici di Don Orione wrote, "when the Pope had the vow of the citizens proclaimed in the church of St. Ignatius, before the miraculous image of Our Lady of Divine Love—Mater Pulchrae Dilectionis, so dear to our hearts—while Monsignor Gilla Gremigni read aloud from the pulpit, in a moved and solemn voice, the formula of the vow, every danger vanished as if by enchantment, and Rome, over which, in the serene brightness of the sky, the protective mantle of the Virgin seemed to spread, was—against all hope—saved!"

And peace came then. Even today, with faith, we stand before Mary's face and say: "Peace, peace, peace for a world that has lost its understanding."

We believe—as Pope Leo reminded us—that prayer can change the history of nations. Places of prayer must be tents of encounter, sanctuaries of reconciliation, oases of peace.

The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Divine Love wishes to be, above all, an oasis of peace and of God's presence—just as it has been through the centuries.

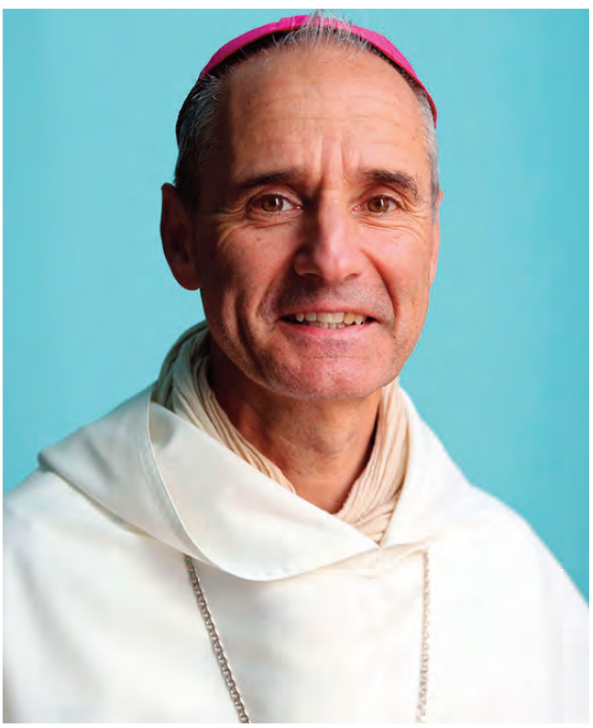
Enrico Cardinal Feroci
Rector of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Divine Love (Rome)

ALGERIA: ARCHDIOCESE OF ALGIERS

The little flame of Christmas!

Jean-Paul Cardinal Vesco, OP
Archbishop of Algiers

Christmas, the craziest story in human history, is par excellence the feast of childhood, the celebration that brings us back to our own childhood. Christmas is a festive atmosphere in the heart of winter—its colors, scents, and tastes. At Christmas, Rome, like all the great cities of the world, dresses itself in garments of light. From this point of view, my first Christmas in Algeria was a shock. None of this exists to signal Christmas: no garlands, no special lights; the last days of December look like any other day of the year. It is the same shock experienced by all students from sub-Saharan Africa studying in Algeria on scholarships. They spend their first Christmas away from their parents and the warmth of their family home. This is why Christmas in Algeria, in order to be Christmas, must be much more than just a Midnight Mass! It requires a family atmosphere that must be recreated and reinvented. Everyone competes in imagination for decorations and festivities. Choirs rehearse songs from every corner of the world, decorations spring from the most skillful and creative hands, nativity scenes come out of cupboards, and Christmas trees join the celebration. Kitchens become busy with preparations for festive meals; makeshift dormitories fill with people snatching a few hours of sleep… And suddenly Christmas is there, with its colors, scents, and tastes from all countries, and everyone hears the Christmas proclamation repeated in their own mother tongue, the language of their childhood, the one that speaks to their heart!
While momentarily away from Algeria, I joyfully anticipated the prospect of celebrating Christmas once again in a society of Christian tradition. And yet, everything was there… except the joy of Christmas in Algeria! Yes, everything was in its place, but that little flickering flame was missing. I realized that, in their fragility, our small parish communities in Algeria make Christmas possible and keep alive its wonderful proclamation of the birth of a God made man. Without us, Christmas would not exist in Algiers, Oran, or Tamanrasset. It is as if God becomes man in these places thanks to the faith and joy of our small ecclesial communities! What a responsibility! At the end of their studies or missions, many remember with nostalgia Christmas celebrated in Muslim lands. As Christmas approaches, I think especially of those in places torn by armed conflicts and war—from the trenches in Ukraine to the ruins of Gaza. I think of prisoners in all the prisons of the world, of the sick in hospitals, of isolated people, of those who will sleep on the streets on Christmas night. It is above all for them that the little flame of Christmas came to shine in the heart of darkness, a sign of invincible hope.
Let us not be distracted by city lights and decorations that appear a little earlier every year! Let us not forget that the Lord needs each and every one of us to take on flesh in the person of a child. He needs us—whether in Rome, Kyiv, Gaza, Algiers, or Tamanrasset—to let Him take flesh within us for the salvation of all humanity: those who know Him and those who perhaps will never know Him!
Merry Christmas!



BRAZIL: ARCHDIOCESE OF MANAUS

The fragility of the Child of Bethlehem awakens us to the care of the fragile and frail

+ Leonardo Cardinal Ulrich Steiner, OFM Archbishop of Manaus

"And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn 1:12) God became Word! "The Son himself is the Word, the Logos; the eternal Word became small—so small as to enter a manger. He became a child, so that the Word might become graspable for us" (Benedict XVI, Nativity of the Lord, 2006). "Now the Word is not only audible, not only has a voice; now the Word has a face, which we can therefore see: Jesus of Nazareth" (Verbum Domini, 12). He became so tangible, so visible, so audible that it is no longer the prophets who speak, but the Son as our own child. The eternal and creating Word wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. The Word who brings forth all things, made flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood, bone of our bones!

The Word-Child wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger is the light that shines in the darkness—the darkness of the night of fear, of human uncertainty, of conflicts and discouragement. The Word-Child in the manger is the simplicity of God, the poverty of God, the nobility and tenderness of God; the breath of God, the groan of God, the sigh of God!

Truly the Word, flesh of our flesh, bone of our bones, blood of our blood, is free and gratuitous love in our midst! The Father's Word is with us and has pitched his tent among us even to "death, death on a Cross." It is true: "He sustains all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3).

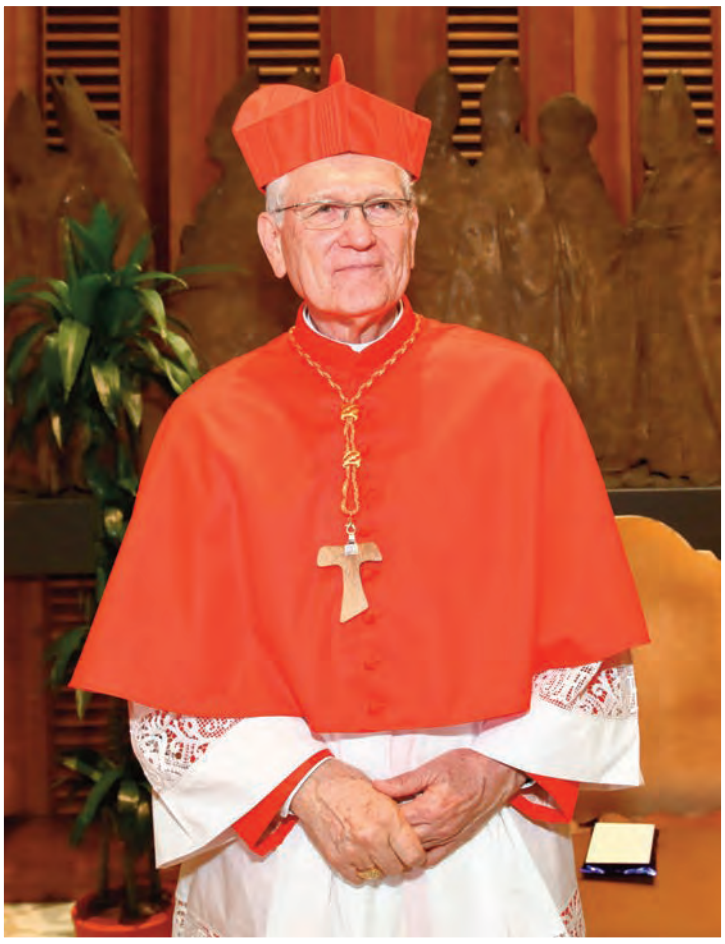
This is the Word that is at the beginning—it is the beginning; it is the one who opens and inaugurates; it is the principle; the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. It founds and grounds all things; it is the One who awakens, radiates, creates all things; it is the meaning of everything: of life and death, of life and mission, of vocation. It opens the new heavens and the new earth; it is heaven and earth. It is the inauguration of a new, timeless time, beyond all time: the new Kingdom. A Kingdom of truth and grace, a Kingdom of justice, love, and peace. Is there anyone or anything that the Word does not bring to light, does not sustain, does not give meaning to, does not grant a new horizon?

Saint Gregory of Nazianzus was right when he said: "After the dim lamp of the Precursor came the most radiant Light of Christ; after the voice came the Word; after the friend of the Bridegroom, the Bridegroom" (St. Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermons, Or. 45,9). A Word so audible, pronounceable, visible, near, so listenable, so convincing, asks of us only one response: love.

To respond means to become word within the Word. To respond: to incarnate, make visible, and resound the Word made flesh. To proclaim to all creation the new reality, the new heavens, and the new earth.

"Let us be guided by the star, that is the Word of God; let us follow it in our lives, walking with the Church, where the Word has pitched its tent. Our path will always be illuminated by a light that no other sign can give us. And we too can become stars for others, a reflection of that light which Christ caused to shine upon us" (Benedict XVI, Epiphany of the Lord, 2011).

Saint Augustine highlights the dynamic of the Word: "John was the voice, but the Lord, in the beginning, was the Word" (cf. Jn 1:1). John was the passing voice; Christ, the eternal Word from the beginning. Suppress the word—what becomes of the voice? Empty of meaning, it is only noise. A voice without words resounds in the ear but does not nourish the heart. Yet even when nourishing our heart, consider the order of things. If I think of what I am about to say, the word is already in my heart. But if I want to speak to you, I seek a way to bring to your heart what is already in mine. In seeking to bring to you and make penetrate your heart what is already in mine, I resort to the voice, and through it I speak to you. The sound of the voice makes you understand the word; and once it has made it understood, the sound disappears, but the word it conveyed remains in your heart without having left mine. Does it not seem that this sound, after transmitting my word, says: "He must increase; I must decrease" (cf. Jn 3:30)? The voice resounded, fulfilling its func-



tion—and vanished, as if to say: "Now this my joy is complete" (cf. Jn 3:29). "Let us keep the word; let us not lose the word conceived within us" (Sermon 293).

The Word, the Logos, became flesh and dwells among us! It illuminates every reality, elevates and ennobles every person. A Star that watches over us amid pain, misunderstanding, and aggression. The fragility of the Child of Bethlehem awakens us to care for the fragile and for fragility itself. In the Holy Year of Redemption, the Year of Hope, the Archdiocese inaugurated Casa Esperança (House of Hope), a pastoral service offering assistance to children and adolescents who have suffered sexual violence. The pastoral service is carried out by psychologists who volunteer their time. The house welcomes, protects, and heals. A house that symbolizes the Kingdom of God, striving for a protective and respectful culture that upholds the right to be a child, an adolescent, a person, a son or daughter of God.

A place where the love of God—who became our humanity—is expressed through welcome, support, rest, the pursuit of justice and encounter. It is a concrete opportunity for transformation, strengthening, and social and emotional support for countless children and adolescents. A sign that it is time to hope.

Children can draw near through the receptiveness—the way they are received—through gestures, through silence, through words, becoming a blessing for them. The House is an offer of healing, so that children and adolescents may have a future, may feel integrated in their relationships and in their sexuality. Healed wholly, so that they may be a living presence of hope in our society, feeling like sons and daughters of God. Experiencing the beauty of the care of the Faith Community.

Services are weekly and directed to children, adolescents, and women who are victims of sexual violence, including caregivers. Psychological assistance is provided in person through group therapy, using a systemic and cog-nitive-behavioral approach, in specific groups for boys, girls, and caregivers. Sessions are weekly, each lasting two hours, for five months, followed by 12 months of monitoring after psy-chotherapy ends.

This pastoral action is necessary, given the number of victims in society. A symbol, a star of resilience and hope. In the House's symbolism, the logo depicts a leaf of the imbaúba, one of the first trees to grow back after a forest fire. A symbol of resistance and stubborn will to live.

God, made man, helps in receptivity and welcome, being the house of encounter—an encounter with pain in order to overcome it, an encounter with consolation in order to become a presence of consoling hope. A house that, according to the testimony of a woman who had been assisted there and whose granddaughter was abused by her father, is a place that "brings hope to those who have none, that brings life to those who are already dead." She said she sees in the house a work of God, present in service to brothers and sisters who manage to go beyond what professionals would normally do.

Inspired by the Word made flesh and become Word of hope, a Star in the desert, the Catholic Church reaffirms its commitment to life and hope, especially among the most vulnerable: a sign of the Kingdom of God.

In the Holy Year of Redemption, the Church can be a sign of hope, of new life for children, adolescents, and their families. The little Word wrapped in swaddling clothes has come to renew the face of the earth, the lives of all who are in need! The Word, the Logos, enlightens life in the House of Hope!

You, little Word, manger, pure, innocent! Admirable presence!
You, Samaritan Word, who comfort, build up, raise to life!
You, Word of consolation in pain, in suffering, in loneliness, in death;
You, maternal Word, who generate new life;
You, Word of hope, like a child, of what is to come;
You, Word, life of the least, of the servants.

COLOMBIA: ARCHDIOCESE OF BOGOTA'

Hope is the Beauty of God's Nearness

Luis José Cardinal Rueda Aparicio
Archbishop of Bogota

The nearness and tenderness of God, manifested in Jesus of Nazareth, bring hope to the lives of Christians and make them missionaries of hope in the world. Christian hope accompanies all temporal realities, enriches them, and gives them true meaning; but it also goes beyond, embracing everything that is temporal, overflowing from it, and opening the horizon of transcendence and fullness in the love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Hope has its origin and foundation in Trinitarian love. Hope is possible in human life thanks to the presence of God's nearness. Hope illuminates and strengthens human existence as a gift and loving initiative of God, because God chose to be eternally close to humankind through the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word in the virginal womb of Mary of Nazareth, in the home of Joseph. Today, God continues His nearness to those who need Him through those who feel they are missionary disciples of Christ.

1. God's nearness creates hope.

Christmas is above all God's nearness, God's dialogue with humanity; it is a persevering and active nearness, a certainty that goes beyond the senses, a trust that He is always close and that everyone can rely on Him in the darkest night and amid the harshest trials, when one's own strength is no longer enough. It is then that the great news arrives: in Bethlehem of Judea the Emmanuel is born for them; thus the joy is born and reborn of knowing that He will never abandon us, that there is no reason for Him to abandon us, not even when we find ourselves most fragile, nor will He turn His back on us when we make mistakes, because nothing can separate us from the love of God manifested in Christ Jesus.

2. Hope springs forth when we leave behind our self-sufficiency.

Celebrating Christmas, we see that God, in the Incarnation of the Eternal Word, takes the risk of becoming fragile and vulnerable in the manger of Bethlehem.

Christmas has the power and beauty of freeing us from the constraint of inadequacy, arrogance, and vanity. In this way, we joyfully recognize that we cannot accomplish everything with our own abilities and talents, and that beside us there is someone willing to share their gifts, their knowledge, their experiences and their life.

Hope takes us by the hand so that we may learn humility. It opens a door for us, reaches out a hand, approaches us with sincerity, ready to lift us up, sustain us, and guide us. And little by little, we feel that the outstretched hand becomes an embrace that restores serenity and confidence, frees us from fear, and teaches us to see a horizon expanding in depth and beauty. Celebrating Christmas is already a triumph of fraternal hope over selfishness.

3. Hope usually shines in existential deserts.

We celebrate Christmas because we desire the vitality of hope to renew the heart of our wounded society. When the certainties that seemed unshakable give way, the nearness of God appears and begins to shine more intensely. It is a manifestation that radiates through the nearness of an inexhaustible tenderness and mercy that manage to rebuild us as individuals and communities in our desires and aspirations.

Christmas is a moment to open our hearts, because God first decided to open His. God so loved the world that He sent His Son to make us brothers and sisters when we feel suffocated in the desert by the sands of war, lies, selfishness, hatred or loneliness. Celebrating Christmas means celebrating the presence and nearness of God to us.

4. Hope helps us walk together.

The most beautiful and profound aspect of hope at Christmas is as simple and wonderful as a child in the home. Because a child is a human seed of hope, because the Kingdom of God is simple and everyday, uncomplicated, in the poverty of the manger and the great richness of a united family—a family that decided to say

YES to God's will and His plan of salvation.
Hope helps us walk together because God Himself comes to walk with us, is interested in what weakens our hope, listens to us with respect and attention as we recount our sorrows, and when He speaks to us, He does so clearly, without indecipherable theories. He explains the Scriptures to us as a Word for today, with the patience of the wise who adapts to the clumsiness and closed mindset of the listener, and continues to walk with us, teaching us once again at Christmas to walk together in hope.
Celebrating Christmas is celebrating God's nearness and the joy of being able to walk together, even when we have many differences. When two or three walk in the name of God, the Lord will walk with them and teach them His ways of peace and fraternity.
5. Hope grows through listening.
Listening to God and listening to our brothers and sisters makes hope grow. God constantly speaks to us, waiting for us to listen. He speaks in each person's conscience and helps us discern good and evil, so that we may learn to choose what is good, just, noble and kind, because everything is permitted to us, but not everything is beneficial.
God speaks to us in the small and great events of life. God speaks to us in the beauty and harmony of creation, in biodiversity, in the signs of a sick and polluted common home. God speaks to us through the people in our families, our neighbors, our colleagues, or classmates.
If we learned to listen with gentleness and without haste, many conflicts would be avoided and many solutions hidden by impatience and noise would be found. The art of listening goes hand in hand with the art of silence and nourishes dialogue, which leads to unity marked by respect and mutual admiration. We have the opportunity to listen to one another at Christmas; it will probably be a gift many need.
6. The joy of serving nourishes hope.
The attitude of service builds a culture of generosity, which brings a twofold joy: the joy of those who decide to serve without expecting anything in return, and the joy of those who feel they have received a service that carries no economic cost. And this bridge, built through every act of service, allows hope to arise in the hearts of all involved—hope that had been obscured because we thought we had nothing to offer others. Let us not be afraid to serve, because in reality we have much to give. Great transformations began with simple acts of generous service, as when Jesus offers His service and His self-gift to humanity on the altar in every Eucharist.
We are all treasures that must not remain hidden or buried out of fear. Fear prevents us from serving, whereas hope gives us the possibility of forging renewed bonds through the joy of sharing. The pilgrims from the East, seeking the newborn Child, nurtured the hope of a star that illuminated their path and brought Him their gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. In return, they found the Holy Family of Nazareth, surely to return home and rediscover the treasure of their own families. No longer in a chest, but in their heart, they carried the manifestation of the nearness of Emmanuel.
At Christmas, let us set out on the journey, especially toward those most in need. Let us bring them our treasures, and in return we will receive the joy of service. A good way to adorn Christmas is with the abundance of our small acts of service.
7. The goal of hope is the love of God.
Hope allows us to enjoy our condition as pilgrims, points out the path toward the Father's house, and encourages us not to stop, to overcome every obstacle we encounter, to stay on the path, to keep alive an inner flame that anticipates the feast the Father has prepared in His heart, to offer us an overflowing welcome of mercy that we do not deserve. Celebrating Christmas strengthens us so that we do not let ourselves be robbed of the possibility of beginning again each day.
Hope along the way dismantles the bitter image that pessimism projects onto individuals and all humanity. Walking in hope means overcoming a virus of the soul: the fascination with immediate gratification. This virus of immediate gratification blinds us, prevents us from seeing the beauty of the possible horizon, and at the same time renders us apathetic.
Pilgrims of hope move forward, achieving small milestones each day. They learn from apparent failures without being overcome by complaint or recrimination. They acknowledge their sins and humbly ask for forgiveness. They are grateful and celebrate every small achievement. They share their experience and the skills they have acquired with those who will come after them. They are capable of looking to those ahead of them without envy, but rather as an inspiration and a force of intercession. The saints are part of the triumphant Church, which courageously endured the great tribulation without wavering, with their eyes fixed on the goal of the communion of love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
We will do our best each day of the coming year so that, with the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph, we may learn to walk together in fraternity, dialogue, and respect.
We will be bearers and builders of peace, social friendship, and a culture of integral care, all woven together with faith, hope, and love.
We will ask the Father that, amid the weeds of fear, pessimism, and hatred, He may mercifully sow the blessed seed of the Gospel in the soil of our families and society.

From the World

ECUADOR: ARCHDIOCESE OF GUAYAQUIL

Christmas: A Message of Hope for a World Without Peace!

+ Luis Cabrera Cardinal Herrera, OFM
Archbishop of Guayaquil

We live in a deeply wounded world. It is enough to turn on the television, open a news site, or look around us to realize that violence has settled into many corners of human life. There is physical, emotional, economic, workplace and military violence. Behind every headline, behind every conflict, there are real faces: children fleeing war, families mourning their loved ones, young people without opportunities, women and men marked by injustice or disdain. It is a world suffering from the absence of peace.

Wars between nations seem endless. Many peoples face one another believing that weapons can solve their conflicts, yet history teaches us that violence leaves only a trail of death and tears. The prophet Isaiah already proclaimed it: "The work of justice will be peace; the effect of justice, calm and security forever" (Is 32:17). True peace is not built through power and violence, but through justice, truth and mercy.

We also experience a lack of peace in our personal and family lives. Daily tensions, lack of dialogue, broken relationships, loneliness, and fear of the future show us that peace begins in the heart. Saint Paul reminded the Philippians: "The peace of God that surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:7). Without that inner peace born of faith, no society can remain in harmony.

Amid so much suffering, however, there are shining signs we cannot ignore. Thousands of people work silently for peace: doctors who heal with tenderness, teachers who teach with patience, young people serving in solidarity projects, families who open their doors to those in need, communities that pray and work for reconciliation. They are true artisans of peace (cf. Mt 5:9), men and women who believe that evil does not have the last word—that life triumphs over death, and love over hatred.

These signs are seeds of hope. And it is precisely hope that is the deepest message of Christmas. In a world without peace, Christmas reminds us that God has not forgotten His people, especially the poor. He wanted to become one of us. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who lived in the land of gloom a light has shone" (Is 9:1). That light has a name: Jesus, the Prince of Peace (Is 9:5).

The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem was not a romantic or distant event. It was humble, yet profoundly transformative. In a manger, amid poverty and silence, God drew near. He became a child to speak to us of tenderness, to teach us that greatness lies not in domination, but in service. As the Gospel of Luke says, the angels proclaimed: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Lk 2:14). Peace is a divine gift, but also a human task.

Christian hope is neither naïve nor superficial. It is not fleeting optimism, nor the wishful thought that things will change on their own. It is the certainty that God is present and at work even in the midst of darkness. "Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Rom 5:5). Christmas invites us to renew that hope which never fades, which is nourished by love and translated into commitment.

The God who is born in Bethlehem does not come to solve problems from the outside, but to accompany us from within history. He teaches us that life is the greatest gift, that freedom is the condition for love, and that fraternity is the path to true peace. Every gesture of reconciliation, every word of comfort, every just action is a concrete way to embody the spirit of Christmas.

That is why celebrating Christmas is much more than lighting decorations or exchanging gifts. It is allowing the Light of Christ to illuminate our shadows. It is opening our hearts so that peace may be born within us and through us. A Franciscan prayer expresses it beautifully: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace."

Today more than ever, the world needs witnesses of hope: men and women who refuse to resign themselves to violence, who do not grow accustomed to suffering, who continue to believe, like Mary, that "nothing will be impossible for God" (Lk 1:37).

Christmas remains, amid the world's darkness, a proclamation of hope. It is the reminder that God believes in us, that life has meaning, that love can transform history. Jesus was born to tell us that peace is possible—that it is worth believing, hoping and loving.

May this Christmas find us ready to build peace beginning in our hearts, extending it to our families, communities and nations. For only when Christ is born in each of us can hope be reborn in the world.

"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord let his face shine upon you…and give you peace" (Num 6:24–26).

PHILIPPINES: DIOCESE OF KALOOKAN

Hope That Takes Flesh: Christmas at the End of a Jubilee Year

Pablo Virgilio Cardinal David
Bishop of Kalookan

Hope is one of the most fragile and yet most powerful gifts entrusted to the human heart. At the conclusion of the Jubilee, we have walked through a year of grace discovering again that Christian hope is not just about optimism or positive thinking, nor about denial, nor a stoic refusal to face reality. It is rather the choice to struggle with the temptation to despair, the courage to hold on patiently, even when everything else seems to be falling apart and breaking into pieces. It is the will to look at the world truthfully—even when peace seems distant, when violence wounds our communities, and human dignity is trampled—while still believing that Emmanuel, God-with-us, has not abandoned His creation.

Christmas is the feast of that hope. It is the proclamation that God did not save the world from a distance. The eternal Word became flesh, in a specific place, at a particular time, amid the turbulence of empire and the fragility of a poor family seeking shelter and not finding it among kin. The Savior arrived not in comfort but in vulnerability. The peace He brings does not come from the strength of arms, but from the disarming power of humility and mercy.

Sometimes we forget that the "silent night, holy night" of Christmas was not as romantic as we might think it is. It was also a "startling night, horrible night" for a migrant family in flight. In many parts of the world today, people are weary. Wars tear families apart. Migrations scatter communities. The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor grow louder. Christmas does not ask us to ignore these wounds, nor to romanticize suffering. Rather, it invites us to see how God has chosen to be found precisely there—at the margins, in the stables of our humanity, among humble shepherds keeping watch in the night, over the ewes ready to give birth. A lamb, among newborn lambs raised for the sacrifice, "wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

The shepherds were the first to receive the good news. They were not powerful or respected. Yet the glory of God reached them in their night, and fear was turned to joy. That same song of the angels—"peace on earth to those on whom His favor rests"—continues to echo, often quietly, wherever compassion overcomes indifference, forgiveness ends cycles of hatred, and communities choose solidarity instead of suspicion.

This is why Christmas is not only a memory; it is a mission. The Incarnation continues wherever believers allow Christ to be born anew through acts of tenderness, fidelity, and courage. Hope takes flesh each time we choose dialogue over division, protect a child, welcome a stranger, defend creation, or kneel before the dignity of one another as fellow creatures in the image and likeness of the one God who is Love, as brothers and sisters.

In the Church, this means allowing synodality—walking together—to become our very way of life. The manger reminds us that no one is too small for God; synodality reminds us that no one is too small, too dirty, or too wretched for His Church. When we listen to one another with reverence, when decisions arise from prayerful discernment and shared responsibility, the light of Bethlehem shines in our communities, so that he could shine through us and carry on with the unfinished project of creation.

The Jubilee leads us here: to the manger, to simplicity, to awe. To a God who enters history quietly, entrusting Himself to human hands. To Christ who still knocks at the doors of our hearts, asking to be welcomed into our hearths—not into palaces, but into the ordinariness of our daily lives.

In a world that constantly longs for peace, the Christmas message is not naïve. It is revolutionary. It tells us that truth is greater than lies, love stronger than death, and grace more enduring than sin. It assures us that even in the darkest winter, the Child born in Bethlehem is already the dawn, the "amazing grace" that will lead us home.

May this Christmas renew in us the humble courage to hope: to believe that God is near, that every act of love matters, and that the Prince of Peace still walks among His people.

JAPAN: ARCHDIOCESE OF TOKYO

To live fully we need hope

Tarcisius Isao Cardinal Kikuchi, SVD
Archbishop of Tokyo

On March 11, 2011, the Pacific coastal area of Japan's Tohoku region, the region where I was born, was struck by a massive earthquake and tsunami. The affected area stretched for about 400 kilometers from north to south, and the disaster was followed by the accident at the Fukushima nuclear power plant. More than twenty thousand people lost their lives, and countless others lost their homes, families, and friends.

Historically, the Catholic Church came to Japan much later than other religions, and therefore many of our churches in this region are located slightly away from city centers. Because of that, most church buildings of our parishes were spared from the tsunami and became important bases for long-term relief and recovery efforts of the Church that continued for more than ten years.

The diocese responsible for this disaster area is the Diocese of Sendai. Together with Caritas Japan, the Sendai Diocese established support centers for recovery in eight coastal parishes, where volunteers gathered from dioceses throughout the country.

About six months after the earthquake, I traveled with several priests to visit the disaster areas. I still remember visiting a Catholic kindergarten in the coastal city of Kesennuma. The entire town, facing the sea, had been destroyed by the tsunami and burned to the ground by fires. The church and kindergarten, located on higher ground, were spared. The head teacher told me what had happened that day: how the earthquake struck while the children were still with them, how the tsunami followed hours later, and how they spent the night in darkness watching the town below burn—protecting the children while filled with fear and uncertainty.

At the end of her story, the head teacher said quietly, "It has been six months. The volunteers are gone. We have been forgotten."

Those words pierced my heart.

I have been involved in the work of Caritas Japan for many years.

When I first began this ministry thirty years ago, I heard the same words in a refugee camp in Africa. When I asked the leader there what they most needed, he answered, "We have been forgotten by the world." It was a cry of despair from the depths of his heart. When people are forgotten, they lose hope. To live fully, we need hope. We can provide food, clothing, and shelter to those facing hardship, but hope is not something that can be given from the outside. Hope must arise from within the heart. To awaken hope, we must first break through despair. And to break through despair, what is needed is the bonds that connect one person to another.

When Pope Francis visited Japan in November 2019, he met in Tokyo with survivors of the Great East Japan Earthquake and said these words—

"Without basic resources such as food, clothing and shelter, it is not possible to live a worthy life and have the bare minimum needed to succeed in rebuilding. This, in turn, calls for experiencing the solidarity and support of a community. No one "rebuilds" by himself or herself; nobody can start over alone. We have to find a friendly and fraternal hand, capable of helping to raise not just a city, but also our horizon and our hope."

In the disaster-stricken region of Tohoku, the churches that became centers of relief activities welcomed not only Catholic volunteers but also many who did not share our faith. Together, they sought simply to live alongside the local people who had suffered so much. As the Church's activities continued for more than ten years, the local people began affectionately calling the volunteers "Mr. Caritas or Ms. Caritas", expressing their gratitude and love.

In a world still marked by violence and despair, the Church is called to be a witness of hope. Let us therefore cherish the relationships, encounters, and mutual support that creates hope.

Japan is not a Christian country, but if you visit Tokyo in December, for example, you will see Christmas decorations all over the city, and for just that moment you might be tempted to think you are in a Christian country. But that fever lasts only until the evening of December 24th. From the 25th, the Christmas decorations disappear from the streets, and traditional New Year's preparations begin. Even in such circumstances, the Church, during this time when people are even slightly interested in Christmas, opens its doors wide and, together in prayer, conveys the message of the birth of Jesus, the source of hope.

Many non-Christians participate in the midnight Christmas Mass, immersing themselves in the light and words that bear witness to hope. We meet people there. The Church continues to be a witness of hope.

ENGLAND: ARCHDIOCESE OF WESTMINSTER

To the crib this Christmas as a pilgrim into hope

Vincent Cardinal Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster

As the Jubilee Year comes to a close we reap its harvest and look forward to 2026. And what better place to do so than gathered round the Christmas Crib. Here, in the light of Jesus, we look back on the closing year, and by that same light, look forward with hope in our hearts.

'Peregrinantes in Spem' was the motto which marked the Jubilee Year. 'Pilgrims into Hope' has indeed been the experience of this year, especially for us in United Kingdom. We will never forget the marvellous State Visit of our King and Queen to Pope Leo on 23 October. Accompanied by the Archbishop of York, they entered the Sistine Chapel to pray together. King Charles, Head of the Church of England, and Pope Leo united in solemn yet quiet prayer, with a single 'Amen' to the prayers of that moment.

Here was a further, vital step in the healing of an ancient wound, inflicted in the sixteenth century: the total breaking of relationships between our two churches. The steady progress of friendship, mutual understanding, joint study and shared actions was so deeply affirmed at this moment and, indeed, carried to a new level. The moment brought to mind the wise words spoken forty years ago by Cardinal Basil Hume that the unity of our Churches would not be the result of negotiation but come as a gift when we were on our knees! This moment saw us again kneeling together as pilgrims into hope.

There was another moment during that visit which struck me deeply. At the Basilica of St Paul's Outside the Walls, another ceremony took place. King Charles graciously accepted the title of 'Royal Confrater' of the Basilica and Monastic community. A grand chair was carved for him to mark this moment, decorated with the Royal Coat of Arms and the words 'Ut unum sint'. The chair will remain in the apse of the Basilica as a permanent reminder of this moment.

Behind this ceremony lay an important piece of history. During the Middle Ages, the kings of England, in cooperation with the Popes, were the Protectors of the Basilica and monastic community. They safeguarded and provided for the monastery and its church. Even today aspects of the royal coat of arms are to be found in the insignia of the Monastery itself. So I come to the crib this Christmas as a pilgrim into hope, deeply grateful for so many graces received. When I arise from my prayers, I can look forward with a renewed hope.

I hope for a renewed cooperation not just across our churches but with all who long for a more peaceful and compassionate world. And there are signs of this, I believe. I have read and heard of a new

openness and responsiveness in some countries in Europe to the instincts and promptings of the spiritual in the hearts of many, especially among young men, between twenty and thirty years of age. The pattern has been seen in the number of baptisms during last year, in the numbers being touched deeply as they enter the beauty of our churches, in their longing for a more purposeful pattern of living and a willingness to offer service to those in need. As I see the rays of the light of Christ cast ahead of us in this fragile movement, I wonder whether we are ready to receive and respond. Are we sufficiently aware of this hunger in the hearts of many? Are we too busy with our internal affairs and problems to notice those who casually cross our threshold with very tentative questions in their minds? I hope not! It would be a shame if these opportunities were missed!

So my eyes return to the figures assembled in the Christmas Crib.

There they are: the curious shepherds who have been summoned by a light and vision beyond their harsh everyday reality. They came, knowing not what they were seeking or expecting. But when they arrived they fell to their knees in an irresistible and instinctive recognition of something that was both utterly beyond them and yet belonged intimately to them. They recognised the light of truth, the light of fulfilment of their longing for love, the light of hope in their impoverished world.

And the kings are there too, with their fine gifts and symbols of power and wealth. They had risked much in following the star, pushing the limits of their knowledge. And so they also came to something, someone, who was rich beyond their imagining and wise beyond their scope. They too fell to their knees, as so did their camels, at least according to the poet!

I am grateful to have the opportunity of wishing all a most peaceful and blessed Christmas as we too take our places, on our knees, around our infant King, Lord and Master. He brings light into the darkest places of our world, places of poverty, deprivation, hardship; places where power is misused and wealth sought ruthlessly to satisfy greed and acquisitiveness. We praise him and thank him for his entry into our world in a manner which excludes no-one and yet summons us all to a more generous response to him and to our sisters and brothers.

Happy Christmas to all.

From the World

HAITI: DIOCESE OF LES CAYES

Christmas in a world often without peace. A pastoral appeal

Chibly Cardinal Langlois
Bishop of Les Cayes

Christmas returns as a breath of consolation in lives often marked by suffering, but it must not be reduced to a simple celebration or to a religious or cultural rite. For the communities of the Diocese of Les Cayes, in Haiti's Southern Department, Christmas is a theological and practical invitation to recognize the presence of Emmanuel in the midst of the violence, poverty, disasters, and social divisions that shape our daily lives.

When we speak of a world "often without peace," here in Les Cayes and the surrounding areas, this reality is tangible: persistent insecurity due to armed gangs and kidnappings, particularly widespread in Port-au-Prince, the nation's capital; political crises that weaken public authority; the collapse of essential services; rising food prices; internal migration; displaced families; and recurrent destruction caused by hurricanes and earthquakes, along with the slow reconstruction that follows each disaster.

In the face of all this, Christmas is neither an escape into an ideal world nor a mystical consolation that ignores reality; it is a light that reveals the truth, a force calling for personal and collective conversion, and a mandate for the Church to stand alongside the most vulnerable as a sign and instrument of reconciliation and rebuilding.

Christ's coming in the manger reminds us that God chooses weakness and closeness over domination. In a land where the poor bear the weight of crises, the Gospel of Christmas affirms that God shares the human condition and calls his disciples to transform fragility into a place of encounter and hope. For the Diocese of Les Cayes, deeply committed to community pastoral care, this means that the Christmas liturgy becomes a celebration of what we call "daily Christmas through concrete actions": food distributions organized by diocesan Caritas, emergency medical care in our clinics, psychosocial support for victims of violence, repair of schools and community infrastructure, aid to displaced families in host parishes, and sustainable projects that help communities regain dignity and autonomy. These actions are not decorative additions to the celebration; they embody the logic of the Incarnation: God draws near through people and institutions that make divine tenderness visible.

The Diocese of Les Cayes, rooted in the reality of Haiti, brings this message forth with strength. Haiti is going through recurring crises. Yet, in the midst of these trials, the voice of Christmas rises: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Lk 2:14). This proclamation is not an illusion but a mission. It invites every believer to become a builder of peace and a witness of hope.

Therefore, in this Christmas season, the Diocese of Les Cayes issues an open appeal: to all parish families, to the youth, to women and men, to community leaders, to local and national authorities, to civil society organizations, and to our international partners. We invite you to make the message of Bethlehem a transformative force that rejects resignation. Christmas teaches us that the peace given by God is received, cultivated, and shared. For this, we need fervent prayers, concrete actions, just policies, and sustainable projects. We invite everyone to participate, according to their own abilities and vocation, in initiatives that protect life, restore dignity, foster reconciliation, and build resilient societies.

In its pastoral mission, the Diocese of Les Cayes proclaims this cry: "Let us not allow fear to stifle the joy of Christmas. Let us not allow violence to steal our hope. Let us choose peace, let us build it together, with courage and faithfulness." Together, locally and internationally, let us work so that Christmas ceases to be merely a momentary easing of suffering and becomes the beginning of a journey toward lasting peace for all of Haiti. May the message of Emmanuel warm hearts, heal wounds, and give us the strength to rebuild not only churches, schools, and homes but also relationships, institutions, and lives.

Christmas reveals to us the greatness of a God who humbles himself and the greatness of a people who rise again. May the nights of Christmas Eve be moments in which the flame of solidarity is kindled, where prayer and charity, justice and peace unite in visible actions. May this Christmas celebration be an awakening for all of us: may our hands be mobilized to rebuild, our voices raised to demand justice, and our hearts opened to welcome others. May we, as "Pilgrims of Hope," receive blessing and peace from a God who walks with us!

INDIA: ARCHDIOCESE OF HYDERABAD

Peace on Earth: The Hope That Never Fades

Anthony Cardinal Poola
Archbishop of Hyderabad

In a world fractured by tension, fear, and division, the message of Christmas stands as a radiant contradiction. Each year, its light cuts through the surrounding darkness and whispers again the promise first sung by the angels over Bethlehem's fields: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests" (Luke 2:14). The proclamation of the angels in the Gospel of Luke is not an echo of naïve optimism, but the very heartbeat of divine hope offered to a weary humanity—a hope that insists peace is still possible because God has not abandoned the world. When the angelic choir announced the birth of the Saviour to shepherds on a cold night, the world was not much different from ours. The Roman Empire held its provinces under military control, violence and inequality were daily realities, and many people lived with a lingering sense of hopelessness. Yet into such a setting, God chose to intervene—not through displays of power, but in the fragile cry of an infant born in a manger. That paradox is the essence of Christmas hope: God's peace does not descend through domination, but through humility, through presence, through love made flesh.

The shepherds' role in this story also reveals the nature of this divine hope. They were ordinary labourers, marginalized by society and largely unseen. Yet they were the first to receive the news of peace. This reversal reminds us that God's peace begins on the margins, where brokenness and vulnerability often dwell. The Christmas message, therefore, affirms that no place is too desolate, no heart too scarred, for God's renewing presence. Peace does not begin with policies or treaties alone—it begins in the soul willing to receive the Christ-child.

The angels' message of glory and peace holds two inseparable movements: the glorification of God and the transformation of human hearts. In the biblical vision, peace is not the mere absence of war; it is the fullness of life rooted in right relationship—with God, with others, and with creation. The word often used for peace in Scripture, "shalom," expresses harmony, justice, and wholeness. This is the kind of peace the angels proclaim, one that only the presence of Emmanuel—God with us—can bring.

In today's world, the longing for such peace remains intense. We witness nations divided by conflict, families separated by misunderstanding, and individuals exhausted by anxiety. Technology and progress have linked people across distances, yet loneliness and isolation continue to rise. Amid this, Christmas speaks differently. It tells us that hope does not come from human ingenuity alone. It is born each time we allow Christ's peace to touch our restlessness, to soften our anger, and to replace fear with trust. The manger still stands as a quiet invitation for humankind to return to simplicity, to compassion, to that radical peace born from faith.

The angelic words also convey a deeper truth: peace is not passive—it is a task. The shepherds, after witnessing the newborn Saviour, went out to share what they had seen and heard. Likewise, the Christmas message compels believers to become instruments of peace in a divided world. Every act of forgiveness, every gesture of reconciliation, every effort to uphold dignity where it is denied becomes a continuation of that first night's harmony. The task is ongoing because the world continually forgets the melody of peace, yet Christmas teaches us to remember and replay it.

As we ponder the angels' proclamation, it becomes clear that their song is not a distant echo of a miraculous event long past. It is a living promise. The Christ who came to Bethlehem continues to enter human history wherever love triumphs over hatred, wherever service replaces selfishness, wherever peace is chosen over revenge. Each celebration of Christmas renews that promise, inviting hearts to rediscover the divine favour resting upon creation.

Ultimately, the message of Christmas is this: God's peace is not the reward for a tranquil world; it is the gift that makes such a world possible. The infant Jesus embodies the reconciliation of heaven and earth. He bridges the gulf between God and humanity so that peace might flow outward—from Bethlehem's cradle to every human heart, and from there, to the ends of the earth.

In a world often without peace, Christmas announces once again that hope has not perished. The angels' proclamation resounds through every generation, urging us to lift our eyes beyond violence and despair. The glory of God revealed in a child assures us that love remains stronger than hate, mercy greater than vengeance, and light more enduring than darkness. Through this, Christmas does not merely recall a historical birth—it opens a path toward the renewal of hope, calling all people to live as bearers of divine peace.

If Pope Francis gave us "mercy," Pope Leo XIV gives us "peace." His first words, "Peace be with you," remind us: peace begins in how we see, listen, and speak— Let us embrace the peace of Christ and pass it to others.o. Abbracciamo la pace di Cristo e trasmettiamola agli altri.

INDIA: ARCHDIOCESE OF BOMBAY

Christmas Message of Hope

Oswald Cardinal Gracias
Archbishop Emeritus of Bombay

We celebrate Christmas this year at the time the Jubilee celebrations are coming to a close, the luminous theme of Hope. Hope is not just a passing sentiment; it is the quiet strength that sustains the weary, the light that pierces the darkness and the firm assurance that God's love never fails. The Jubilee that now concludes has been a sacred time-a year of renewal, reconciliation and conversion. As we step beyond it, Christmas offers us the perfect horizon: the end of one sacred time becomes the dawn of another, in which hope continues its quiet work through each of us.

The closing of the Jubilee is not an ending; it is a sending forth. The Jubilee invites us to mercy and renewal and to remember that we are all pilgrims on a journey to the Father. As it concludes, the feast of Christmas enters inviting us to carry that Jubilee grace onward-to transform hearts, homes, and institutions with the spirit of hope.

Each year at Christmas this mystery renews itself in our midst. In the poverty of a manger, God enters human history to dwell among us. He comes not to dominate but to redeem; not to condemn but to heal not to punish but to save. It is in that vulnerable Child that the omnipotence of God's love is revealed-a love that alone can bring authentic peace to a restless world. Christmas is not just a memorial. It is a true coming of Jesus in our homes - if we only open our hearts to receive him.

As we lift our gaze towards Bethlehem, we cannot ignore the suffering of our time. We watch with grief as the war between Russia and Ukraine daily continues to claim hundreds of lives, displace families, sow bitterness across nations and polarise the world. We behold with deep anguish the suffering in the Middle East where the very land that once hosted the angels' song of peace now echoes with the cries of the innocent pleading for an end to violence. We gasp with disbelief at the fratricidal conflict in Sudan, with no solution in sight. And there are other arenas where wars are fought.

We are conscious that much of the world groans under unjust oppression, economic instability and spiralling violence. How much suffering does this not cause! In the midst of this darkness, the light of Christmas bursts f011h proclaiming an astonishing truth: God still loves the world. God still enters human history. The stable at Bethlehem is proof that no conflict, no cruelty, no injustice can extinguish His desire to be with us. For Christ is not a distant observer of our struggles. He is the very path that leads us from hostility to fraternity, from fear to faith, from despair to hope.

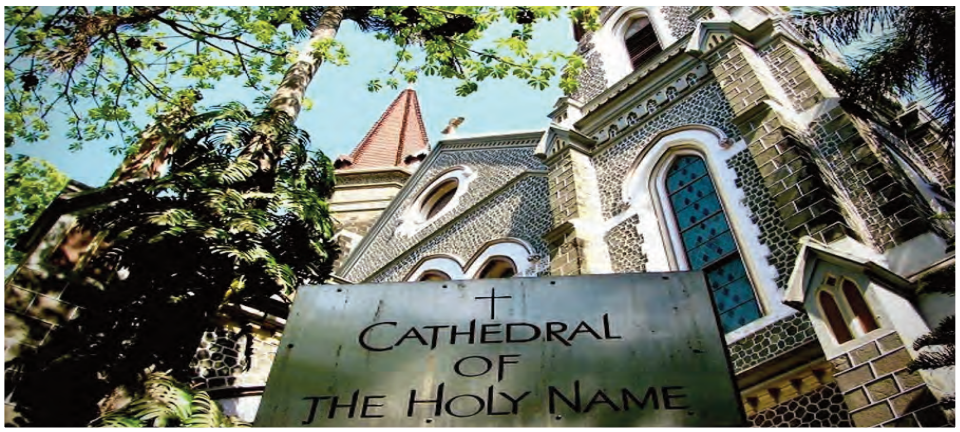
In India, a land of diverse languages, cultures and religions, Christmas is celebrated with vibrant joy and deep hope. The decorations, the sparkling lights, the sharing of gifts, and the celebrations bring joy to all irrespective of faith. It brings the confident hope that the year soon to begin will bring better times with a resolve that we can make it happen. Even poverty does not dampen the spirit of Christmas. The humblest home experiences the comforting warmth and generous love that is the essence of Christmas.

Churches across the country hold midnight Masses in churches brightly lit with special decorations, reminding the faithful that Jesus, born in Bethlehem, is our peace and hope, the light which enters every darkness, the joy that fills all hearts. Homes are adorned with stars, cribs, and colorful lanterns, while families gather to share festive meals and exchange gifts. Across regions and communities, people - Christians and non-Christians alike - join in the spirit of goodwill and harmony. Even amid the challenges we confront Christmas in India becomes a moment to rediscover the comforting truth that Christ brings hope to the weary and peace to every troubled heart.

As the Jubilee's final light gives way to Christmas dawn, we find ourselves standing again at the foot of the crib at Bethlehem-before the manger, before the God who became a child.

We pray this Christmas, blessed by the incessant calls of Pope Francis and now continued by Pope Leo, renew in us the courage to build peace-beginning in our hearts, extending through our communities, and embracing the world. May the Prince of Peace bless us and our families. May His light guide our work inspiring integrity, compassion and service. And may this holy season awaken in all of us a faith that acts, a love that heals, and a hope that endures. And may the Hope of Christmas perdure all through the year and beyond.

A Christmas filled with hope be ours!



IRAN: ARCHDIOCESE OF TEHRAN-ISPAHAN

The 800th anniversary of the Canticle of the Creatures

Dominique Joseph Cardinal Mathieu, OFMConv
Archbishop of Teheran-Ispahan

The Islamic Republic of Iran recognizes registered Iranian Christians as a religious minority and grants them what Christians consider to be « freedom of worship », within the framework of Iranian law. The authorities also guarantee « freedom of religion » to officially recognized minorities. Christmas is not a national holiday in Iran, but the Christian minority — of « Armenian, Assyrian, or Chaldean ethnicity », as well as foreign residents of Eastern, Catholic, or Protestant traditions — celebrates it. Christmas has also become a cultural curiosity and a commercial festivity for a wider part of Iranian society. The « Armenian Apostolic » community, the largest Christian group in the country, celebrates Christmas on « January 6 ». Families decorate Christmas trees, exchange gifts, and share festive meals.

Many non-Christian Iranians, especially in large cities, appreciate the aesthetic and cultural aspects of Christmas. For them, it is not a religious holiday but a social and cultural expression. Shops, cafés, and shopping centers in Tehran and Isfahan, where many Armenians live, are often decorated with Santa Claus figures, Christmas trees, and lights. Posts on social media about the holiday have become popular among young Iranians, who see it as a global festive event rather than a religious one. Some even buy gifts or take pictures with Christmas decorations.

The Roman Catholic (or Latin) community includes, besides a few Iranians, mostly immigrants and foreign nationals — students, workers, and diplomats. Its only ordinary pastor is a Conventual Franciscan friar, the Archbishop of Tehran-Isfahan of the Latins, whose archdiocese covers the entire country. He carries out his pastoral duties with the help of a few Daughters of Charity and committed laypeople. Shiism, the majority faith in Iran, recognizes — like all Muslims — Jesus, son of Mary, as a prophet. As with all messengers sent by God, they believe in him and honor him. Except for the Prophet Muhammad, celebrating the birth of prophets is not customary. However, the Qur'anic account of the birth of Jesus is recited respectfully during sermons in Ramadan and on other occasions.

The Qur'an teaches respect for the prophets and considers their birth and mission as moments of divine grace. In Shiite thought, as in Islam as a whole, prophets are men chosen by God, endowed with spiritual perfection but remaining mortal. All died according to God's will — some naturally, others as martyrs. Jesus, in this tradition, was saved from crucifixion but is regarded as a "martyr by intention", since he was ready to sacrifice himself.

In 2026, the Franciscan family will celebrate the eighth centenary of the trespass of Saint Francis of Assisi, concluding four jubilee years that began in 2023 with the commemoration of the living Nativity scene of Greccio, symbolizing the mystery of the Incarnation, and the stigmata of Christ received in 1224. Though he ardently desired to give his life for Christ, Francis understood that martyrdom was not God's will for him. The stigmata — signs of his deep passion for Christ — are tangible expressions of God's merciful love and an invitation to compassion for humankind, whom Christ came to redeem through his Passion, death, and Resurrection. Francis of Assisi traveled to the lands of Islam, eager to visit the holy places where Jesus was born, lived, and died. He aspired to be a "peaceful martyr", serving in humility and proclaiming the Gospel. His 1219 journey was brief but intense. Upon returning to Italy, his life became a continuous martyrdom — marked by illness and trials — culminating in the reception of the stigmata.

This year also marks the 800th anniversary of the "Canticle of the Creatures", a hymn to creation and life, praising God. Muslims and Christians alike feel deeply connected to the event being commemorated. Jesus and his mother Mary hold a central place in Islamic religious thought. The Qur'an places great emphasis 3 on the virginal conception, affirming that Mary conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. God sent the angel Gabriel to her in human form to announce that she would bear a Word from God, a Word emanating from Him, called "the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary." "Peace be upon him the day he was born, the day he will die, and the day he will be raised to life again." (Cfr. Surah Maryam, 19:33) ezione" (cfr. *Sura Maryam*, 19,33).

IRAQ: PATRIARCHATE OF BABYLON OF THE CHALDEANS

Hope: The Christmas and Jubilee Project to Bring It to the World

Louis Raphaël Cardinal Sako
Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans

The presence of Eastern Christians is a testimony of hope. De-spite our declining numbers, we continue to live in hope even today, steadfastly preserving our faith despite the disasters, wars, and persecutions we have endured. In our liturgical rites and in the Chaldean Mass, we begin our prayers with: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good hope to men. (according to the Syriac Vulgate - Luke 2:14), because we under-stand that we are called to be disciples of Christ, to live His teaching (the Gospel), and to bring it to our brothers and sisters in every possible way. The light that shines on the face of Jesus enables us to contemplate, receive and spread the light, as the Apostles and the early Christians did. For this reason, our presence must be supported so that we may continue to give hope and be a sign of a dignified life for our fellow citizens.
Faith is the light that penetrates within us and the creative force that gives meaning to our existence. It guides us toward evangelical conversion, embraces feelings, expressions and ways of life, instills trust and serenity, and strengthens hope.
The Jubilee is a tradition found in the Old Testament and then in the Church. It is an opportunity for self-examination, renewal, and the rebuilding of relationships. According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus applied to Himself the program of the Jubilee year, declaring it an everlasting Jubilee:
"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the op-pressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord (the Jubilee)" (Luke 4:18–19).
This Jubilee, which concludes on January 6, 2026, has as its motto —chosen by Pope Francis—the need of our world for hope. Hope brings us consolation and propels everything forward. There-fore, we must keep its flame burn-ing within us and carry its light into the darkness of a divided and wounded world.
Hope: Our vision of faith must be positive. In this confused time, God invites us to manifest our love with greater strength, to listen deeply to the song: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). This is the labor of a difficult and prolonged birth (Revelation 12:2).
The future will be better when we contribute to preparing it, without fleeing from our responsibilities or allowing ourselves to be drawn by false ambitions—the thirst for money, power, fame and division. Evil, despite its violence, is not equal to good. Good endures; evil does not. For this reason, Saint Paul exhorts us: "Rejoice in hope" (Romans 12:12).
Hope is the promise of God's presence: "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you" (Jeremiah 1:8). Jesus says: "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20). And Saint Paul affirms: "I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me" (Philippians 4:13). We must transform hope into a time of prayer, meditation, and good works, lived with love and joy. Jesus gives meaning and helps each person understand themselves and fulfill the purpose of their life. Is this not the mis-sion of Jesus?
Hope is not a lottery game but a conscious waiting that moves our hearts and kindles within us the expectation of God's saving intervention. This creative intervention is manifested through people like John the Baptist, the newborn Child, His Immaculate Mother, and the saints. Therefore, we must be courageous, not yielding to fear or anxiety. The Gospel repeats: "Do not be afraid," and the truth remains: "There is no fear in love" (1 John 4:18). We do not fear, because we are made in the image of God; let us draw near to Him with trust and hope, for He is our safest protection.
Our waiting is not limited to Jesus's first coming (His birth) but also looks to His second coming—the final encounter with Him.

Is not the invocation Marana tha—"Come, Lord" (1 Corinthians 16:22)—the first prayer that the early Christian communities expressed as a sign of their hope? Should we not continue to repeat it? Mark opens his Gospel with words rich in meaning: "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Mark 1:1). It is a new beginning with Jesus, with God—the beginning of something new: a new journey, a new covenant, a new relationship, a new existence. These beginnings are opportunities to live a new condition, far from feelings of fear, anxiety, sadness and pessimism.

Jesus assures us that God loves us, that He is here and with us: "Emmanuel—God with us" (Matthew 1:23). That is, God is in Jesus, and Jesus is in God: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). He invites us to recognize this truth even in trials and difficulties and to live with Jesus, for in Him we have life—and in abundance (John 10:10): "Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Peace is God's plan for Christmas—for all people whom He loves and wishes to live in peace. At Christmas, the Lord invites us to true conversion, to eliminate destructive actions from our world, and to commit ourselves to making peace a reality, living as sons and daughters of God, as brothers and sisters.

The Jubilee Year is the program of the new covenant embodied by Jesus, which the Church and Christians must put into practice in their own reality over time, to alleviate injustice, poverty, and sickness, and to uphold freedom and human dignity. These celebrations express the unity of believers and call them to vigilance and conversion, to renewal of faith, to benefit from God's mercy, and to care for brothers and sisters in need and for the environment, with the spiritual strength to face various difficulties.

Important Steps:

1. When we allow the voice of God to speak to our hearts, we will clearly find all that God wants to tell us, to fulfill it with joy and to pass it on with hope to others.
2. Conversion and reconciliation: we begin a new phase that the Gospel calls repentance, freeing ourselves from the painful past, selfishness, corruption, and the spirit of vengeance. Reconciliation means healing conflicts and the spirit of revenge through sincere acknowledgment of faults, repentance, and a change in behavior to live in peace and harmony. Just as God opens the door of mercy to those who sincerely repent, so we too must forgive those who have offended us and ask forgiveness from those we have wronged. This is what Jesus taught in the prayer of the children: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12).
3. The service of charity: the Jubilee is an opportunity to offer generous help to others—through generous volunteering to serve the poor, the sick and the disabled; by donating clothes we no longer use, furniture, food, or money, and so on. Pope Francis says that every work of mercy is a sign of hope (Homily for the World Day of the Poor, November 17, 2024): "What we give remains; what we consume disappears."

May the conclusion of the Jubilee Year of Hope and the celebration of Christmas be an invitation to Christians, Muslims, Jews, and all people to eradicate the causes of destructive conflicts, the tragedies of injustice, the suffering and death of millions, greed, corruption, and indifference—so that we may live together as brothers and sisters, in peace, security, and harmony. May Christmas and the Jubilee fill our hearts with joy and lead us along the path of peace, love, hope, and new life—like the shepherds and the Magi.

ITALY: DIOCESE OF ROME

Hope Beyond the Jubilee

Baldassare Cardinal Reina
Vicar General of His Holiness for the Diocese of Rome

The Jubilee of Hope is now drawing to a close. It has been a time of grace that has involved millions of believers in a journey of conversion and spiritual renewal. Inspired by the various signs that characterize it—the passing through the Holy Door, pilgrimages, prayer, confession, etc.—many of us have decided to start again by placing our trust in the mercy of the Father.

The text of Leviticus gives the Jubilee a spiritual meaning that immediately has social implications: since everything belongs to God, everything must return to Him, and those who, for various reasons, have fallen behind must be put in the condition to live again. Pope Francis wished to give the Jubilee a particular thematic focus through the reference to hope: pilgrims of hope. This is the program of the Jubilee, which will see its official closing on January 6. As that date approaches, many will be thinking about taking stock—starting from numbers, evaluating the events organized, or reflecting on the impact of what has been experienced in individual dioceses. The simple (but not trivial) question that many of us have been asking in recent weeks is: what remains of the Jubilee of Hope?

It is a question that speaks to the conscience of each person, because we know well that beyond what was lived outwardly, it is necessary to understand whether this further gift from God has or has not awakened in us the desire for sincere personal and communal conversion—to the point of being able to say with St. Paul: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come." I am convinced that such reflection will take place, at least on the level of individual believers.

However, another question remains—complementary to the first and more communal in nature: What has changed in the world after the Jubilee of Hope? In a world that seems to have lost peace, where does the Jubilee fit? Is it already a vague memory? The question has every right to be asked, given the scenarios that are before our eyes each day.

There are more than 50 wars in the world, marked by unheard-of violence, by an increasingly massive use of weapons, and by the spread of death among children and civilians in ways perhaps never seen before. Pope Francis often spoke of a third world war "fought piecemeal." One could add: a third world war that is tearing all of us to pieces. And so the question returns: what has become of the Jubilee of Hope?

The temptation to say that it served no purpose is strong, because the evidence would lead us to think that humanity does not change—indeed, that sometimes it grows worse. During this time of grace, the provident design of the Father willed that, after the ministry of Pope Francis, the pontificate of Pope Leo XIV would begin. If "hope" was the key word used by Francis to open the Jubilee, "peace" has been the one used by Leo to continue it. In a mysterious and enriching continuity, the two Pontiffs thus unite the virtue of hope and the commitment to a "disarmed and disarming peace." For if hope is the virtue that allows you to see beyond, peace is the gift that becomes a daily task, enabling you to build the present time as God's time—in which fraternity is realized. There is no doubt that the time we are about to live is a complex one, and the wars make it feel dark and difficult. Yet it is also true that it is precisely within this dramatic complexity that we must place the challenge of Christian witness.

In the eschatological discourses found in the Gospels, when Jesus is asked about the final events, He does not hesitate to respond, but He never focuses on when the end will come—rather, on how the disciples are called to live the present. In the face of wars, persecutions, famines, and plagues, Jesus says: "This will be your opportunity to bear witness." This eschatological perspective is striking, yet extremely concrete: while I look at what is happening, I do not stop looking at the goal; indeed, I look at what is happening in the light of what will be at the end—and what is already my ultimate end. I believe this is the perspective we must adopt to live the closing of the Holy Door in the proper spirit.

The "door" itself can help us imagine a spiritual path that serves as a hinge between what the Jubilee has been and what will come the day after it concludes. In fact, if the movement we lived at the beginning was one of entry (through the Holy Door we entered a basilica), the movement we must live starting on January 6 will be one of exit—toward the world and toward history.

It will be the humble and joyful witness of Christians that will show that the Jubilee has borne fruit. With the smallness of our lives, we will continue to sow peace, fraternity, benevolence, forgiveness, mercy. Maybe we will not be the ones to harvest the fruits, or maybe we will not see significant changes around us. But if we have been changed in the meantime, that alone will be a first fruit of the Jubilee. That already is hope opening paths of peace.

LUXEMBOURG: ARCHDIOCESE OF LUXEMBOURG

Born in Hope: The Gift of Christmas

Jean-Claude Cardinal Hollerich
Archbishop of Luxembourg

We are approaching an important moment in the life of the universal Church: the upcoming closing of the Jubilee of Hope, inaugurated by Pope Francis on 24 December 2024 and concluding on 6 January 2026. This jubilee period, celebrated under the theme "Pilgrims of Hope," has been an invitation to rekindle our trust in God at the heart of a world marked by uncertainty. As Christmas draws near, it becomes essential to understand that the end of this Holy Year does not mean the end of its message. On the contrary, it leads us back to the very source of our hope: God, Emmanuel.

In a global context marked by crises, tensions and anxieties, Christmas is not merely a comforting remembrance. It reveals how God chooses to unite himself with humanity in its fragility, so that a light capable of resisting despair may shine. Christian hope is not simply a positive feeling, but an inner and theological strength that sustains and guides the life of faith. As the Jubilee draws to a close, Christmas invites us to understand how this hope can remain alive, lasting, and transformative.

Hope in the face of crises in our world

We are moving through a world shaken by profound crises that test our way of living and hoping. An ecological crisis threatens Creation, bringing a sense of urgency and anxiety for the future of our planet and the safety of future generations. A political crisis weakens our institutions and democracies, exacerbating social tensions, polarization and mistrust, and raising the specter of instability and violence. Added to this are economic crises: precarious work, unemployment, growing inequality, and financial uncertainty weigh heavily on the daily lives of many families. At the same time, armed conflicts in various regions—Ukraine, Gaza, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan—forcefully remind us that peace remains fragile and that violence continues to tear human lives apart.

Moreover, human distress also has an interior dimension: loneliness, spiritual uprootedness, psychological isolation and existential anxiety often intensified by modes of communication that are rapid but superficial and hinder deep human connection.

In this troubled context, the essential question remains: how can we continue to live with confidence? Christian hope is not simply superficial optimism; it confronts reality head-on, opening our hearts to a truth greater than ourselves. The German theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich was right to define hope as an inner strength rooted in God, capable of resisting despair. Hope becomes "a confident anticipation of the fullness of Being" (P. Tillich, Systematic Theology, vol. III). Believing that God remains present despite trials enables us to act with courage, resist despair, and continue to build—day after day—paths of peace, justice, and solidarity.

At Christmas, hope becomes presence.

It is precisely to this fragility that Christmas offers a radiant response. The Incarnation is the event through which God comes to dwell within humanity—not in power, but in the vulnerability of a child. Born in the simplicity of a manger, Jesus reveals that God chooses to draw near to every form of human weakness. His presence offers a peace that does not deny conflict, but proposes an inner reconciliation capable of sustaining our journey. Christmas is not only a memory; it is a presence. And this presence sends us on mission. To be "Pilgrims of Hope," as the Jubilee invites us to be, means allowing the light of Christmas to transform our daily actions. It calls us to care for Creation, taking concrete steps to protect our common home. It calls us also to be close to the victims of war, to support those who are isolated, and to open our communities to all who seek a place of peace and understanding. As Archbishop of Luxembourg, I have deeply admired the generosity of parishes and families who have welcomed refugees, as well as the ecological and solidarity-based initiatives that have arisen in recent months. Through these actions, the Gospel comes to life and hope takes shape, inscribing the impetus of the Jubilee into the ongoing mission of our diocesan and ecclesial community.

The Jubilee does not end: it opens within us.

As it draws to a close, the Jubilee of Hope must not be seen as a parenthesis that is closing. Its true fruit is the inner dynamism it has awakened. Christian hope does not deny the divisions of our time, but it rejects fatalism. It affirms that God continues to act in history and calls us to become artisans of light.

Christmas shows us that God entered time in order to transform it permanently from within. This presence is not confined to a liturgical season: it dwells in every act of kindness and faith. If we allow hope to shape our lives, then the Jubilee continues within us. The light born in Bethlehem can still illuminate the nights of today's world.

May Christmas renew our courage, strengthen our faith, and keep alive within us the hope that comes from God.

MALAYSIA: DIOCESE OF PENANG

Christmas: Hope That Builds Bridges and Welcomes Every Heart

Sebastian Cardinal Francis
Bishop of Penang

As we draw the Jubilee of Hope to a close, Christmas greets us with its quiet radiance, a light that does not dazzle but gently heals. In a world marked by conflict, division, and the fatigue of hearts longing for peace, the birth of Christ reassures us that hope is not an escape from reality. It is God entering our reality, walking alongside us, especially those most vulnerable, and calling us to be instruments of His mercy

In Malaysia, a land rich in diverse cultures, languages, and faith traditions of multiple races, Christmas offers a profound invitation: to become builders of bridges in a time when divisions can so eas-ily be magnified. The Child in the manger reveals a love that is in-clusive, humble, and creative. True unity does not demand uniformity but calls for patient, courageous encounters. When we look at one another with the eyes of Christ, we see not strangers, but neighbours, companions, and brothers and sisters under the same sky of God's mercy.

This bridge-building hope is alive in the daily life of our communities. I see it in families sharing their simple blessings with neighbours, in the people of God opening their doors to those who have no place to call home, and in young people struggling and learning to listen before they speak. I see communities that cele-brate one another's festivals, not merely tolerating differences but embracing them with respect. I see volunteers teaching children to read and write, youth organizing clean-up drives, and neigh-bourhood communities helping the elderly with daily errands or as simple as a visit to the hospital. These quiet gestures reveal the heart of synodality: celebrating together, listening together, and walking together.

Christmas also calls us to the peripheries, to those whose presence is often unseen: the Orang Asli (indigenous) communities safe-guarding ancient wisdom of the land, migrants and foreign work-ers labouring far from home, refugees arriving with little more than hope for safety, elderly and single parents enduring hardship, and local families facing poverty, illness, or social marginalisation. The Gospel reminds us that the first to hear of Christ's birth were shepherds, ordinary people, overlooked by society, yet chosen by God to witness His glory. Today, those on the margins continue to reveal the presence of Christ among us.

In the smiles of Orang Asli children learning their traditions with pride, in the whispered prayers of migrants in cramped dwellings, in the resilience of refugees rebuilding their lives, and in the quiet faith of the elderly, there the light of the manger shines. When we draw near, we discover that they are not merely recipients of charity but teachers of hope, courage, and perseverance. Through their witness, we are reminded that the smallest gestures, sharing a meal,

listening attentively, offering companionship, or helping someone find a job, become instruments of God's kingdom.

Our ongoing journey, Walking Together Towards a Synodal and Prophetic Church - A People for Missionary Discipleship, takes deeper meaning during Christmas. The God who became small in Bethlehem sends us forth not as conquerors but as companions, missionary disciples who listen deeply, heal gently, and accompany faithfully. A prophetic Church stands beside the poor, speaks for the voiceless, and refuses to look away from suffering. It reflects God's tenderness not through grand gestures, but through daily fidelity to love and service.

As the Jubilee concludes, its grace continues to guide us. The Holy Year has shown that hope must be made visible in concrete actions: crossing cultural and social boundaries, fostering communities where every person is heard, and creating spaces where the vulnerable experience dignity and belonging. Hope becomes credible when it is lived! not only proclaimed.

Christmas reminds us that peace begins in the manger, in humility, simplicity, and the willingness to be close to one another. If we allow the humility of Christ to shape and mould our relationships, our families, and our society, our communities will become places where harmony can take root.

May the newborn Lord awaken in all Malaysians, a renewed desire for mutual respect, unity, and compassion, and may our Christian communities become ever more synodal, prophetic, and missionary: bridges of understanding, homes of welcome, and bearers of a hope that does not disappoint, because it springs from the God who chose to dwell among His people.

I invite Catholics, and all men and women of peace and goodwill, to be pilgrims of hope.

From the World

MOROCCO: ARCHDIOCESE OF RABAT

A Church, a Bridge of Hope

Cristóbal Cardinal López Romero
Archbishop of Rabat

Soon, Pope Leo XIV will bring the 2025 Jubilee to a close— a Holy Year woven through by a luminous and steadfast thread: hope. Not a generic, fragile or sentimental hope, but a hope that does not fade, because it is founded on God, revealed in Christ.

This has been our mission during the Holy Year: to offer the world—so often wounded by uncertainty and fear—the leaven of an authentic hope, a hope born of faith and rooted in history.

Many events have marked the journey of these months, in the Church and in the life of the world. And yet, from the Christian perspective, hope is never illusion or escape: it is not the projection of an impossible far-away dream, but an active certainty grounded in the tangibility of faith and expressed through responsibility, dialogue and social friendship.

As Pope Francis reminded us, "Hope is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, small securities and compensations that narrow our horizons" (Fratelli tutti, 55).

I remember well when, in 2003, I arrived in Morocco, in Kenitra. I discovered then that kenitra means "little bridge." In that name I perceived a subtle, almost playful caress of Providence: an invitation to become a bridge. A bridge between cultures, languages, histories, and faiths.

In that word I sensed my vocation in Moroccan land—to be a kenitra, a passage, a support, a way.

Since then, this image has shaped our ecclesial identity. The Church in Morocco—small, poor, pilgrim—is called to be a bridge: between Christians and Muslims, between Africa and Europe, between East and West, between generations and sensibilities, between Christian denominations, and above all, between God and humanity, as Christ our Lord and brother did. "For He is our peace; he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity through his flesh." (Eph 2:14).

It is the logic of the Gospel, which does not erect walls but opens paths.

We are just over 30,000 faithful from more than 100 countries, in a nation of 37 million inhabitants: less than 0.1%. A tiny presence, but anything but insignificant.

Small, yes—but by grace, a sign.

A community capable of forging bonds, inspiring trust, and building a ground of fraternal friendship with our Muslim brothers and sisters. A Church that lives alongside, never against; that learns before teaching; that witnesses more with life than with words.

Our first treasure is communion. Living together—so diverse in language, culture, and origin—is already a reflection of the Trinity: communion in distinction.

John Paul II reminded the Bishops of North Africa that "the Catholic Church, without the Christians of North Africa, would be less Catholic."

Catholicity is not numerical greatness—it is the breadth of the heart, the universality of vision, the capacity to welcome.

It is the attraction of fraternity, friendship, and mutual respect.

In a time when many voices fuel conflict and suspicion, we affirm with our simple existence that Christians and Muslims can live as friends—indeed, as brothers.

This fraternity is not an abstract utopia but a concrete one: something not yet fully realized, yet already growing, taking shape, and changing history.

Pope Francis reminds us in the Document on Human Fraternity, signed in Abu Dhabi: "Faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother to be supported and loved."

We live as a Church-small, yet a Church-sign. Small like a seed, yet fruitful with hope. A gentle presence, yet prophetic.

A fragile yet necessary bridge, thrown across rivers of distrust to make encounter possible.

The Jubilee now concluding reminds us that the world needs communities like this: communities that do not shout but accompany; that do not impose but offer; that do not close themselves off but build relationships; communities that show with humble firmness that peace is possible, that fraternity is real, that God never ceases to sow hope in history.

This is our mission. This is our joy. To be bridges. To be a Church of hope.

In the gentle light of the Bethlehem cave, we learn once again that true strength lies in humility and true peace is born of encounter.

May we continue to be a sign of fraternity, dialogue, and hope.

Merry Christmas! Feliz Navidad!

PARAGUAY: ARCHDIOCESE OF ASUNCIÓN

Promoting a "disarmed and disarming" peace

Adalberto Cardinal Martínez Flores
Metropolitan Archbishop of Asunción

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests!"
(Luke 2:14)
This Christmas, as we near the close of the Jubilee Year of Hope, we make our own this praise of the Angels to God, invoking that His love and mercy may touch hearts and move the will of world leaders in this time when we hear the "drums of war" beating in various parts of the planet — what our beloved Pope Francis, of happy memory, called "the third world war fought piecemeal."
From his very first public appearance on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, at the end of the conclave in which we elected him, the Holy Father, Leo XIV, invoked peace:
"Peace be with you all! Dear brothers and sisters, these are the first words spoken by the risen Christ, the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for God's flock. I would like this greeting of peace to resound in your hearts, in your families, among all people, wherever they may be, in every nation and throughout the world. Peace be with you!"
The way of God is the way of peace born from humility. It is manifested in the fragility of the Child born in a manger, and this great joy is first announced to the poor, the shepherds:
"Today a Savior has been born for you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."
Pride, greed, the sense of superiority, and the arrogance of power driven by profit — these engines of war — stand in radical contradiction to the central message of Christmas: God's love for humanity, to the point of becoming one of us.
For this reason, the Holy Father's call to promote a "disarmed and disarming peace" is most timely.
Catholics throughout the world — in communion with other Christians and various religious traditions, in fruitful ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, as well as with all people of good will — must work actively for peace within our societies and together with our governments.
Pope Leo XIV's message for the upcoming World Day of Peace 2026 offers us a roadmap. Indeed, the Pontiff "invites humanity to reject the logic of violence and war, and to embrace an authentic peace founded on love and justice." A peace that is not merely the absence of conflict, but a choice for disarmament — "that is, a peace not founded on fear."
The silence of weapons thus becomes "disarmament," because it is "capable of dissolving conflicts, opening hearts, and generating trust, empathy and hope."
But invoking peace is not enough: "We must embody it in a lifestyle that rejects every form of violence, both visible and structural."
It is painful to see and hear that fear and mistrust are driving vast financial resources in the countries of the global North into a dizzying arms race, under the logic that peace will only be possible as the result of military might, rather than as the fruit of dialogue and understanding among peoples.
In this logic, governments allocate more budget to defense at the expense of social programs in their own countries and of humanitarian aid to the nations of the global South. To the old saying, "If you want peace, prepare for war," the Holy Father replies: "If you want peace, prepare peace institutions" — not only in the spheres of government, but also from below, in dialogue with all. In his message for the 80th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Leo XIV calls us to reject "the illusion of security founded on mutually assured destruction."
Instead, he proposes that we "forge a global ethic rooted in justice, fraternity, and the common good."
Let us accompany the Holy Father's intentions with our prayers and our own contribution — even if only a drop of water in the sea — toward building a peace founded on justice, fraternity and the common good.
Paraguay, a small nation rebuilt from the ashes left by the War of the Triple Alliance (1865–1870), with a population almost annihilated, knows the value of the peace that springs from faith in Christ, the source of our hope.
Christ is the Prince of Peace, and this Christmas He reaffirms to us the message that God loves us, and it is because of this love that He grants us the gift of peace.
Therefore, together with the angels, we praise and bless God:
"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests!" (Luke 2:14).

PERU: ARCHDIOCESE OF LIMA

Seeking an Attitude of Faith at Christmas to Face Our Profound Epochal Crisis

Cardinal Carlos Gustavo Castillo Mattasoglio
Archbishop of Lima

As we approach the holy night of December 24th, welcoming the gift of Jesus in human flesh, let us receive with deep spiritual and historical awareness the first experience Luke recounts of Mary (Lk 1:26–38) — the beginning of her journey, which is also the beginning of our Christian faith.

The Annunciation and the Long History of God's Promise to David

In the text of the Annunciation, we find a blessed encounter with another, much older text — 2 Samuel 7:11–16 — written probably eight centuries before Mary. It is the prophecy in which Yahweh orders Nathan to correct David's desire to build Him a temple. Indeed, it reveals God's intention to straighten out David's natural religious impulse — shared by all of us humans — to honor the divinity by building temples and offering other tokens of homage.

Nathan clarifies that it is God who is the true builder — not of a physical house or space to dwell in, but of a person, a family and a history, through His faithful presence in David, his family and his dynasty across time. As we know, David's story begins as that of a marginalized youngest son of Jesse, scarcely considered a son at all — the least, the insignificant one, the poor and simple shepherd upon whom Yahweh fixes His gaze, seeing not his strength or appearance, but the sensitivity of his heart (1 Sam 16:7).

In Luke, the Angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary fulfills God's prophetic promise to dwell within David's dynasty through a descendant who would be His own Son. Yet, in Mary's time, that family no longer held power. Nearly six centuries had passed since the Davidic line — once destined to govern Israel until the birth of the promised Son — had been overthrown. From 538 B.C. to the first century A.D., priests ruled from the temple, which, through the Sadokite system of governance, had turned into a hierocracy.

When the king Zerubbabel returned with Joshua (the priest and Diarka) in 538 B.C., that king's life ended either in disastrous battle or by a priestly coup d'état. In any case, from that time onward, no more kings appear in Israel's history. Thus, the angel's announcement to Mary — the conception within her of the promised royal Son — comes to a woman who belongs to a defeated, marginal, and insignificant dynasty.

Just as Nathan's promise to David's line was told without foretelling how it would unfold, the subsequent history — dominated by priestly rule from Jerusalem's temple — shows that the fulfillment would not come through power, but through "powerlessness," through historical annihilation. The return from exile effectively ended the Davidic dynasty as a project, and with it came the disappearance and exclusion of the prophets who had accompanied the kings.

Joshua the priest and his successors, initially alongside secular governors and later as sole rulers, established priestly control under the Sadokite line, especially with the priest Ezra, who carefully realized Ezekiel's vision of a "Holy Israel" centered on the Temple (cf. Ez 40–48).

Through the Annunciation text, we learn that God's promise to David's dynasty is fulfilled in a completely unexpected historical manner — not through centuries of political survival, but through defeat. The royal and prophetic families, such as those of Isaiah and Zechariah, survived on the margins, defeated and persecuted by the priesthood.

For this reason, they are absent from the biblical books of the Persian, Greek and Roman periods. These became the so-called Enochite group — formerly referred to in modern biblical studies as the anawim, the poor of Yahweh — who meditated on and lived this story throughout those times in secrecy, many apparently fleeing to Ethiopia.

It is no wonder, then, that Luke's note that "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" expresses not only her personal attitude as the bearer of the Son of the Promise, but also that of all those of royal and prophetic descent who embodied hope in their humility.

In other words, the promise of the "eternal king" would be fulfilled dramatically and paradoxically from the margins — not through power, but through "non-power." It would begin to be realized through the persistent faith of the marginalized descen-

dants of a defeated dynasty, who could only wait.

One of the treasures of this tradition was the preservation of the Songs of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah (Is 42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12), later applied to Jesus in the Gospels and by Paul (Phil 2:1–11). Paolo Sacchi, the great scholar of Enochic literature who recently passed away, highlighted in History of the Second Temple the importance of the last reigning king, Zerubbabel, even proposing that the Suffering Servant Songs were written by the longest-lived Isaiah, inspired by the death of King Zerubbabel on behalf of his people.

Who could have imagined that twenty-one centuries ago, in the events surrounding Mary and Joseph, this same defeated promise would be definitively fulfilled in the line of the vanished descendant of David — Zerubbabel? Without political triumph, Jesus would be the definitive Messiah, prefigured in the suffering servant, fully incarnate and defeated on the cross, exalted so that all might believe and have life in Him.

Thus, the two Gospels of the Nativity, Matthew and Luke, are both preceded by genealogies naming that defeated king as an ancestor of Jesus (Mt 1:12–13; Lk 3:27).

That the New Testament's Christmas narratives begin with the Annunciation — that it happens at all — and that Jesus is received by shepherds, by magi from distant lands, by elders like Simeon and Anna, and first of all by Elizabeth through Mary's loving service, shows us something profound. The fact that Mary engages Gabriel in deep and conscious dialogue, aware of her inheritance of the promise, teaches us that the fundamental attitude to live and cultivate in a grave and prolonged time of crisis — such as ours, marked by successive defeats and suffering for most of humanity — is to trust wisely in the subtle and historic incarnation of God's promise within the world of the poor, the defeated, the suffering, and the mistreated of every age. Indeed, wisdom has been throughout history one of humanity's inexhaustible sources for emerging from great confusion. To un-derstand and value the meaning of crisis prevents hasty judg-ment and allows hope. As Pope Leo XIV recently quoted Nicholas of Cusa: we must understand things calmly even when we lack answers, waiting patiently to avoid error — a humility that accepts not knowing and relies solely on the conviction that comes from faith: trust in the promises of Jesus and in the fundamental principle He planted through the cross and resurrection — to receive His free love and love to the end.

In times of crisis, judgment is suspended because solutions are lacking, and this invites us to wait without fear or haste. Haste pressures and suffocates the use of wisdom — and with it, the hope for possible solutions. It tempts us to be consumed by the problem, to avoid facing or understanding it, or to seek control over it for a false sense of security that ignores the mystery of reality's challenges — the very place where Jesus becomes incarnate and speaks to us.

This, in fact, was the root of original sin: the desire to seize wisdom prematurely, "to be like gods," without humility, without reflection. Mary, unlike the first woman, does not grasp wisdom for herself; she asks, she reflects deeply, and she consents to live the mystery — deciding in favor of the mission Gabriel offers her.

As Pope Francis has said, we must not hurry; we must always ponder. He told us last Christmas (2024) that Mary's journey has three moments: first, listening; second, discerning; third, walking. To walk, then, we must first listen, then discern — and this leads us from fear to trust and to joy.

Amid our current epochal crisis, adopting Mary's attitude — deepening our understanding of the painful history of the marginalized and afflicted of today's world, those who suffer most from injustice, tyranny, contempt, war, violence, unemployment, migration, hunger, misery and abuse — opens the possibility of finding in the mystery of the incarnate Son of God the strength of a hope that not only does not disappoint but fills humanity with a joy that expands without ceasing: that widespread cry for human dignity that must halt the madness of ambition and tyranny, which, instead of showing solidarity, sinks into scorn.

This Christmas, let us cherish the vast humanitarian movement that is growing, so that we may rejoice — because, as Bartolomé de las Casas said, "God remembers even the smallest and most insignificant."

Merry Christmas to all.

PORTUGAL: DIOCESE OF SETÚBAL

Called to seek the dark paths of those who are lost

Américo Cardinal Aguiar
Bishop of Setúbal

I live by the sea, in a land of fishermen and workers. When I come to my window, I see the outline of the ships, the houses surrounding the Paço, the mountain that encircles the landscape and makes it beautiful and unique. I know the streets, the factories, the neighborhoods. I smile with the smiles of the children sitting in the pews of our churches; I suffer with the families who are left without work or home. And when, at the end of the day, I sit down to see what is happening in the world, I find myself faced with images that repeat month after month, year after year. War, massive destruction of cities, famine.

This reality contrasts totally with the lights already illuminating the cities, with the Christmas songs heard in commercial spaces, with the frantic charm of selling and buying gifts that enters every home. Two realities living in the same time and space. Contradictory, they are the living example of the world we inhabit, where we are called to bear witness that Jesus, the Child of Bethlehem, is alive among us. I am grateful to have been called to a Diocese that reminds me of the Holy Land, the land where the Child Jesus was born. A land by the sea, a land of fishermen and workers. A land invaded by an empire, where war and persecution were part of daily life. More than twenty centuries later, the world is still at war, immersed in the murky world of politics. This is the case in Ukraine, Russia, the Gaza Strip, Yemen, Sudan, Ethiopia, and so many other places in the world that no one speaks about. A world in which poverty, though immeasurable, is hidden beneath the fantasies of social networks. In the midst of the turbulence of a world that seems to have forgotten God, that seems to have lost any kind of fear in the face of decisions that affect the lives of millions of people—amidst this world—here I am, here we all are called to be, body and soul.

But may our being be permeated by Hope, by the certainty that God knows each of us one by one and loves us as a father loves his children. And may this Hope speak to us of Mary, the young woman of Nazareth who had the audacity to say Yes, the courage to remain with Jesus—from the wondrous night of Bethlehem to the most painful trial a mother can face: the death of a son.

The Church gives us Advent to prepare ourselves, body and soul, for the great feast of Christmas, the greatest mystery of God's Incarnation. Amidst the hustle, the glitter, and the lights, I am—we are—called to seek the dark paths of those who are lost, the silence of those who are abandoned, the absence of color and joy in those who are unemployed, in those who cannot face the day. I am—we are—called to make a difference in someone's life, even if it is only one person.

How beautiful it would be to live this Advent with greater attentiveness, greater simplicity, greater Christian spirit. To arrive at the most beautiful of all nights with a peaceful heart, full of hope for a better world. This will be the world that each one of us is able to create around us.

To have hope. A hope renewed every day and filled with peace and joy every Christmas we celebrate, every Easter we live.

This is the Christmas of the Jubilee, a period of Grace granted to us in this year 2025, which has given us Hope as our guide and beacon. We were pilgrims of hope. This is how I wish that all of us—every one of us—could live this approaching moment. To have Hope as the companion of our days and nights. Because just as it happened on the night of Bethlehem, so too a sky full of stars shines over us, announcing the beauty of eternity. Together with Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, sowers of hope…

RWANDA: ARCHDIOCESE OF KIGALI

Living Hope at the Heart of the Jubilee. A Christmas Message in a World Often Without Peace. Echoes from the Archdiocese of Kigali

Antoine Cardinal Kambanda
Archbishop of Kigali

On the eve of the conclusion of so many celebrations that have marked the Holy Year 2025, it is fitting to reflect on this Pilgrimage of Hope in order to better understand how to live the virtue of hope at the heart of the Jubilee, even when peace seems out of reach. And with the approach of Christmas, what message of hope does it offer in a world so often without peace?
Returning, as we should, to definitions, we find in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) n. 1817 that hope is "the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit. 'Let us hold unwaveringly to our confession that gives us hope, for he who made the promise is trustworthy' (Heb 10:23). The Spirit has been 'poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.'" More than mere optimism or a wish for better days, it is an unshakeable trust in God, who is almighty, and in his fidelity.
The Jubilee, for its part, is best defined in the biblical sense of Leviticus 25. It teaches us social justice through the liberation of slaves, the cancellation of loans and forgiveness of debts, as well as the restoration of land sold or mortgaged to its original owners. Beyond maintaining social balance, it also has this religious aim of reminding us that our earthly inheritance is not an end in itself, but a gift from God to be managed according to his will. People should reflect on this and be converted to this cause. God continues his work of creation and redemption in time. He never ceases to recreate us through his Word. The Jubilee, therefore, remains one of the celebrations of Faith.
It is good that we reflect on these two elements in the light of the religious content of Christmas, which celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ from the Virgin Mary. It is indeed He whom the prophets announce as the Messiah, the promise of salvation (Psalm 27:14). He is our hope. Through his resurrection, he opens for us the way to Heaven (Romans 5:5).
It is only here that our Christmas Message for 2025 takes root, in reference to our diocesan community, so often afflicted by the hardships linked to the lack of peace in today's world. Living hope fully nourishes mutual support in times of trial; it cultivates in us patience and perseverance against every despair; it perfects our love for the ultimate good, which is God, transforming our long-

ing into an expectation of eternal life.

The remembrance of the difficult circumstances of Jesus' birth also helps us not to deny suffering, but to give it meaning. We must remain firm even in difficult moments. God is always present, Emmanuel, and he leads us toward the fullness of life. As part of the celebration of the Jubilee, may Christmas rekindle in us this hope that allows us to pray with confidence. In our families, we must teach our children and young people to do this by reading the Word of God, nourishing themselves with the gifts of the Sacraments, and showing solidarity (charity) toward those who suffer and are in need. The annual celebration of the Nativity of Jesus is not a noble custom, nor a precept to be observed. It is a profession of faith, an unceasing song of Love. It is the acknowledgment offered by humble beings to the Master of motion and being. Thus, Christmas comes and returns like a light in the darkness of the world. It brings consolation to the children of God, often overwhelmed by wars, violations of human rights, lack of basic necessities, and ethnic and racial divisions. The Good News of Christmas is therefore Hope—life constantly striving to renew itself.

Although the word "Jubilee" evokes a spirit of celebration and exultation, this atmosphere does not exclude the virtue of humility to which the manger invites us. Both aspects have characterized the pastoral year in the Archdiocese of Kigali. Through simple celebrations and activities, the faithful have tasted God's blessings, rediscovering once more that peace is not an abundance of goods, nor the enjoyment of power, but the acceptance of unconditional love. The Child of Bethlehem, poor yet Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), stands as an inspiring model for Christian life in today's world.

We celebrate this Christmas as we conclude the Jubilee of the Universal Church. In Rwanda, we simultaneously celebrate the 125th anniversary of evangelization and, in 2026, we will enter the golden jubilee of the Archdiocese of Kigali. This is blessing upon blessing, an opportunity to praise the Lord for his generosity throughout the journey of our particular Church. At the same time, it is a moment to look to the future, so that history…

The memory of fifty years serves as a springboard for leaping forward and walking with the Lord, inviting him into our lives at every moment.

Finally, Christmas is the feast of the family. The family is the domestic Church and the foundation of society. Christmas, as the feast of the family, is a source and motive of hope for the Church and for humanity. May the Holy House of Nazareth be a sure compass, so that our hearts, longing for peace, may burn brightly and the world may know the good that draws its origin and foundation from faith, hope, and love.

Merry Christmas to all.

SERBIA: ARCHBISHOP OF BELGRADE

Signs of Hope of the Holy Year in Today's Serbia

Ladislav Cardinal Nemet, SVD
Archibishop of Belgrade

The Holy Year, and especially the Jubilee of Youth, were powerful moments also for Catholics in Serbia. Although the Catholic community here is a small minority — about 300,000 faithful in a country of nearly 6.3 million inhabitants with an Orthodox majority — participation in the celebrations of the Holy Year and the Jubilee of Youth is a clear sign of vitality and hope.

Several groups of pilgrims from Serbia bore witness to their faith and their love for the universal Church and its Pontiff, Pope Francis, and later for Pope Leo.

The Catholic Church in Serbia is a successful example of catholicity practiced and lived. The International Episcopal Conference of Saints Cyril and Methodius brings together the bishops of Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, showing that it is possible to live in peace and harmony with one another and alongside one another.

Within Serbia, Catholics belong to various ethnic minorities — Hungarian, Croatian, Albanian, Ukrainian, Slovak, Czech, Slovenian, and Bulgarian — who live dispersed among the Serbian Orthodox majority. For them, living in the Church and gathering together represents an experience of unity in diversity, a prophetic sign in a context marked by ethnic and nationalist tensions. The appointment of the Archbishop of Belgrade as Cardinal brought greater recognition of Catholics in the country. In one of my interviews emphasized that I had never received so many positive reactions—from the President, the Prime Minister, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and many others. This is evidence of how the small Catholic community can be a sign of dialogue and openness. In recent years, Serbia has seen a marked rediscovery of popular religiosity, both among Catholics and among Orthodox believers. The Orthodox Church in particular enjoys an extraordinary increase in the number of people attending liturgical celebrations. Even more striking is that most of those practicing are young. It is hoped that this phenomenon will deepen the evangelical spirit in the private and social life of the entire country, after so many tragedies—beginning with the wars of the 1990s, and more recently the massacre in an elementary school in Belgrade, when a 13-year-old boy killed 10 people, and the following day in a small village near Belgrade, where a young man killed 8 people.

Looking at Serbian society as a political-democratic entity, one must acknowledge that it is undergoing a moment of profound transformation which, despite its contradictions, offers several concrete signs of hope for the future of the country and of the Balkans.

A bright and positive sign comes from the student protests that began after the tragic collapse of the canopy at Novi Sad station on November 1, 2024. Students across the country led an unprecedented movement that involved hundreds of thousands of citizens in over 400 localities, demanding above all justice, transparency, and a more effective fight against corruption.

What makes this movement particularly significant is its ability to reconnect a large part of Serbian society beyond the ethnic and nationalist divisions that marked the post-war period (the 1990s). The participation of students from Novi Pazar, a predominantly Muslim city traditionally marginalized, demonstrated a new idea of inclusive national identity.

This movement showed an ability for democratic innovation, practicing forms of popular solidarity, direct democracy through assemblies and plenums, and nonviolent resistance. In 2024 Christmas message after the tragedy in Novi Sad, emphasized the importance of justice in building a society worthy of trust. His voice represented a moral call to the authorities and to all Serbian society.

In conclusion, it can be noted that the signs of hope in today's Serbia reside mainly in the new generation that has found the courage to imagine a different future, in the capacity for dialogue shown by the Catholic Church and by religious communities, and in the renewed religiosity of the masses, especially the young.

SINGAPORE: ARCHDIOCESE OF SINGAPORE

The gifts of Christmas and the Jubilee of Hope

William Seng Chye Cardinal Goh
Archbishop of Singapore

Christmas, the first coming of Christ, anticipates His second coming when the world will be reconciled to God by the hope He brings. This hope is not wishful thinking or a desire for things uncertain, but founded on Christ and His promise of the glory of heaven to those who love Him and do His will.

"Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you..." (1 Peter 3:15). Christmas marks the beginning of this hope realised, bringing love incarnate, joy, and peace to the world, strengthening faith and inspiring charity.

As Pope Francis and Pope Leo said, compassion is at the heart of evangelisation and the proclamation of the Gospel, and it is with compassion that the Archdiocese of Singapore strives to proclaim Christ through dialogue and action for the common good.

Gift of hope Through social and financial assistance programmes, the Church's humanitarian organisations Caritas Singapore and CHARIS – and their affiliate members – continue to bring hope to the needy.

Caritas Singapore supports the disadvantaged and those with special needs regardless of their race, language, or religion; while CHARIS brings aid to countries in crisis, particularly those affected by natural disasters. Care for migrants

The local church recognises migrants are an essential part of Singapore's multicultural society, even as they enrich her liturgies and celebrations with their faith, culture, and traditions.

Through her pastoral mission, the Church pays particular attention to the social integration of these communities who make up a significant part of the Singapore population. This includes those who work in construction, healthcare, and domestic sectors, as well as professionals in the fields of finance, information technology, and hospitality.

Today, the Archdiocese accompanies and supports migrants from China, France, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Myanmar, Indonesia, India, the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam. Through humanitarian outreach, educational initiatives, and pro bono legal and pastoral care, the love and compassion of Christ is presented to these migrants who are far from home, affirming their dignity as members of the Body of Christ.

Trust and understanding

Singapore is one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world, and it is in this context that the Church witnesses through interfaith collaboration.

The Archbishop, for example, hosts an annual Christmas celebration where the leaders of other religions are invited to share their faith perspectives on human themes such as hope and gratitude. Over time, these encounters have come a long way in fostering fellowship and mutual trust between the diverse communities.

Through its various Archdiocesan Organisations, the local church partners the Government to ensure safety and security in its places of worship; builds social cohesion between diverse communities; and promotes healthy marriages and family life, strengthening the very fabric of society.

Pilgrims of hope

Throughout the Jubilee of Hope, the Church journeyed as one.

Many faithful made their pilgrimage to Rome, passing through the Holy Doors, walking the Way of Saint James, and visiting other holy sites around the world; others organised local "caminos" to the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd – the local shrine of pilgrimage – as a sign of unity and renewal of faith.

Yet other churches organised Christmas and Easter celebrations, inviting neighbours and non-Christians alike to celebrate the joy of the Gospel and the reason for their hope,

Our gift of gratitude

As we come to the close of the Jubilee, we thank God for this Year of Hope which reminds us of our Christian calling to proclaim the Prince of Peace to the world, regardless of race, language, or religion.

In a world divided by selfishness, intolerance, and the desire for power, Christmas reminds us that true peace and joy come from humility and self-giving love.

Jesus emptied Himself to dwell with us, identifying with our poverty, suffering, and need for mercy. Through His love and forgiveness, He reconciled us with God, with one another, and with creation.

Let us continue strengthening our faith, asking God's mercy, and sharing His compassion with a world longing for peace and love, giving thanks to Him in all circumstances.

May we be reconcilers, peacemakers, and bridge-builders offering Christian hope to all.

Glory to God, and peace to all people of goodwill!

SYRIA: APOSTOLIC NUNCIATURE IN DAMASCUS

A Christmas of Hope

Mario Cardinal Zenari
Apostolic Nuncio in Syria

During a Papal Audience granted to me in September 2024, I thanked Pope Francis for proclaiming the Jubilee Year of Hope — particularly considering that, in Syria, hope was dying and risked being buried under the rubble of long years of war. The civil war has caused about half a million deaths, 13 million displaced persons, more than 100,000 missing people, and has reduced 90% of the population to living below the poverty line. Moreover, over two-thirds of Christians have emigrated, and the exodus continues unabated, leaving a deep wound in the Eastern Churches and negative consequences for Syrian society itself, which for two thousand years has benefited from the particular contribution of Christians to its social and economic development.

Unexpectedly, on December 8, 2024, with the bloodless fall of the regime and the beginning of a new political course, a tender shoot of hope sprang up among the Syrians amid the euphoria of the moment. A shoot, however, exposed to the strong winds of enormous social, political, and economic challenges.

The international community, taken by surprise, reacted with caution, repeating: "Wait and see!" Personally, as I witnessed the intolerable suffering of people without bread, without work, without electricity, and without medical care, I invited everyone — Christians included — to roll up their sleeves, appealing also to the international community with the encouragement: "Work and see!" Waiting, it seemed to me, bordered on cynicism, as if to say: "Don't hold your breath." For the people, survival came first — discussions could come later.

The new political course had finally managed to free speech after more than 50 years of harsh repression. Prisons were opened, particularly Saydnaya, which held political detainees. At the same time, however, more than 100,000 families remained in bitter disappointment, still uncertain about the fate of their missing loved ones — pain that was further intensified by the gradual discovery of numerous mass graves.

The new government leaders promised to rebuild a new Syria founded on democratic freedoms, respect for human rights, and the inclusion of the various ethnic and religious groups that make up the country's social mosaic. The path toward social cohesion is steep and not without grave and painful events, such as the massacre — mostly of Alawite civilians — that occurred in the coastal region in March of this year, and another in the province of Sweida this past July. Added to these was the bloody terrorist attack against Christians at the Greek Orthodox Church of Mar Elie in Damascus on June 22.

Government authorities are striving in various ways to unlock international funds, without which there can be no reconstruction or economic revival. Many promises have been made — such as the lifting of sanctions and other measures — yet all remain slow to materialize. Meanwhile, among people still without work, healthcare, or electricity, disappointment and discontent continue to grow. As President Ahmad Al-Sharaa reminded us, investments are a priority. In this regard, Pope St. Paul VI already taught that "development is the new name for peace." And Pope Francis has repeatedly emphasized the importance of a spirit of fraternity among nations, as expressed in the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together signed in Abu Dhabi in 2019, and in the 2020 Encyclical Fratelli Tutti.

For Syria, this remains but a tender flower of hope — one that bloomed unexpectedly a year ago amid thorns and remains exposed to the strong winds of the troubled Middle East region. Will this fragile shoot survive? Some believe it will. Others are doubtful and uncertain. The international community seems to believe in it, as shown by President Ahmad Al-Sharaa's participation last September in the Plenary Assembly of the United Nations and by his visit — as the first Syrian President in history — to the White House in Washington. Only a year ago, a bounty of 10 million US dollars hung over his head, as he was considered a dangerous terrorist!

Is it possible to bet on hope? During the Angelus of October 12, Pope Leo described the fragile cease-fire agreement in Gaza as a "spark of hope." May this "spark of hope" take hold and spread throughout Syria and the entire Middle East!

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO

HE CAME AMONG US: CHRISTMAS HOPE AND SYNODALITY

Blase Joseph Cardinal Cupich Archbishop of Chicago

These past several years and stretching into the future, the Church throughout the world has been invited to consider and embrace synodality. This is a word that simply means walking together in a way that opens us to discover and discern the presence of the Holy One of God working in our midst, putting aside our fears and believe in Emmanuel, God who is with us.

The biblical narratives that surround the birth of Jesus capture so well the essence of synodality. They invite us into the stories of multiple figures who encounter and discover the Lord's pres-ence in their lives: Mary and the Archangel Gabriel, Mary and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem, the Holy Family and the shepherds, the Magi, and Simeon and Anna in the Temple. At every juncture, people of faith on their journeys, who walk together, encounter each other but in doing so meet and discover the presence of the newborn Messiah in their midst. Christmas is once again an invitation to discover that the newborn Prince of Peace walks us, giving birth to new hope, a new sense that God is truly with his people, Emmanuel. That hope overcomes the forces of sin and death which threatened to overshadow and dominate a fragile world. Today, we need this hope as we con-tinue to live in a fragile world. War, en-vironmental degradation, the economic exploitation of vulnerable populations, natural disasters, health crises, the specter of famine—all these suggest a dim future. And while we must be real-istic about assuming our proper respon-sibility for the world, we do so with hope, as we celebrate once again that God has broken the bar-rier between eternity and time, divinity and humanity to walk with us.

Our proclamation of the Christmas stories gives new meaning for our lives and our world for there is nothing that separates us from the love of Christ, even our sinfulness and death itself. So let us be filled with hope and be empowered to move to-gether on the road, helping each other along the way to make the journey, confident that from the very beginning of time the Father has always wanted us to enter his house and gather around the banquet table of his love.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: APOSTOLIC NUNCIATURE IN WASHINGTON D.C.

Hope Does Not Disappoint

Christophe Cardinal Pierre
Apostolic Nuncio to the United States of America

Hope, as Pope Francis reminded us by quoting Saint Paul, does not disappoint. It does not say, "it might not disappoint." Nor does it say, "it usually doesn't disappoint." No. Hope does not disappoint — meaning it is impossible for it to disappoint.

Why can we say this?
Well, Paul continues. The reason hope does not disappoint is "because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."
In short: God has done something that cannot be undone.
We look at the state of the world and are understandably alarmed by the amount of human antagonism — measured not only by wars between nations and peoples, but also by dictatorships, acts of public violence, conflicts within homes and families, and suicidal despair in the hearts of individuals.
If we take out our calculators to add up and multiply all the statistics that seem to demonstrate the exact opposite of Christ's saving work and his Gospel in the course of human affairs, we might think we have reason to contradict or at least question the Apostle's conviction that hope does not disappoint. Countless people are disappointed — and worse than disappointed — in countless ways. How, then, can we hope for a better world that truly manifests the power of Christ's saving work?
Well… in a certain sense, that very question contains the problem. Is it really "a better world" that we hope for? Do we hope for better leaders, better policies, fewer wars, more peace? Is that truly the object of our hope? In other words, is our hope directed toward a more favorable outcome?
In fact, the answer to that question is "no."
At first, this may seem puzzling — even, let's admit it, disappointing. But in truth, ceasing to "hope" for what is not really the object of hope at all can be very beneficial to us, in that it purifies our hope.
The object of hope — true hope, theological hope, the divine gift of hope — is nothing other than the permanent and saving act that Christ has already accomplished, continues to accomplish in humanity, and will unfailingly bring to completion in the perfection of the eschatological Kingdom. It is our hope in that reality of which Saint Paul speaks.
Now, this fact — this saving act in which we hope, with full certainty that it has already been accomplished — produces beautiful effects in the lives of those who hope in this way. If everyone in the world — every president or prime minister, every government official or legislator, every business leader or board member — lived their life grounded in this hope in Christ, then yes: there would be no wars, no financial corruption, no abuse or systematic human violence.
That is the world we (rightly) desire, because it is the world that would exist if Christian hope reigned supreme in every human heart.
We see how incredibly far we are from that world, and so we are tempted to do the opposite of hoping: to despair. Or, perhaps more commonly and more insidiously, to become indifferent.
And so… Christmas?
Yes, Christmas. What Christmas reveals to us — as it must reveal again and again and again, like the father responding to his child's request, "Read the story again, papa!" — is the true meaning of the true hope that, in reality, has not disappointed us.
Namely: that Christ entered the heart of a Virgin through the Spirit, and thus was able to take flesh in the womb of that Virgin, so that in that same flesh he could touch the leper, exorcise the possessed, and die upon the Cross for every person in human history who did not have the privilege of living with him during his brief earthly life.
You and I, each of us, are that Virgin, that disciple, that convert, that leper. Each of us is capable, through the living and active Holy Spirit in this world, of being touched by Christ and of passing on this spiritual experience to others.
And this spreading of the Gospel life of the risen Christ brings about, even in the smallest ways, the "results" we long for — not yet a world at peace, but living love in that "world" contained within a human heart that opens itself to the Savior: mine, yours, and another's whom we meet in love.
In each of those hearts, a space can open wide enough for Christ to dwell — just as he dwelt in the heart of the Virgin.
And she, most certainly, is a woman of hope.

SWEDEN: DIOCESE OF STOCKHOLM

Christmas – The War Winter of 2025

Anders Cardinal Arborelius, OCD
Bishop of Stockholm

When God becomes human on our earth, everything changes. However difficult and seemingly hopeless the situation may be for many, especially for all who live in the shadow of war, the light of hope is still kindled for our whole world. God wants, at any cost, to come to the aid of us who are weak and vulnerable. Throughout the Old Testament we see how God longs to support and lead his people on the path of peace and mercy. That is why he constantly calls for conversion, for obedience and attentiveness to his words and commandments. Time and again we see how the people go their own way and fall away from faith and righteousness. When nothing else helps, God sends his beloved Son to us, to help us live in righteousness and love, in peace and unity.

In the person and message of Jesus we see how we are to live so that peace and justice may prevail on earth. That is why it is so important to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus in prayer, and to enter ever more deeply into who he is and receive what he wants to say to us, so that we may reflect him in everything we say and do. He wants to help us build a world of peace and justice for all. At the same time, we see how we humans so often choose the paths of violence and sin, of war and oppression. But the God who sends his Son into the world as a poor and powerless little child does not give up hope for his humanity. He continues to hope for us, that we will turn toward the Child in the manger, so that we may learn the ways of love and goodness. That is why hope is always something divine—yes, a theological virtue, a source of strength that binds humanity inseparably to God.

The mystery of Christmas continues to speak to us, telling us that God's peace has come to our earth. God's eternal glory, heaven itself, can already be glimpsed in the midst of our reality, because God has chosen to share it with us by becoming our little brother in the manger of Bethlehem. Therefore, there is always hope. In the midst of winter's war we can sense that God's peace waits for us. But we humans must receive this message. We must long for it with all our hearts. We must learn to listen intently to the faint voice of the child in the manger, calling us to become like children, to convert ever more deeply.

Since God was born into our world, he remains here. The Incarnation is a lasting reality, only strengthened by the Resurrection. Jesus Christ has shared our human condition—even the pain of life and all the suffering that humanity has endured through the ages. He has come to share our burdens, to free us from them, as we see from the manger all the way to the cross. That is why we can always see Jesus in all human suffering, in everything that weighs humanity down and makes life heavy and unbearable. He has risen and thus conquered the powers of evil and violence. He is with us in our struggle against evil and sin. He remains with us. He cannot abandon us. He is irrevocably bound to our painful history. He has come to save and set free. He carries us when we can no longer carry ourselves. He cannot turn his gaze away from us; it rests upon us always, to give us hope in hopelessness, light in darkness. When no one else remains, he stays by our side. He is risen to draw us to himself and share his eternal glory with us.

That is why hope is so vital. All the problems and conflicts, the wars and all the other misery cannot simply disappear; but if we can perceive the hidden Jesus amid all this hardship, then there is always hope, however small. However desperate our situation—and the situation of our entire world—may seem, hope can never be taken from us. Jesus has come into our world to stay, to remain by our side. He often seems more hidden and invisible to our eyes, but to our hearts he is always present. Our hearts are created to resemble his sacred heart. We can find rest and peace only when we open ourselves to his heart, when we surrender and yield. However desperate things may look in many places in our world, the weak and sometimes flickering flame of hope can never be extinguished. When God becomes human and is born in Bethlehem, the flame of hope is lit once and for all. This light must continue to shine in our world—both in the Holy Land and in all places ravaged by war and violence. Within us, our hope is to be strengthened. Through what we do, we are to show that we are peacemakers following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Vatican

The Smallness of God

Sr. Simona Brambilla, MC
Prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life

The incredible capacity of God to make Himself small—perhaps this is what astonishes us the most, what fascinates us, moves us, and captures us—somewhere between wonder and dismay—as we gaze, enchanted, at the nativity scene.
A few years ago, I was particularly struck by a reflection offered by the then Bishop of Civita Castellana—the diocese to which the Generalate of my Institute belongs—on the occasion of the pilgrimage of the statue of Saint Michael the Archangel to the parish of Nepi. Starting from the meaning of the name Michael—"Who is like God?"—Monsignor Romano Rossi led us into the mystery of God's greatness, but also of His smallness. It is quite easy for us to think that, indeed, no one is like God because God is great, infinite, while creatures are small and finite. God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent. It is therefore evident that no one is like God, because no one is as great as He is. Yet, the Bishop helped us to reflect further: let us also ask ourselves whether any of us would choose to become as small as God. That is, to descend, to empty oneself, to annihilate oneself out of love. He, the Infinite, chose to become small—so very small—to take flesh, becoming a tiny embryo in the womb of a virgin, to be born in a cave, to live in an obscure village working as a carpenter—being God. And to make Himself a servant out of love: the One who bends down to wash feet, who takes our sufferings into His own body, who forgives insults and offenses, who gives Himself entirely and surrenders to death—even death on a cross—who becomes bread broken and wine poured out. Who is like God in His smallness?
Blessed be the smallness of God, who descends among us!
Blessed be the smallness of God, who becomes a child for us!
Blessed be the smallness of God, who becomes bread and wine, food and drink for us! Come, Lord Jesus, into our smallness and make it Your own. You, the Infinite One who can gather Yourself into a fragment of bread, make every fragment of our existence fruitful with Eternity! You, the Word who joined Yourself to flesh, make our humanity a transparency of the Invisible!
You, the Creator who longs to dwell in the creature, grant us a pure heart that can see You in all things!
You, the Almighty who rejoices in Your little ones, grant us the joy of the small, who know how to rejoice in You!
Maranatha, come, Lord Jesus!

The Hope Born of Encounter and Walking Together

+ Flavio Pace
Archbishop, Secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unityi

The Jubilee Year 2025, which began under the pontificate of Pope Francis, draws to a close under the guidance of Pope Leo XIV, whose motto In illo uno unum ("In the One, we are one") holds particular resonance for the journey toward unity among all believers in Christ. One cannot remain silent about the causes for concern linked to tensions within various partners of the Catholic Church's ecumenical dialogue — one need only think of those within the world of Byzantine Orthodoxy — which urge us to invoke with greater intensity the gift of the Spirit of reconciliation, healing, and communion. After all, the mystery of Christmas, which we are preparing to celebrate, reminds us of the difficulty of welcoming the Word made flesh — both in the narrative perspective of the Infancy Gospels and in the more theological one of John's Prologue. Yet, in that same text we also find the clear affirmation: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:5).
Signs of this light have also characterized the Catholic Church's ecumenical journey in Rome during this Jubilee Year, offering hope and renewed momentum against resignation. I think first of the period of Pope Francis's illness and death, which, alongside the prayer of the Holy Rosary in St. Peter's Square, saw an ecumenical prayer vigil for the health of the Holy Father and for all the sick, led by the Taizé Community and attended by non-Catholic Christians of Rome in the church of San Lorenzo in Piscibus. In the days preceding the Pope's funeral and during the funeral rites themselves, delegations from all Christian partners came in succession to pay homage — a spontaneous movement that sought to honor a father and brother on the journey toward full visible unity. There were also some Jewish brothers present: a rabbi from the United States, wearing his kippah, recited Psalm 23 in Hebrew, entrusting to the Lord, the Good Shepherd, a friend who was also a friend to the Jewish community.
The beginning of Pope Leo's pontificate likewise saw the presence of numerous delegations from Eastern and Western Churches and Christian Communions, starting with His Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. At the end of the Eucharistic Celebration, Pope Leo personally greeted some of them, and received all the delegations the following day, together with representatives of Judaism and other religions. On that occasion, he referred to his motto, connecting it to the path toward full unity:
"In fact, the quest for unity has always been a constant concern of mine, as witnessed by the motto I chose for my episcopal ministry: In illo uno unum, an expression of Saint Augustine of Hippo, which reminds us that even though we are many, 'in that One — that is, Christ — we are one' (Enarr. in Ps., 127, 3). Our communion is realized to the extent that we converge in the Lord Jesus. The more faithful and obedient we are to Him, the

more we are united among ourselves. Therefore, as Christians, we are all called to pray and work together, step by step, toward this goal, which is and remains the work of the Holy Spirit. Aware also that synodality and ecumenism are closely linked, I wish to assure my intention to continue Pope Francis's commitment to fostering the synodal character of the Catholic Church and to developing new and concrete forms of an ever deeper synodality in the ecumenical field."

When these pages appear, we will all have been able to witness and support in prayer the commemoration of the First Ecumenical Council, to be held in Nicaea — present-day İznik in Turkey — on November 28, and the following day's meeting, November 29, between Pope Leo, Patriarch Bartholomew, and other Christian leaders or their delegates. The remains of the Council's basilica lie for most of the year beneath the waters of the lake that has formed in the area, yet visible will be the desire to respond to Jesus' prayer at the Last Supper: "that they may all be one" (Jn 17). This too is a sign of hope for the journey of Christ's disciples — a journey on which we do not wish to be mere spectators, but active participants, supported by fervent intercession.

Not least is the relationship with the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion. Although many commentators in recent weeks have focused on the challenges for dialogue that might arise from the election of a new Archbishop of Canterbury — for the first time a woman — they seem to forget that both the 2006 Common Declaration between Pope Benedict XVI and Archbishop Rowan Williams, and the 2016 one between Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin Welby, already acknowledged the challenge posed by the ordination of women as priests and later as bishops, yet reaffirmed the desire and necessity to continue walking together.

Signs of hope have also come from King Charles's visit to Pope Leo, with prayer in the Sistine Chapel and the conferral of the title Confrater upon the Sovereign at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls — a gesture wrongly interpreted in some circles as a mere "honor," whereas it was in fact the fruit of long conversation and collaboration between the Ecumenical Offices of the Catholic Church and the Church of England. This rediscovery of historical dimensions of the relationship between the Basilica and the English Crown, as well as the symbolic importance of that Church within the ecumenical movement — particularly in its ties with the Catholic Church — marks another hopeful step.

Finally, deeply moving was the proclamation of Saint John Henry Newman as Doctor of the Universal Church on November 1. In the petitio addressed by Cardinal Semeraro to the Holy Father at the beginning of the celebration, explicit mention was made of the support offered by the Church of England to the petition. That Church indeed sent to Rome a distinguished delegation led by Archbishop Stephen Cottrell of York — then the highest-ranking figure of the Church of England, since Her Grace Sara Mullally, newly designated Archbishop of Canterbury, had not yet been installed.

The proclamation of Newman as Doctor of the Church, approved by Pope Leo XIV and resulting from the discernment of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints with the nihil obstat of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, acknowledges the eminence of his doctrine not only from the moment he entered into full communion with the Catholic Church, but also in all the writings and reflections of his Anglican period. This too is a luminous sign of hope for the continuing ecumenical journey — a call to recognize the gifts the Lord has bestowed even beyond the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church.

Christmas: A Story of Hope

+ Ivo Muser
Bishop of Bolzano-Bressanone

The story of Christmas has, for centuries, been a story of hope. It is a story that, despite profound cultural and social changes, continues to resonate with surprising force. Even though, in our own land, this hope seems to be turning into a "vague longing," almost no one seems willing to give it up completely. It is a paradox we experience every year: no other feast—religious, cultural, or political—is as globally present as Christmas. And yet, the Church, the very institution without which this story and its celebration would not exist, has long since lost the primacy that once allowed it to be its authoritative interpreter. In a sense, Christmas has "emigrated." It has found a home in different contexts, becoming, not infrequently, the emblem of unrestrained consumerism—a phenomenon that, admittedly, many have wanted and fostered.

In the face of this, a Christian may feel a twinge of concern. Yet, at the same time, one cannot help but be fascinated and comforted by an evident fact: the Christmas story contains, intrinsically, something that continues to touch people deeply—in the very core of their hearts and in their longing for meaning—even

when it appears in a "secular guise," stripped of its religious connotations.

But where does this story actually begin? Not in an idyllic cradle, as popular imagination might suggest, but in a surprisingly political way—with a State decree. It begins with a census, with life reduced to numbers: counting, gathering data, recording everything. The evangelist Luke presents us with the Roman emperor Augustus, the "divine ruler," who orders all the inhabitants of his vast empire to register in their towns of origin. It is an act of power, a strategy of control, taxation, and domination. And here, the first great reversal takes place. The narrative of the census is suddenly interrupted, and Luke begins a "counter-story." No longer will it be about the empire's revenues, but about "ordinary Jewish folk": Mary and Joseph, a child in a manger and humble shepherds.

It is the story of people who are counted, registered, and noted down—but who do not "count" in the eyes of the world. They obey the imperial decree, they set out on their way, yet their journey leads elsewhere. It does not end in the census ordered by the emperor, but unfolds into a much greater Narrative.

And the message of this Narrative is clear and profoundly unsettling: it is not the emperor of Rome who brings salvation and hope, but a defenseless child in a poor manger. It is a great reversal—a turning upside down of dominant, established values. Since then, this story of hope has been seeking men and women who believe that a different humanity and peaceful solutions to conflict are possible—and who act accordingly. It seeks those who have the strength to break free from the vicious circle of irreconcilability, from that harmful reflex that turns the neighbor into an adversary, the refugee into an enemy, the fellow human into a threat. Such a change of perspective demands immense courage. This courage is what the child in the manger represents—it is the very heart of the story of hope bound to the man we call Jesus of Nazareth.

The Christmas Tree: A Symbol of Life in the Story of Hope

A special place among Christmas traditions is held by the Christmas tree: its presence in our homes, adorned with lights, is not merely decorative. It carries with it a message deeply rooted in Christian hope. The Christmas tree represents the Tree of Paradise—but with a crucial difference: its fruits, the colorful ornaments we hang from its branches, no longer bear the mark of death and separation, like the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. On the contrary, they convey a message of joy—of celebration and of life.

The Nativity Scene: A Silent Homily on Incarnate Hope

Beside the tree, the Nativity scene completes the picture with its intimate and powerful story. Among the figures that once again fill our homes and churches during these weeks, beyond the main characters—the Child, Mary and Joseph—stand the ox and the donkey, ever-present since the earliest depictions. They are not mere extras. They hold a profound symbolic value, revealing the mystery of God's Incarnation. They represent the Tierwelt—the animal world—and, ultimately, all of creation, which awaits the Revelation of God.

An Exhortation: Guarding the Christian Heart of Christmas

In an age of relativism and secularization, a spontaneous desire arises: that Christmas may remain a Christian feast. That many prepare for Advent and then celebrate Christmas not out of vague cultural tradition, but because they are Christians and wish to remain so. The manger and the Cross are not primarily signs of culture or of mere human solidarity. They are, first and foremost and irrevocably, signs of the Christian profession of faith in the Lord who became man, was crucified, and rose again.

To rediscover and live this profession of faith is to draw from a source of inner confidence that has no need to feed fear toward the symbols or people of other religions. Whoever truly cherishes the sacredness of their faith will never need to stir up populist fears against others.

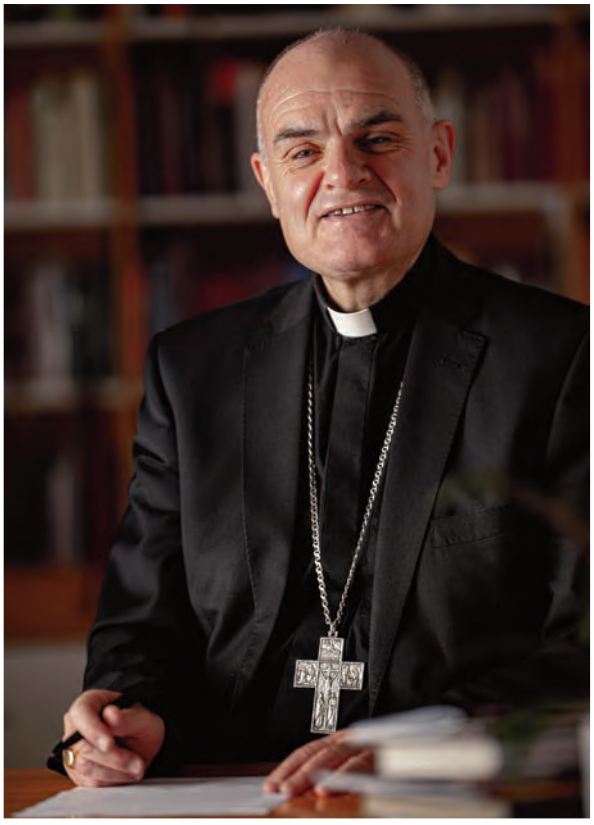
The Hope That Does Not Disappoint

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, there resounds a promise that seals every Christian hope: "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the world." These words of Jesus are not merely a beautiful ending to a story—they are a beginning, a commission to continue writing His Good News with our lives, "in word and deed," every day, until the end of the world. Especially where people touch their own limits, their end, their desperate need for help.

The hope of Christmas, symbolized by the light of the tree and narrated in the Nativity scene, is this: the promise of a Presence that does not abandon us. It is the invitation to become, in turn, bearers of that light and that love.

The deepest wish, then, is that of a genuine encounter—like that of the Magi: "When they saw the star, they rejoiced with great joy. Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him."

May we all have this experience. May we find a Christmas joy that endures—that does not fade with the last decoration packed away in the cellar. For, in the end, one cannot celebrate Christmas without the One who is celebrated. Everything speaks of Him. It is about Christ. Without Him, Christmas loses its soul, and our hope its foundation. He is our identity and the center of our faith. In the wonder of this miracle—this Child who is God—we find the strength to be, in a world often dark, shining trees and living cradles of a hope that does not disappoint.



Christmas: A Song of Hope

+ Giuseppe Giudice
Bishop of Nocera Inferiore-Sarno

Filled with wonder before the Nativity scene, Admirabile signum (Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter, 1 December 2019), pilgrims of hope in this Holy Year — opened by Pope Francis and continued by Pope Leo XIV — it is not taken for granted to ask ourselves: where is hope born, who is it, and for whom is it born? Every nativity scene, in its beauty and uniqueness, in the intertwining of art and tradition, helps us to respond with trust.
Hope is born in Bethlehem, a geographical periphery; it is born for all; hope is a Child, the Only Son of God, clothed in the garments of our humanity.
If we look with our hearts, we realize that within the wood of the cradle the wood of the cross is already hidden; and the true light that enlightens everyone (John 1:9) is always and only the light of Easter, Unica Spes, which begins to shine in Bethlehem.
Christ is the Hope that neither deceives nor deludes, even when I do not know or recognize Him; He is Lumen Gentium, the light reflected on the face of the Church. The nativity scene of the Diocese of Nocera Inferiore-Sarno — designed, prepared, and lovingly assembled to be offered to the Pope this year— also seeks to respond to the questions about hope.
Guided by the gaze of children, themselves signs of hope, we let ourselves be led by the hand to contemplate the marvels of God — mirabilia Dei — becoming small and humble disciples before the manger, grasping its surprising relevance:
"For by His incarnation the Son of God has in a certain way united Himself with every man.
He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, He acted with a human will, He loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin" (GS 22).
To the notes of Tu scendi dalle stelle and other traditional Italian Christmas songs by Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, our nativity scene — faithful to tradition yet open to innovation — seeks to represent our local land, blending art, devotion, and the bounty of the earth, almost like a window open to the world.
It is the children, the poetry of Christmas, who guide us through the various characters — real icons of existential situations — in which each person can rediscover a fragment of their own story and open themselves to hope. Saint Alphonsus welcomes us into a typical courtyard home, with his harpsichord, the image of Our Lady, and a clock reminding us that time is worth only as much as God is worth.
Unique among the figures is the shepherd of the Holy Year, who, carrying an anchor, points toward the Holy Door — as if to guide the many figures of the nativity scene along their path, reached where they are by the Good News, the Gospel of Christmas.
Two highly relevant themes, signs of hope, are highlighted

through the witness of the Servants of God, Don Enrico Smaldone and Alfonso Russo. The first is the theme of education — increasingly an emergency today — with the invitation to Draw maps of hope (cf. Leo XIV, Apostolic Letter, 28 October 2025); and the second, the theme of volunteer service and care for the fragile, the small, and the sick, to say that in the Nativity there is hope for everyone (cf. Leo XIV, Apostolic Exhortation Dilexi Te, 4 October 2025).

The Magi, with their mounts, garments, and gifts, attract the little ones, who recognize in them those who seek what is true, good, and beautiful — and how life itself becomes a journey, a gift, and an offering.

The angels and stars cannot be missing — signs of heaven illuminating the earth, fixed stars in humanity's path, always in search of a point of reference. Thus, the nativity scene, with all its details to be discovered and admired, becomes a fusion of heaven and earth, a luminous trail for the many wanderers and pilgrims.

And once again it is the children, our little teachers, who lead us to the heart of the Christmas mystery — to the central scene set in a particular place. The early Christian Baptistery, the place of every person's rebirth in Christ, serves as the grotto and stable — the place where life begins, the Gospel of life, the Good News without which hope cannot blossom.

The old walls crumble, or remain as witnesses of a world that has passed, while Christ makes all things new (Rev 21:5). The heart of it all lies where Truth is laid upon the straw — fragile as crystal and strong as diamond — contemplated by Mary and Joseph, so that the words mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister regain their original flavor and give rise to new relationships.

And the fountain, placed a short distance away, reminds us that the waters of baptism are only the beginning; later, in life's pilgrimage, we also need the waters of penance and tears — to be reborn after every starless night, and to hold together, in a design of justice, forgiveness, and peace.

Let us admire the nativity scene not as a mere religious object or ornament, but as an open page of a new civilization — the Civilization of Hope — no longer built on fragile materials, but founded on solid rock, an indestructible foundation, a cornerstone: Christ, my hope that does not disappoint — the eternally young Christ, heart of the nativity, heart of the world, and heart of the Church.

Nativity and Hope: the Gift Reborn in Daily Work

Every year, in the industrious quiet of the Industrial Center, the Directorate of Infrastructure and Services, and many other sectors of the Governorate, I meet women and men who offer the Holy See a service that is discreet, competent and deeply human. For over fifteen years, as their chaplain, I have lived the Advent season at their side: in Eucharistic celebrations, in homilies, in brief exchanges in the workshops. It is there that I discover the concrete face of hope.

The Jubilee now drawing to a close has reminded us that hope is not a vague feeling, but a strength: it allows us to rediscover a deeper meaning even in daily toil. At Christmas, this hope takes on a name and a face: that of the Son of God, who is born in simplicity, who will grow up beside a craftsman, sharing for thirty or forty years the life of those who support their family through the work of their hands.

Saint Joseph, with his patient industriousness, is close to the workers I meet each day: hard labor, sacrifice, conditions that are not always easy. And yet it is precisely there— in the small workshop of Nazareth as in the departments of the Vatican— that God's presence becomes a silent and faithful companion.

It is in this spirit that the words of the Holy Father Leo XIV also resound. In his first meeting with Vatican personnel, on May 24, 2025, just a few days after his election, he said: "Each person offers his or her contribution by carrying out daily work with

dedication and also with faith, because faith and prayer are like salt for food—they give flavor." That reminder, received with emotion, has become for many a confirmation of the dignity of their service. The Pope also added: "…we must all cooperate in the great cause of unity and love. Let us try to do this first of all through our conduct in everyday situations, beginning even in the workplace." Words that invite each person to discover in their work a concrete way of participating in the mission of the Church.

My homiletic reflections— and those of my confrères who assist in the spiritual care of the personnel— often emphasize this: recognizing in work not only a duty, but a path of fulfillment and gift. Those who serve the Holy See with dedication contribute not only to efficiency, but above all to an atmosphere of fraternity, respect, and collaboration, even when it is not easy.

Christmas in the Governorate is a time of great activity: countless things to coordinate, final preparations, commitments that follow one after another without pause. Everyone wants everything to be ready and beautiful. And right in the midst of this intensity arises my strongest invitation: to find a space, even a small one, to prepare not only the surroundings but the heart. To allow Jesus to be born within us, despite haste and worries.

The hope that Christmas offers us is not escape: it is the ability to discover, in work and in relationships, a light that does not go out. It is the courage to return home after a demanding day and offer one's family a smile; to cultivate good relationships with colleagues; to pass on to one's children the joy of what we do. Vatican City is not a place like any other: it is a space where faith can become a way of life, where work carries a spiritual value and where hope becomes a daily responsibility.

In a world wounded by wars, violence, and uncertainty, Christmas reminds us that God continues to draw near. And He entrusts to us a simple yet decisive mission: to be bearers of hope through our work, our kindness, and our silent witness.

Father Bruno Silvestrini, OSA
Custodian of the Apostolic Sacristy

The Paschal Mystery has its Beginning in the Mystery of the Incarnation and the Nativity

During these Christmas festivities, with the closing of the Holy Door of the Vatican Basilica, the Ordinary Jubilee proclaimed by Pope Francis on May 9, 2024, with the Bull Spes non confundit will come to an end. The title is taken from a passage in Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans (5:5), in which the Apostle refers to the plan of universal salvation conceived by the Father and brought to fulfillment, in the hour of His Passion, Death, and Resurrection, by His Only-Begotten Son, clothed with the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is the Paschal Mystery announced in the Scriptures and made present—by the command of the Lord Jesus—in the celebration that perpetually commemorates His Death and Resurrection, the supreme sign of His Love for all of us, who are not "righteous" in the eyes of God but "still sinners." As we read in Philippians 2:6–11, it is therefore possible to affirm that the Paschal Mystery has its beginning in the Mystery of the Incarnation and the Nativity of the Lord, in which He came into the world "emptied" of His divine condition, having taken on the utterly humbling state of a "servant," that of mortal man. The liturgical feasts of the Christmas season emphasize the connection with Easter. This is clearly seen in the Octave of Christmas, in which the Gospel passage recounts the Circumcision of the Lord "on the eighth day," in obedience to the Law. On that occasion, the Child Jesus sheds His precious blood for the first time—an anticipation of the blood He would pour out on the Cross for the remission of sins.

The Christmas season concludes with the feast of the Baptism of the Lord in the waters of the Jordan, evoking the waves of death that symbolize the burden of sin in the world—sin that He takes upon Himself, transforming those waters into waters of New Life, that of the "beloved" Son upon whom the Spirit descends in the form of a "dove." The dove protects her young beneath her wings; likewise, the Holy Spirit accompanies and guards the Son, who in filial obedience to the Father sets out toward the Cross.

The Christmas festivities end with the solemnity of the Epiphany, in which the universal salvific will of the Father is revealed—the will to gather all "nations," represented by the Magi, into the family of God's children, that is, into the Body of Christ, which is the Church.

Because the Lord's Nativity—understood in the light of the Apos-

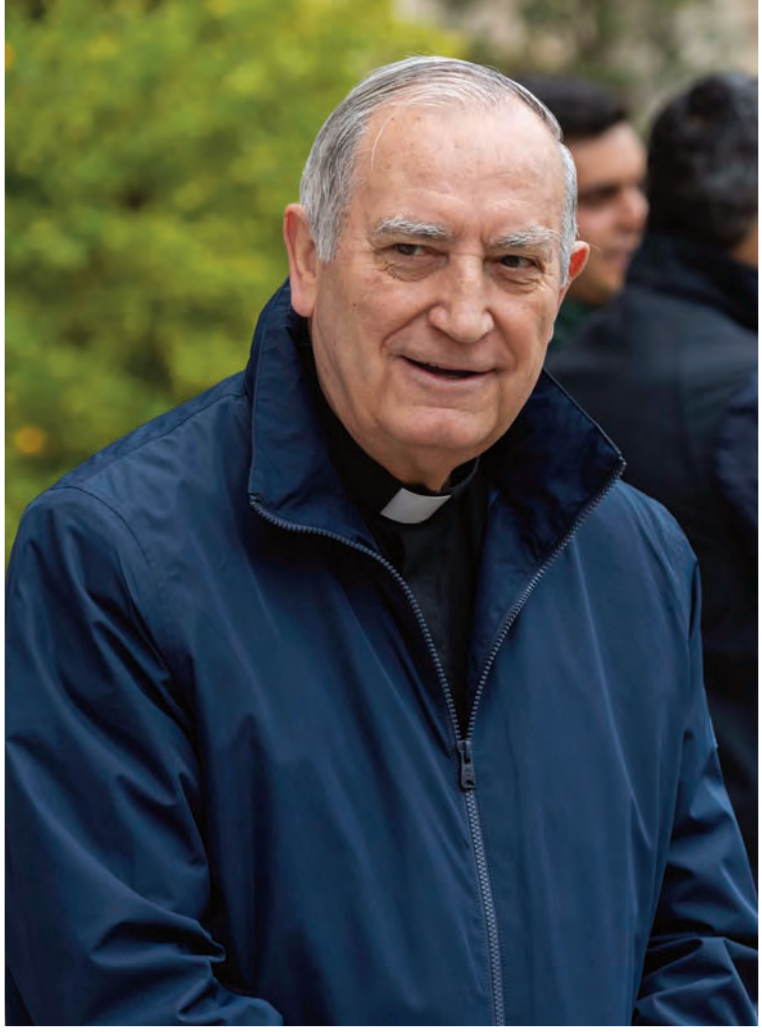
tle's writings cited above as the beginning of the Paschal Mystery, the foundation of the Hope that does not deceive or disappoint—Pastors and the Faithful alike are called to be formed by the Scriptures proclaimed throughout the festive season and to learn to pray as the Church teaches in the prayers of the Missal. These prayers perfectly express the content of the biblical readings proclaimed, revealing within human history the grace of God's love in His Son, Jesus.

In this regard, I would like to briefly mention the work of Father Giacomo Alberione (1884–1971), a humble man still little known today. As a teenager, during the night between the 19th and 20th centuries, while praying in the cathedral of the town of Alba, he perceived a clear illumination—to "do something for the men and women who would live with him in the new century." This inspiration concerned the use of the "swiftest and most effective" means of social communication in the service of a widespread dissemination of the Gospel and of the entire Bible, to be placed in the hands of preachers of the Word and of the faithful. With pastoral insight, he wished the biblical texts to be accompanied by introductory and explanatory notes to aid comprehension according to the Church's own reading and interpretation.

From that moment on, the Pauline printing houses, spread across all continents, tirelessly produced new editions of the Gospels and of the Scriptures in every language. The most recent edition of the Bible, presented last October, is in Arabic. Saint Paul VI fully recognized the charismatic gift shining in the heart of Father Alberione. Meeting him on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, on June 28, 1969, he said: "Here he is: humble, silent, tireless, ever watchful, ever recollected in thought—his thoughts running from prayer to work (according to the traditional formula: ora et labora)—always intent on discerning the 'signs of the times,' that is, the most ingenious ways of reaching souls. Our Don Alberione has given the Church new instruments to express herself, new means to give strength and breadth to her apostolate, new capacity and new awareness of the value and the possibility of her mission in the modern world, with modern means."

Father Alberto Fusi, SSP
Directorate of
Telecommunications and
Information Systems

Pilgrims in Hope with Saint Thomas



Peregrinantes in Spem cum Sancto Thoma

We began this Holy Year, urged on by the late Pope Francis, under the Pauline motto of the Jubilee Bull Spes non confundit (Rom 5:5). It summons the whole People of God—priestly, prophetic, and kingly—to "journey in Hope" toward the common Homeland of God's Heaven. That Heaven of God for which we long for every day, exhorted by the prayer of the Our Father, which interprets our hopes. The very word "hope" (spes) already speaks to us of open spaces, of breath and heart widening, of frequently scanning the horizon, of the seer's upward gaze (spao, spicere, spondeo, speculare...) to see whence help comes to us, or more simply, of walking—just as Saint Isidore of Seville suggests in one of his ingenuous Etymologies:

"Spes is so called because the root pes is present for moving forward: quasi est pes. The opposite is disperazione or despair, where the root is lacking (deest enim ibi pes), and there is no capacity to advance." (Etymologiarum, Book VIII, c.2: PL 82, 296).

In this case, it is a matter of crossing almost liturgically through the Holy Door: "I am the door: whoever enters through me will be saved" (Jn 10:9). This is the Door of God's Mercy, which allows us to pass through Christ into the Sancta spoken of in the Letter to the Hebrews (6:19–20), which Saint Thomas Aquinas commented on as follows: "He, as our forerunner, has passed beyond the Veil for us, and there He has fixed our Hope, as is said in the Collect of the Vigil and the Day of the Ascension" (In Haebr., 6, lect. 4).

But it is not only a question of the more or less Pelagian effort of our walking. This Door is not content to wait for us, but, "lifting up its ancient lintels," comes toward us and takes the initiative by knocking at the doors of our freedom. Christ Himself is the first who, in His humanity, crosses the Door of His divinity and comes to our door, as in the beginning He came to the Door of Mary's freedom: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, dine with him, and he with me" (Rev 3:20). Therefore Saint Augustine, amazed at this divine mobility, rebuked us: "Arise lazy one! The Way itself comes toward you!" (In Evangelium Johannis, Tract. 34, n.9).

Mary, in this divine play of doors, was the first to open her door to Christ when "for us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven," meriting the title Janua Coeli. She is that mystical door through which, in the beginning—as Thomas says with Augustine—"the Lord alone enters and goes forth" (S. Th., III, q.8, a.3, sc.), but who, once becoming our mother, introduces all to Christ with her example, care, and maternal tenderness: Ad Iesum per Mariam! Not by chance does Thomas call Mary "the guide of all pilgrims": dux viatorum vel itinerantium (Sermones, s.3, p.2).

Searching for the reasons for Christ's Incarnation, Thomas emphasizes that Christ comes to open wide human hope to perfect happiness, which otherwise remains impossible for man:

It was supremely fitting that God should assume human nature in order to lift up man's hope to Happiness (ad spem hominis in Beatitudinem sublevanda). Therefore, after Christ's Incarnation, men began to aspire more intensely to heavenly Happiness.(Gentes, IV, 54.)

Now, to speak more accurately of Hope, nothing is better than to turn to that great pilgrim, expert in hope, Saint Thomas Aquinas, who left us at least four treatises on human and divine hope, which in man differ only by the manner of abstract consideration.

1. The Metaphysical Hope

This first and most "metaphysical" hope grounds and gathers the natural hope of all beings in being itself, which "goes forth and returns" (exitus-reditus), rising up to the Ipsum Esse of God. It is a pre-cognitive, almost transcendental hope by which every being, from the depths of its essence, clings by natural appetite—within a confused ensemble of love, desire, hope, and joy—to the most precious and foundational good of its being, without which it would fall into nothingness. This being is not born from intrinsic principles but comes participated from without, bound to the Auctor naturae, as a most precious good, act and perfection of all perfections. Participated from the diffusive and "advocating" Goodness of our God, the Pa/gkalos (Most Beautiful and Super-beautiful," "Supersubstantial Beauty": cf. In IV De Div. Nominibus, lect. 5), this being appears as a good that is lofty, arduous, distant, almost future, yet attainable, since "nature fails only in the fewest of cases" (Gentes, III, 85).

Thus, the Principle of Hope (Das Prinzip Hoffnung) of every being, contrary to Ernst Bloch's frivolous modern narrative (spes frivola), is founded on God Himself, the one true "He Who Is" (Ex 3:14), the First Principle and Last End of the being of all beings:

Being itself is the likeness of divine goodness. Therefore, insofar

as things desire being, they desire to resemble God, and God 'implicitly'" (De Veritate, q.22, a.2 ad 2). "Only the rational creature is capable of God, since only it can know and love Him 'explicitly'. Other creatures share the divine likeness, and in that way desire God Himself" (De Veritate, q.22, a.2 ad 5). "Therefore there exists a natural love and desire, or even 'hope(!)', which can in a certain sense also be predicated of natural things 'lacking knowledge'. (S.Th. I-II, q.41, a.3).

2. The Psychological Hope

The second treatise is more "psychological," centered on the classic treatment of the "passions of the soul," composed of a formal sentimental aspect (immutatio spiritualis) and a physical alterative aspect (immutatio materialis). It studies the kind of hope proper to animal sensibility—the most recognizable in us. Thomas develops a profound "psychology of the elpidic movement," analyzing its activation through prior knowledge rooted in the animal estimative sense or the human cogitative sense, and tracing the dynamics of this complex passion of the irascible appetite.

To distinguish it from the other eleven basic passions (love–hatred, desire–aversion, joy–sorrow, hope–despair, fear–audacity, and anger), Thomas defines the passion of hope by its formal object: a "good that is arduous, future, and possible to obtain" (cf. S. Th., I-II, q.40, a.1; De Virtutibus, q. IV, a.4), both in the form of spes and expectatio. Following the medical tradition of his time, he also considers its "material–physical" aspects, noting the bodily alterations revealed in the "movements of the heart." Depending on its origin, Thomas distinguishes passions starting from bodily alteration (e.g., a wound producing emotional effect) and sentimental passions beginning from impulsive reactive emotion that move forward into the body.

3. The Moral Hope

The third treatise becomes more "moral," involving the deliberate will, which makes the elpidic act properly "human" and not merely animal. It is based on rational knowledge and free voluntary management, perfectly within the natural powers of man (ex propriis). Its goal is the goods proper to man as an embodied spirit, capable of projecting himself heroically onto horizons of earthly glory: excellence in wealth, wisdom, strength, courage, skill, power, military arts… which increase earthly happiness with the fame merited by effort—what we generally mean by "great honor."

The repetition of acts under rational guidance generates in us the virtue of Magnanimity (a "habit" we can use at will), part of the virtue of Fortitude and opposed to Pusillanimity. This "greatness of soul" ("magnitudo animi") moderates and humanizes our passionate hopes, elevating us from impulsive bestialitas to the splendors of human culture: the honor of the scientist, soldier, noble, entrepreneur, hero, martyr… within a sphere of human progress shaped by the creative rule of reason: "the perfect governance of man is through reason perfected by art" (In I Met., lect. 1).

Magnanimity is not the same as the Virtue of Hope, because it concerns the arduous within human undertakings, not the arduous which is God (arduum quod est Deus). Therefore it is not a 'theological virtue' but a 'moral virtue' which shares something of Hope. (In III Sent., d.26, q.2, a.2 ad 4).

4. The Theological Hope

The fourth treatise is "theological." Here we pass from human hope to divine hope. This transition, as the work of divine Wisdom, happens fortiter et suaviter: grace does not destroy but completes nature.

Now, man's rational intellect, strengthened by revealed Faith, attempts to rise to God to reach his Ultimate End: perfect Beatitude, the joy of that arduous and future Good that only God's grace makes possible (arduum quod est Deus). But he does so like the Master Hierotheus, "more by suffering divine things than by learning them" (non solum discens, sed et patiens divina: S. Th., I, q.1, a.6 ad 3).

Thus, theological Hope is not the fruit of Pelagian merit. More than a courageous spes based on one's own powers, it becomes a divinely infused, trusting expectatio, different from moral Magnanimity, which is only humanly acquired.

Therefore, this "suffering of divine things" does not occur merely in the irascible passions, as Magnanimity did, but in the rational and free will itself, which is also kept open to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit:

The arduous to which we are ordered by acquired virtues is an end proportioned to natural capacity. Thus nature is of itself determined to hope for that end and needs no additional habit. But the arduous which is Eternal Life surpasses natural power. Therefore, since nature is not of itself determined to hope for it, it must be determined by some infused habit. And this is the Hope which is a [theological] virtue. (In III Sent., d.23, q.2, a.1 ad 2). Therefore, theological Hope is cultivated in assiduous union with God, lifting the mind to Him in the garden of prayer, particularly in the prayer of the Our Father, "the interpreter of hope" (cf. S. Th., II-II, q.17, a.2, obj.2 and ad 2).

Indeed, when Thomas wished to summarize theology for his trusted secretary Reginald in a brief "Compendium," he reduced it to the three theological virtues: Faith (in the Creed), Hope (in the petitions of the Our Father), and Charity (in the twofold commandment of love of God and neighbor).

"As the ship entrusts itself to the pilot for direction, so man has been entrusted to his own will and reason, as Ecclesiasticus 15:14 says: 'God created man in the beginning and left him in the hand of his own counsel.'" (S. Th., I-II, q.2, a.5). And Thomas, commenting on Hebrews, adds:

"Here hope is compared to an anchor that holds the ship steady at sea. So hope steadies the soul in God in this world, which is like a sea… But the anchor must be secure, so it does not yield; thus we make it of iron… And it must be firm, so it does not easily detach. Thus man must cling to hope as the ship to its anchor. But there is this difference: the anchor fixes itself in the depths; hope fixes itself in the heights, that is, in God. Nothing in the present life is so solid that the soul can anchor and rest in it. Therefore Genesis 8:9 says that the dove found no place to rest its foot… Hence it is said here that the anchor must penetrate within the Veil… the state of future glory. There God wills us to fix the anchor of our hope…" (In Haebr., 6, lect. 4).

Among the prayers of Thomas that have come down to us is this one, expressing his longing for Eternal Life:

"Grant me, O Lord my God, an intellect to know You, a diligence to seek You, a wisdom to find You, a way of life that pleases You, a perseverance that waits for You in trust (fidenter te expectantem), and a confidence that finally embraces You. Grant me the penance that purifies me here by Your sufferings, the grace that sustains me on the way by Your gifts, and above all, the glory that causes me to rejoice in Your joys in the homeland. Amen." (Piae Preces, s.4).

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The Hope Reborn: Christmas with Saint Francis, Prophet of Humble Light

At the heart of Christian life, hope is a theological virtue that directs us toward God, sustains our journey, and opens us to the promise of eternal life. In this Jubilee Year, as we commemorate the eight hundredth anniversary of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi (1226–2026), we are invited to rediscover hope as a living experience — a path that passes through poverty, fraternity, and evangelical joy. For Francis, Christmas is the radiant source of this hope.

Greccio: The Manger as an Incarnate Theophany

At Christmas in 1223, Francis desired to celebrate the birth of the Lord in a new, vivid, and tangible way. In the town of Greccio, among the Umbrian rocks, he set up the first live nativity scene: there, God became a Child. In that manger, hope ceased to be a mere concept and took on a human face. It became flesh that cries and smiles; it is the God who stoops down in order to lift up. Francis did not contemplate a distant God, but one who is near, tender, vulnerable, and small. The nativity scene is not a spectacle but an act of adoration and a prophetic gesture: to see "with the eyes of the body" the hardships in which the Child found Himself means to make tangible the revelation of incarnate love. That night, hope was kindled like a flame that will never be extinguished. The tenderness awakened by the encounter with the Child is the threshold of hope: it is not born of strength, but of accepted fragility; not of power, but of love that gives itself. The Franciscan Christmas is incarnate theology: God becomes small so that no one need fear to draw near to Him. The Child of Bethlehem, laid in a manger, is the sign that God walks the path of humility. Poverty is not mere misery but an open space to welcome God; it is the condition of hope, for only those who empty themselves can await and receive.

Minority, the Rule and Evangelical Life

Through his love for Christmas, Francis teaches us that hope is born when we empty ourselves to make room for the Other. The spirituality of minority — of making oneself small — is the way to be great in the Kingdom. "The Lord revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel" (FF 116).

To live the Gospel means to trust the Father as Jesus did in the grotto, to accept insecurity as a space of freedom, and to believe that even in the darkest night a light can be born. The Franciscan Rule is understood as a path of evangelical freedom: not a set of impositions, but a way of living poverty, fraternity and mission. Moreover, because Francis embodied in his life the universal principles of the Gospel with disarming simplicity and kindness — never imposing anything on anyone — his influence has been extraordinary and endures to this day, not only within the Christian world but beyond it.

Francis understood that God was calling him, as He had called the first apostles, to proclaim the Gospel. For this reason, his friars did not withdraw from the world into monasteries to save their souls;

they were to live among people, in direct contact with ordinary life, preaching the Gospel first by example and then by word, bringing fraternity into the world.

Conclusion: The Hope That Renews

The nativity scene of Greccio is light in the night of the world. In a time marked by wars, divisions, and fears, Francis lights the candle of hope that God is with us. From the Incarnation arises the profound truth that every human being is a brother or sister; Francis makes this universal fraternity the foundation of his mission. To hope today is a revolutionary act: it is to believe that good is stronger than evil, that light overcomes the night, that God continues to be born every time a heart opens. To hope means to be reborn with Christ each day, to recognize that the manger is still open, and to feel the nativity scene alive. Saint Francis teaches us that hope is a Child reaching out His arms; it is not a luxury but a necessity — the breath of the soul that entrusts itself, and the song of the heart that trusts. Let us celebrate this Jubilee not just as a mememto of the past, but as a commitment to build the future — with eyes fixed on Christ, hearts open to the world, and a hope that is reborn each day — as in the town of Greccio, as in the heart of Francis. "May the God of hope fill you with all the joy and peace in believing." (Romans 15:13)

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Hope in the Jubilee Year and the Salesian Centennial: a Future to Build Together

The Jubilee Year now drawing to a close has been a time of grace and spiritual awakening for our parish. Hope—the central theme of the Jubilee—has reminded us that God never abandons His people and continues to guide them patiently through the changes of history. It is an active, intelligent, concrete hope: a hope that opens the eyes, renews the heart, and sets our steps in motion again.

This year, for Castel Gandolfo, hope has taken on a very precise face: the centenary of the arrival of the Salesians at the Oratory (1926) and the 98 years of the pontifical parish entrusted to the sons of Don Bosco (since 1929). A century of presence, education, and Christian formation; a century of faces and stories, of prayer and service, of young people accompanied and families supported. A history shaped around the community's three churches—St Thomas of Villanova, Mary Help of Christians, and Our Lady of the Lake—and around the Oratory, the living heart of the Salesian charism.

Today, however, the centenary is not only an anniversary to recall: it is a prophetic call. Times have changed. The number of residents is decreasing, many homes are becoming tourist accommodations, and society moves fast. And it is precisely in this context that the five Salesians currently serving—coming from five countries and four continents—carry out their mission, a living sign of a global Church. The pastoral work of the future requires open eyes, passionate hearts, and fresh minds: yesterday's paths are not enough; new roads are needed.

Among these new roads, one of the most surprising pastoral initiatives has been the ministry to motorcyclists, who gather around Lake Albano. The great European Jubilee Rally held on 13–15 June, with almost a thousand motorbikes from all over Europe, showed how the parish can go out and meet people where they live their passions. The encounter with Pope Leo XIV left an indelible mark on many: faith can run fast, like the wind gliding over the road. In this new pastoral context we also find the spiritual accompaniment of the famous Rome Night Run in October, with the celebration of the Eucharist at 3 a.m. in front of the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls, attended by more than 2,000 motorcyclists.

But hope grows above all in families. The parish is investing in premarital journeys—not simple classes—and in accompanying couples even after marriage. Several young couples have already welcomed this proposal with enthusiasm. For this reason, the patronal feast of St Thomas of Villanova has been reimagined as the Festival of Families, a communal embrace bringing together different generations each year.

Youth ministry is experiencing a season of renewal: young people have countless opportunities, and the Oratory—competently led by laypeople—is seeking new languages and new proposals. In this year marking the beginning of the Oratory's Centennial, facilities are being renewed and activities imagined that can speak to today's young people, not to a world that no longer exists.

The community feasts of the area also remain precious moments of identity and mission: the boat procession of Our Lady of the

Lake, the motorcyclists' pilgrimage, the feast of St Sebastian involving the entire town, and celebrations in the various districts. These are living traditions, bridges between generations, moments in which the parish becomes a home for all.

One of this year's great developments has been the significant increase in pilgrims: groups from all over Italy and abroad are ever more frequently requesting to celebrate the Eucharist in the pontifical church. The opening of the Laudato Sì Center for Advanced Formation, the new Borgo Laudato Sì desired by Pope Francis, and the crucial presence of the Pontifical Villas—because of their important historical role—and of the Vatican Museums all contribute to reshaping Castel Gandolfo as a spiritual, cultural, and cosmopolitan place. All this brings new responsibilities to the parish: to be a welcoming home, a bridge between cultures, a pastoral center open to all—always the fruit of a renewed Hope lived in new times.

Other ecclesial realities are growing as well: the Neocatechumenal Way continues to expand, involving new people; the Oratory's initiatives are multiplying; new activities are emerging around the Lake; new forms of catechesis for youth and adults are taking shape—signs that the Holy Spirit, the true "first parish priest," continues to inspire, stir, and guide.

For this reason, this article is not meant to be merely a description, but a strong invitation: let us open our minds, broaden our hearts, and allow ourselves to be challenged by the signs of the times. The parish does not "belong to the Salesians" but to the entire People of God. The future cannot be built alone: it requires willing hands, creative minds and spirits that are docile to the Lord's voice.

In this closing Jubilee, as we celebrate so many gifts received, we feel a strong call: to join the team. To let ourselves be involved. To become builders of bridges, creators of communion, generators of hope.

Thanks to all who already serve in catechesis, liturgy, the Oratory, festivities, hospitality for pilgrims, and caring for people. Thank you to those who offer time, energy, creativity, patience, and a smile. Thank you to all who believe that the parish can truly be a family for everyone.

May the Lord, through the intercession of Don Bosco and Mary Help of Christians, continue to grant us courage, vision, and passion. For although the Jubilee ends, the mission… begins again with new energies—the fruit of renewed Jubilee Hope.

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Christmas is for all Time a Message of Hope and Peace

We are approaching the conclusion of the Jubilee Year, which has invited and helped us to live as "pilgrims of hope," in the certainty that Christian Hope continues to give life to our days. The Christmas we are about to celebrate reminds us once again that Jesus, our Hope, never disappoints, for He is a constant Presence in the life of humankind. This certainty is a gift from above, born of boundless Love—Love that draws near to every person, entering the heart and the life of all who open themselves to grace. Only the awareness of so great a Gift from on high can open new paths of reconciliation and peace.

We have lived this Jubilee Year in a time marked by wars, conflicts, anxiety, and uncertainty among many peoples and nations. Yet the Hope that dwells in the human heart can open new horizons of life even where everything seems lost. As baptized Christians, we ourselves are called to be this sign of hope. Indeed, as Pope Leo XIV reminded us during the catechesis of the General Audience on October 15, speaking to English-speaking pilgrims: "In a world struggling with weariness and despair, we are signs of the hope, peace and joy of the Risen Christ."

The prophetic message of the Jubilee Year has once again highlighted the fundamental values of peace, harmony and forgiveness, which are essential for pursuing the common good and respecting human dignity in every circumstance of life. The human heart seems never to tire of hoping, rather, faced with life's difficulties and the suffering that inevitably comes our way, it urges us even more strongly not to lose hope—precisely because hope becomes necessary and indispensable, like an effective and fitting medicine for full recovery and for resuming the path that life sets before us.

As the Jubilee Year draws to a close, this does not mean that our desire to hope will fade, nor our commitment to cultivate projects of peace and to open our hearts to the beauty of God, which blooms in the heart of every person of good will. We wish to ensure that what has been sown during this Holy Year—in every social and professional setting—may grow and bear fruit capable of generating new life, goodness, and kindness among us and all people. As Christians, we are the first responsible for giving form and vitality to these sentiments of goodness—like a wave that never ceases, despite the obstacles and limits we encounter in life and in society.

With the celebration of Holy Christmas, the Church reminds us that every project of Love has its origin in Jesus, the Prince of Peace. We want to be, with Him, protagonists of a new experience of life—one that we can offer as an alternative to despair

and to all that stands in the way of human happiness. A Christian gaze upon reality allows us to glimpse a ray of hope in every situation of life, for we ground our faith and our hope in an event that continues to illuminate our lives and make them always worthy of being lived.

In this Christmas season, we let ourselves be touched by the message of the multitude of the heavenly host who, at Bethlehem, praised God, saying: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Lk 2:14) The message is clear: the Hope that comes from above bears a divine fragrance; it is a gift planted in every heart—it is, deep down, the secret desire of every human being: to live in peace and to be at peace with all.

In the wondrous story of Christianity, there is also a place for a simple man who made this divine message of love his own, becoming an instrument of harmony and fraternity: Saint John of God. This Saint, a great reformer of healthcare and founder of the Hospitaller Order of Saint John of God, understood—through personal experience—that only the Love of God can heal the wounded heart of man. He made this Love concrete and visible by dedicating himself to serving those marked by fragility through illness, suffering and poverty.

This Saint also reminds us that the experience of illness, sooner or later, touches every person and affects every aspect of life. For this reason, it requires not only careful, targeted, and qualified medical care, but also a good measure of hope—a truly indispensable supplement for achieving full and integral healing. If we want hope to remain a constant presence accompanying all our days, it is essential and urgent that we cultivate and care for our spiritual life in this time when the human heart is restless and faces great challenges—"contagious" in our closeness to men and women, that they too may experience the saving power of this gift, not only as a path to healing but also as a foundation for a better future worthy of the children of God.

For this very reason, Christmas continues to be a message of hope—a medicine for our time. By welcoming this divine message and making it part of our lives, we can open ourselves to the newness of God, which is always a promise of goodness and peace for every person and for all people of good will.

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Christmas is a time of Marian hope

A person of faith believes in certain truths, and a person of charity loves God and neighbor in concrete ways. But what do we mean, then, when we speak of a person of hope? In reality, we are often tempted by despair, which can manifest as cynicism or resignation. Hope is the remedy for these vices: it is a source of new freedom, initiative, and creative strength, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges.

In purely human terms, hope concerns the struggle to endure in difficult times. It is the virtue of the will that desires to reach for what is good and noble, though arduous, and to do so despite adversity. We might, for example, hope to recover from a serious illness or to be reconciled with a family member from whom we have become estranged.

Through hope we strive toward a good that is difficult to attain, yet worth fighting for.

Christian faith makes hope both simpler and more sublime. It makes it simpler because it grants us the inner grace to know God revealed in Christ, to love Him sincerely, and to hope in Him in this life and in eternal life. With Christ we can face every adversity—even the powers of sin, death, and the devil—with the certainty that we can overcome them through divine grace. This is not an attitude of blind devotion or an outdated cliché, but the most fundamental posture of Christian existence. As Christ teaches us in the Gospel of John (16:33): "In the world you will have tribulation. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"

But why is Christian hope more sublime than mere human hope?

Fundamentally, Christian hope transcends the horizon of this world and everything in it that can go wrong, because it is a hope in life with God. The Gospel promises that God can be for us the source of eternal happiness. In the Catholic Church we find the real possibility of a conversion of life and an inner communion with God: the forgiveness of sins, spiritual peace, the strength to love and forgive, the power to work for Christ and His mission in the world—all these are sources of hope. Christian hope can kindle within us a zeal and a strength that the world can neither give nor destroy. The Christian life frees us to seek the good always, without being crushed or overwhelmed by difficulties.

Of course, hope grows within us only under pressure, sometimes

even under constraint. As we know well, working in and with the Catholic Church for the good of today's world requires a continual growth in hope. We may find ourselves exposed to the temptation of sloth or cynicism, which we must face and overcome if we wish to be truly rooted in a meaningful and holy life. We continually encounter our own human limitations and those of others; yet it is precisely here that hope finds the opportunity for deeper charity, for new perspectives of mercy and justice, for creative perseverance. We live in a world wounded by grave problems: violent wars, contempt for human life, persistent political injustice, poverty, lack of education, and religious persecution. Our Christian vision is not utopian, but realistic. In all these situations we are called to respond with the patience of faith working through love.

Our zeal for truth can touch the lives of millions and transform societies profoundly. Yet we must be faithful in small things, day by day, with the patience of supernatural hope. At times we do not see immediate results, and we must constantly recall the reality of heaven. Living for the life to come in hope and working hopefully to improve the present world are two inseparable dimensions—indeed, it is hard to practice one without the other. God is the provident ruler of the world. He silently blesses our labors, which often bear fruit even as our actions prepare us for incomparable joy in eternal life.

The Christmas season is a Marian season of hope. The Virgin Mary believed the angel's message and lived the first Advent in preparation for the birth of the Messiah and Lord. From His infancy He was recognized by the prophets as the Redeemer. Thus the Virgin lived a radiant yet hidden hope, which gave her joy even when she was surrounded by shadows of darkness. The Church too is Marian: she follows Christ with an ineffable hope in her sacramental life, in her teaching, and in the power of His grace. The saints who come after the Virgin Mary are likewise infallible signs of perennial hope.

At Christmas we receive a promise already fulfilled, something already given to us, yet we also experience the presence of our greatest hope—the One who will ultimately redeem the world fully and definitively. The Virgin and her Child invite us to enter this interior life, vibrant with hope, capable of animating, strengthening and renewing all that is within us. Even as we look realistically at the world's limits, we must first confront ourselves. Strengthened by the grace of Christ, who can do all things, we can already begin to live with a stable and lasting hope in the victory of the Resurrection.

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For a Christmas of Peace and Hope

The Jubilee of 2025 has opened before the world a horizon of hope and peace to which peoples, nations, families, and young people look as the coming of a new humanity—truer, more just, filled with peace and love. The opening of the Holy Door is a call to "go beyond," to begin a spiritual renewal through an encounter with Jesus.

In this year of grace, we have been invited to be pilgrims of hope, to experience deeply the love of God revealed in the Incarnation of His Son, the Prince of Peace, and the source of the hope that dwells within us. Christmas is an invitation to let the joy of a patient and trusting faith radiate through our lives—a faith that, from the littleness of the Nativity scene and in the silence of the Mystery, transfigures reality and makes all things new. Hope and peace are two closely intertwined "stars" that Christmas brings with it. Jesus was born to reveal the face of the Father, and every birth carries within it life and the promise of the future.

We celebrate Christmas in a historical moment marked by wars, injustices, and uncertainty, and at the same time thirsting for light and new dreams—with the desire to make peace shine amid so much darkness, to restore to young people, so often deprived of hope, the joy of living. Pope Francis, in Spes non confundit (no. 12), invites us to care for the younger generations with renewed passion: "Closeness to young people, the joy and hope of the Church and of the world!"

In this same spirit, I wish to speak as a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, a Salesian of Don Bosco, recalling the meeting of Pope Leo XIV with young people on the occasion of their Jubilee (October 30, 2025). In his words, I find a message valuable for all of us who care about their future:

"Dearest ones […] you see well how our future is threatened by war and by the hatred that divides peoples. Can this future be changed? Certainly! How? Through an education for peace—disarmed and disarming. […] Do not set your gaze on falling stars, to which fragile wishes are entrusted. Look even higher, toward Jesus Christ, 'the sun of justice' (cf. Lk 1:78), who will always guide you along the paths of life."

In the Apostolic Letter Drawing New Maps of Hope, Pope Leo affirms:

"To educate is an act of hope and a passion that continually renews itself, for it manifests the promise we perceive in the future of humanity" (3.2).

In the Salesian charism, I find full harmony with these words. I think of Don Bosco, the great educator of hope, who at Valdocco transformed the lives of many wayward youths into those of "saints." The sole purpose of his educational joys and labors was to bring Christ to them and to help them rediscover the gift of listening and of solidarity with those in need. He, who lived in times no easier than our own, left us a legacy that encourages us to seek possible ways to educate toward hope and peace.

I also think of Mornese, the birthplace of our Institute, where Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello, with keen feminine intuition, knew how to embody Don Bosco's charism. In the Cronistoria and her many Letters, we read that Christmas celebrations were held with great solemnity. If we were to summarize the Christmas atmosphere that filled that humble but holy place, we could

say that it shone with simplicity, essentiality, and a joyful poverty, because the feast was rich in human and spiritual warmth. Valdocco and Mornese—two realities filled with deep love—became sources of life that spread throughout the world and continue to be contagious today. Love transforms the world; it is the source of new life.

Everything must begin in the heart of each one of us. Conversion of heart and of life is the essential condition for something new to be born within the human family. Recently, to a community of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who chose to remain in their country despite the war, the people said: "We can still have hope because you stayed with us!" This presence is a sign of God who chooses to remain among His people—a sign of Jesus who came to dwell in the world. A light that recalls the star of that first Christmas night!

To live Christmas today means returning to the Gospel; it means rediscovering in simplicity, humility, and essentiality the features that make us ever more like Jesus, so as to rejoice in the mystery we celebrate. In a world where so many suffer from loneliness, exclusion, and marginalization, we are invited to offer those we meet the gift of a fraternal presence—listening, availability, and time: to be there, to kindle a light of hope, as Jesus chose to reveal the Father's Love through His presence.

May Mary, Mother of the Word, accompany the steps of all who recognize themselves as pilgrims of hope. May this Christmas be for everyone a Christmas of peace and hope.

Sr. Yvonne Reungoat, FMA

“Christmas: God Who Descends unto us”

In the second week of the Spiritual Exercises (EE), St. Ignatius of Loyola proposes a journey centered on the contemplation of the life of Jesus Christ, so as to gain an intimate and profound knowledge of Him and to follow Him more closely. In a complementary section, at the end of the four weeks of exercises, he offers a series of meditations on the Mysteries of the Life of Christ. The goal is to know His person and actions more deeply and to let oneself be guided by Him. A central meditation for the journey of the second week is the meditation on the Incarnation.

Here, the exercitant is first invited to contemplate the world: to see men and women “on the face of the earth,” some at peace, others at war; some weeping, others laughing; some being born, others dying. It is a realistic, non-idealized gaze: Ignatius places us before concrete humanity—wounded, in need of salvation. He then invites us to “look at the Trinity,” which, from heaven, contemplates this same humanity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit see the darkness, the confusion, the struggles of human life; they see men and women going to perdition… and thus decide “in their eternity” that the Second Person of the Trinity will become man: “Let us bring about the redemption of the human race.” Christmas, then, is not a sweet fairy tale, but the answer of divine compassion.

God does not remain a spectator. He does not stay in His glory: He enters time, becomes small, vulnerable, poor. Ignatius invites us to “see how the three Divine Persons send the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary,” to “consider and reflect,” to feel within ourselves the tenderness of God who descends. This contemplation leads us to recognize that God does not save from afar but from within our own history, sharing our condition. It is the logic of love that draws near. For St. Ignatius, contemplation does not end in a feeling, but flows into a decision.

After having seen God who descends, the exercitant is invited

to ask for "an intimate knowledge of the Lord who has become man for me, that I may love Him more and follow Him more closely" (EE 104). This is the key to the Ignatian Christmas: to know internally—that is, to enter the mystery from within, to allow oneself to be touched and transformed. It is not enough to celebrate the birth of Christ; He must be born in us, take flesh in our choices, in our daily actions, in concrete compassion toward the poor, the lonely, the rejected. Christmas thus becomes a call to availability, to imitation of God's movement: to descend, to draw near, to give oneself.

In contemplating the Child of Bethlehem, we recognize a God who is humble, silent, merciful—a God who does not dominate but serves; who does not impose but invites; who does not manifest Himself in strength, but in the fragility of love. In this face of the Child-God the revolution of the Gospel is fulfilled: the glory of God is not power but tenderness; His majesty is not distance but closeness; His greatness is not triumph but gift.

It is noteworthy that St. Ignatius, following the Gospel of Luke (Lk 2:8–20), proposes a meditation on the announcement of the birth of Jesus to the shepherds (EE 265). This meditation is part of the Mysteries of the Life of Jesus. Ignatius does not describe it explicitly, but he lets the exercitant contemplate the scene of these shepherds living by night in their tents in the fields, in the cold and in very poor conditions. They represent a part of the "remnant" of Israel that moved the Trinity to compassion and for whom the Word became flesh. To these shepherds the angels appear, announcing the birth of Jesus.

It is a "tremendous and fascinating" Gospel scene, contrasting the extreme poverty of the shepherds with the glory of the angels proclaiming the birth of the Savior God. The shepherds become the first protagonists and witnesses of the Incarnation of the Messiah. God reveals Himself first to them precisely because they are poor and abandoned—a true foreshadowing of the Beatitudes. They are the first to go and adore the Child Jesus. Here we see God's preferential love for the poor and afflicted, realized from the very beginning. For each of us, this meditation conveys the certainty that God never leaves us alone, especially when we feel lonely, excluded, or abandoned.

To contemplate the Incarnation, as St. Ignatius teaches, is to allow oneself to be challenged by this mystery: God has chosen to come "among us," not for a moment, but forever. Every time a heart opens to love, a wound is healed, a relationship restored—Christmas is renewed.

Thus, in the gentle light of Bethlehem, we can pray:
"Lord, grant me an intimate knowledge of Your love made flesh,
so that I may respond to You with my life,
and become, with You, a sign of Your presence in the world."

Fr. Gabriele Gionti, SJ
Deputy Director of the Vatican Observatory

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light”

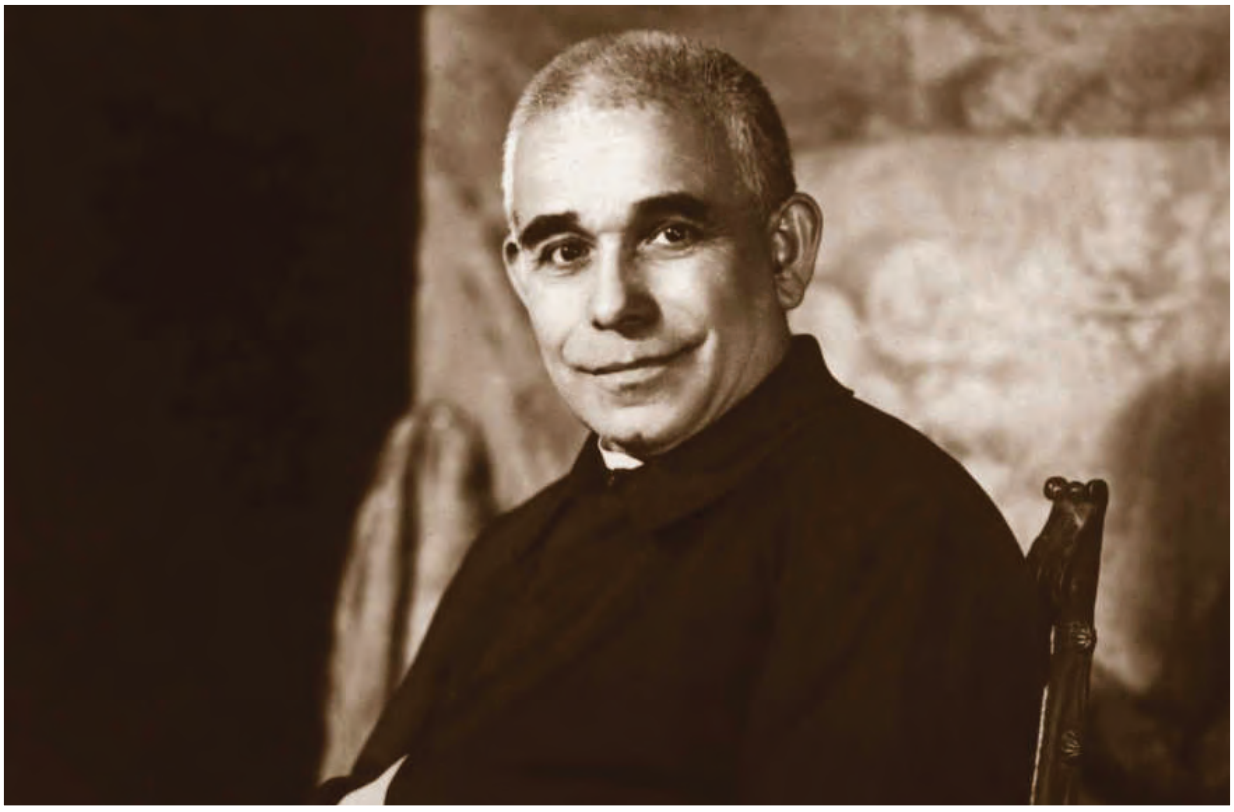
The Birth of Jesus, Source of Hope in the Teachings of Don Orione

Saint Luigi Orione nurtured a deep devotion to the mystery of Christmas. From the earliest years of his Work, he wanted the birth of the Savior to be celebrated in all his institutions with solemnity and joy. He himself would place the statue of the Child Jesus in the manger prepared by the boys, solemnly singing Tu scendi dalle stelle. In the 1930s, the saint of Tortona also organized large live Nativity scenes through the streets of Tortona, Voghera, and Novi Ligure, involving hundreds of participants—a true popular proclamation of faith.

For Don Orione, the Nativity scene was not merely a tradition, but a living Gospel, a visual catechesis inviting everyone to contemplate the love of God made Child. Its first message was a simple and powerful invitation: “Let us go with the shepherds and prostrate ourselves at the feet of Jesus.” That Child, poor and fragile, is “the true and only salvation of humanity.” In Him, God becomes near, humble, and in solidarity with every creature. And His light reaches all, especially the least, the forgotten, the “shepherds” of every age.

In the school of our Founder, Christmas for us Orionine religious is above all a message of hope—trustworthy hope, because it is founded in God. In the dark nights of the world—and of the heart—the light of Christ shines, renewing and saving all. Don Orione reminded us with words ablaze with faith:

“Goodness always triumphs… Love conquers hatred, good con-



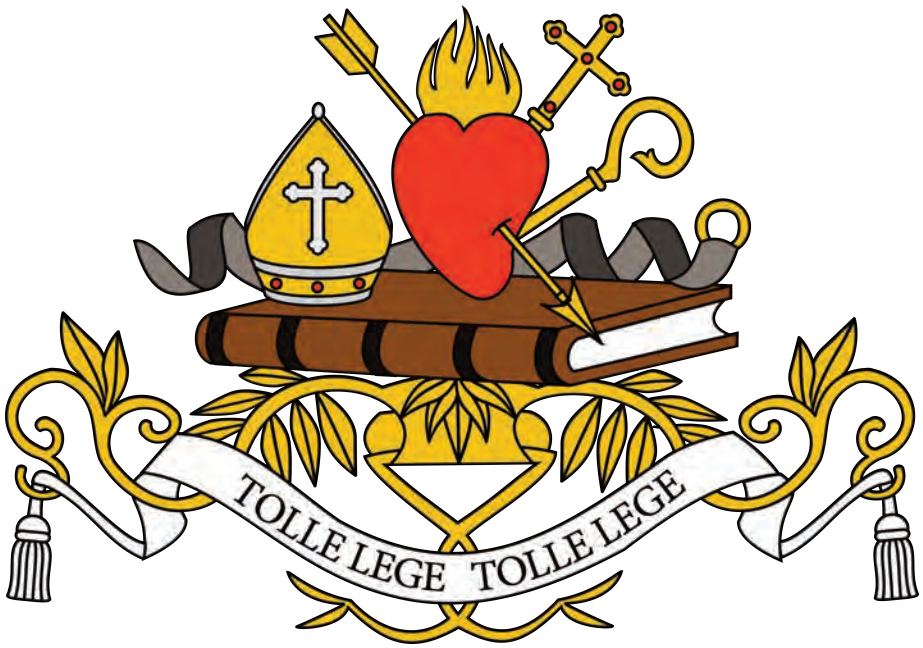
quers evil, light conquers darkness! All the darkness in the world is nothing before the light of the Christmas night. The Lord will have the final victory—and the Lord always wins through mercy!"
For a Son of Divine Providence, hope is inseparable from charity. Christ is the source of all love, and our service—in homes, in works, among the poor—is a reflection of His tenderness. From the very beginning, the Orionine works were born as concrete signs of hope: God's outstretched hands toward those who suffer, gestures that restore dignity and trust. In today's world—marked, as Pope Francis reminds us, by the globalization of indifference, where bonds grow fragile and relationships are measured in likes and followers—the Orionine response is one and the same: to draw near. It is not enough to see suffering; we must stop, bend down, touch, and care. An ancient etymology traces the word "to care" to cor (heart) and uro (to burn): a heart that burns, capable of being moved and of moving toward others. Only a heart kindled by the love of God transforms compassion into action.
Don Orione continues to urge us: "We will have a great Catholic renewal if we have great charity. But we must begin today, among ourselves." Every act of love, even the smallest, illumines the darkness around us. As Saint Augustine writes: "Hope in the Lord, but do your part: reach out your hand, lift up your brother, and your hope will become light for both." Caring for others heals the one who receives, but also transforms the one who gives. In a world that isolates, closeness builds communion; in a society that extinguishes, hope kindles new lights.
Christian hope is not a naïve dream nor a vague feeling, but the humble strength of those who believe that good can be reborn—even from the ruins. It is born each time someone chooses to love, to rise again, to "begin with oneself." As Martin Buber reminds us: "Begin with yourself—that is the only thing that matters… The Archimedean point from which to lift the world is the transformation of myself."
No one is too small to begin. Heroic gestures are not required, only small daily acts of love—offering time, presence, and consolation. Hope is like this: a small seed sown generously into the soil of life, which germinates silently and, in due time, bears fruit.
In this season, when many clouds gather over our sky, Christmas invites us to lift our gaze once more—to choose hope. To begin with myself.

Don Felice Bruno
Head of the Postal and Philatelic Service Office
Governorate of Vatican City State

Hope lifts us up

Hope is one of the fundamental aspects of the Advent season, which marks the beginning of the liturgical year. In the mystery that envelops the darkness of our days, there is a glimmer of light that urges us to keep walking toward our final goal. As we draw near to the conclusion of this Jubilee Year, we continue our life's journey as Pilgrims of Hope. Our pilgrimage is a path we travel together with others. We walk together, in a synodal way, toward our common goal of eternal life with God.

The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity enlighten us, guide our journey, and inspire the life we live each day. Hope, in particular, moves us to recognize that we are not alone and that our future always lies before us. There are moments in which we may feel as though we have stumbled along the way and find it difficult to rise again. Yet we find the strength to stand up and continue our journey. We know well that we cannot rise on our own. We must acknowledge that it is with the help of



the One who created us and loves us at every step of our journey that we are able to rise after we have fallen. Saint Augustine, in the opening lines of his Soliloquies, offers us these simple yet profound words: "Hope lifts us up." Hope is the foundation of our faith and the fuel that offers us countless possibilities for living our Christian vocation to love God and neighbor.

In Psalm 71 we pray: "You are my hope, Lord; my trust, GOD, from my youth. On you I have depended since birth; from my mother's womb you are my strength my hope in you never wavers." Our Christian vocation to live in peace as sisters and brothers in communities of hope includes the invitation for all of us to reflect on all that remains to be fulfilled in our lives, regardless of our age. During Advent we have rituals that help us prepare for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel. Each ritual is filled with hope for the good that is to come in the days ahead. Hope allows us to see how we—as individuals and as members of larger communities: family, church, city, country, world—are both recipients and creators of dreams, visions, and possibilities. The prophet Joel tells us: "It shall come to pass, I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even upon your male and female servants, in those days, I will pour out my spirit." (Joel 3:1–2).

Hope gives people, young and old, the courage to become prophets. It gives them a voice to proclaim the Gospel message to the world around them. Hope breathes new life into those who are weary after a long and difficult day of work and inspires them to rise the next day with renewed energy to face the work ahead. It comforts parents who worry about the future of their children, since they can no longer protect them as they did when they were young. Hope heals those who suffer from physical, spiritual, or emotional illness and, when united with faith and charity, can bring about miracles. Saint Paul reminds us in chapter 8 of the Letter to the Romans: "In hope we were saved." There is no greater gift that hope can give us than the certainty of our salvation.

All of us have received the call to be people of hope. Those who have answered the call to live their vocation as Augustinian sisters and brothers do so by living in community, in imitation of the first community in Jerusalem described in the Acts of the Apostles. Saint Augustine recognized the value of this way of life so deeply that at the beginning of his Rule he clearly states: "The main purpose for your having come together is to live harmoniously in your house, intent upon God with one heart and one soul." Nourished by common moments of prayer, recreation, meditation, and meals, Augustinians all over the world are able to respond to the needs of our sisters and brothers. As prophets of hope, we are entrusted with privileged moments in which we have the sacred opportunity to encounter our fellow travelers in their spiritual journey.

Through apostolic works of education, chaplaincy, advocacy for the poor and vulnerable, the sacraments, counseling, contemplative prayer, peace and justice, care for creation, initial formation and vocational promotion, Augustinian sisters, nuns and friars in more than 50 countries around the world live their vocation as religious while collaborating with our lay sisters and brothers. One of the greatest blessings of Augustinian formation is the emphasis placed on working and collaborating as brothers and sisters. We live in communities of hope so that we may be active in ministry. We are not alone in our actions; we work with one another and learn from one another.

May this Advent season inspire all of us once again, regardless of our vocation, to renew the way we respond to God's love. It will do us good to call to mind and heart the words of Saint Paul in chapter 5 of the Letter to the Romans: "Hope does not disappoint!" For God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (Romans 5:5).

Fr. Joseph L. Farrell, OSA
Prior General

Saint Augustine and Hope

Hope, which runs like a watermark throughout Augustine's lived experience, theology, spirituality and preaching to the people of God, was—as he confesses—something he learned from his mother Monica. "My widowed mother," he writes, "made all the more zealous by hope, and no less ready to weep and groan, persisted in prayer before You" (Conf. 3, 11, 20). From that maternal school—mirror of the praying Church—he spoke to the people about Christian hope:

"We have sung," he preached, "I have hoped in the mercy of God. Let us speak briefly about our hope, which must endure and not end with our words. Hope always cries out to God. What is the object of our hope? … As long as you dwell in the body, you are in exile, far from the Lord; you are on the way, not yet at home. He who governs and creates our homeland made Himself the Way to lead us there. Therefore, say to Him: You are my hope. And then what? My lot is in the land of the living. What is now your hope will then be your portion… The very existence of every human being is not without hope; until death, no one is deprived of hope. Yet even when one receives what he hoped for, he is not satisfied; he longs for more. Christ is now your hope; He will then be your good. He is the hope of those who believe, He will be the good of those who see. Say to Him: You are my hope." (excerpt from Sermon 313F, 1–3)

For Augustine, however, one must be educated in hope, recognizing that it is the fruit of forgiveness—both given and received—from God and from those whom life places beside us. Indeed, the wise man prays in the Book of Wisdom 12, 19: "By acting thus you have taught a lesson to your people how the virtuous man must be kindly to his fellow men, and you have given your sons the good hope that after sin you will grant repentance".

When generations no longer pass on the hope of Christ to one another, a fracture arises among them—with sad consequences for daily life. Benedict XVI wrote about this in 2007 in his encyclical Spe Salvi (Saved in Hope): "There is a decline in trust in life," something visible today in the wandering faces of those lost in the streets of our cities. To mend this rupture, Augustine preached that hope is a gift of God's love (Exposition on Psalm 41), incarnated in the Christian's faithfulness to God's own faithfulness—walking through life and sowing works of charity (Sermon 359/A, 1–4).

After the Sack of Rome in 410 by Alaric, the Roman world was tormented by the fear that the end of the world had come. Against this widespread disorientation, Bishop Augustine encouraged Christians to abound in works of charity—fruit of walking in hope—toward new and beautiful times to be built, like the colors of "zealous hope" (Sermon 81). And with such hope, he preached, everything becomes possible: "Do not lose hope; pray, preach, love." (Commentary on the Gospel of John 6, 24)

In his sermon on the fall of Rome (from Sermon 81, 9), he exhorted them:

"We beg you, we implore you, we exhort you: be gentle, suffer with those who suffer, support the weak; and on this occasion, with the influx of many foreigners, of the poor and afflicted, let your hospitality be more generous, your good works more abundant. Let Christians put into practice the commands of Christ."

In the same sermon, Augustine spoke of the "Christian times" being lived after the pagan ones, when pagans blamed Christians for the evils of their age. He clarified that there are no evil times in themselves—times are good or bad depending on the goodness or wickedness of the people who make them so. He urged Christians to view life's tribulations not as religious scandals but as tests to be faced with courage. He explained:

"Let us speak a little of the scandals with which the world is filled, how frequent and abundant are the tribulations. The world is being crushed, pressed like grapes in the winepress. Come now, Christians... Let not those who love the world trouble you—those who wish to remain in it, but whether they will or not, must leave it. Let them not deceive or seduce you. These tribulations are not scandals. Be good, and they will be only trials." (Sermon 81, 7)

Indeed, the fall of Rome was to be read as the image of a new age being born—made possible by the renewal of humanity in Christ. On the proposal of "Christian times," he said:

"Has God perhaps granted you a small grace in sending Christ in the old age of the world to renew you when everything is falling apart? … He came when all was growing old, and He made you new… Do not wish to cling to a decaying world; do not refuse to be made new with Christ, who says to you: 'The world is falling apart, aging, disintegrating, gasping for breath in its old age.' Do not be afraid: your youth shall be renewed like the eagle's" (Ps. 102:5; Sermon 81, 8).

Today too, humanity—living through an epochal transition—is called to build a new history. (See F. Fukuyama's essay The End of History and the Last Man, Milan, 1992.) Fukuyama, however, proposes a sociological interpretation: the succession of new eras brought about by technological and economic innovation—from the agricultural to the industrial, and from the industrial to the informational age. In that view, history becomes a reflective justification of epochal change. Augustine's Christian proposal, instead, was—and remains—an anthropological one grounded in faith: to build a new historical phase through human freedom guided by Christian hope.

With Christmas now at the door, under the light of the star that guided the Magi, we remember the birth of the Son of God—the hope of humanity—who leads it along the path toward the eternal heavens, its final destination.

Fr. Vittorino Grossi, OSA
Of the Augustinianum Patristic Institute,
Professor Emeritus of the Chair of Patrology and Patristics of the Pontifical Lateran University

St. Augustine, Master of Hope

With the election to the papacy of Leo XIV, a religious of the Order of St. Augustine (the Augustinians), interest has greatly increased—both in the Catholic world and beyond in the founder of this Order: St. Augustine, one of the most influential Fathers in the history of the Church.

Augustine is one of the greatest Doctors of the Church, not only for his vast literary work, but also for the clarity and depth of his spirituality. He lived a troubled life. Though born into a modest family, through his great intelligence and determination he overcame every obstacle in his studies and obtained the position of official orator to the Roman Emperor, who at that time resided in Milan.

In that city, Augustine met Bishop St. Ambrose, who was striving in every way to combat the Donatist heresy and to prevent the plan of Justina, mother of the young emperor Valentinian, to hand over the Ambrosian cathedral to the Donatists, taking it from the Catholics. Ambrose succeeded in his intent by persuading the Catholic community to occupy the cathedral permanently, day and night. Among the most zealous participants was Augustine's mother, Monica, who had followed her son wherever he chose to settle (first in Rome, then in Milan). "My mother, your handmaid, was in the forefront of the vigils through her devotion; she lived by her prayers."

Intrigued by Ambrose's reputation in Milan as a great orator, Augustine decided to attend his exhortations and homilies to the people. He was not interested in the content of the sermons but in Ambrose's eloquence, which captivated his listeners. But, as Augustine himself recounts:

"I cared not to learn what he said, but only how he said it; … yet while I opened my heart to admire his eloquence, the truth which he spoke came in with it, though by degrees."

From there Augustine came to conversion, to acceptance of the Catholic faith, and to baptism, which he received from St. Ambrose himself.

Hope according to St. Augustine

In his tireless catechetical activity, Augustine sought to give his listeners—both in his own time and in ours—inspiration and reasons ("hope") to overcome the difficulties of life: the fragility of the individual, the weakness of families—particularly visible today in a society struggling to find effective remedies for its own growth and flourishing.

A few thoughts on hope.

Hope needs faith in order to be an effective medicine for improving humanity and dispelling the fear of the future and of unpredictable events that may befall the human community.

Human hope, without faith in a merciful God and in His Son Jesus—who came to earth to give us a certain hope—becomes deceptive and false, incapable of fulfilling dreams or removing the fear of the future.

Jesus assured us that human hopes will find their full realization in the Kingdom of Heaven, which He Himself has merited for us through His redeeming Passion. There, we will hope for nothing more, for we shall have everything that humanity desires for its happiness.

"Hope always cries out to God": there is no true hope in the person who lacks faith in the God who fulfills all our expectations. It is not man who can ensure the realization of what is hoped for, but the goodness of the Savior. Hence the essential connection between hope and faith, and consequently between hope and charity (or love). Faith guarantees the fulfillment of hope; charity is the necessary instrument for making hope a reality. Commenting on the biblical passage "Cursed is he who puts his hope in man," Augustine writes: "… therefore, one who puts his hope in himself is also bound by this curse. We must therefore ask only God for the good that we hope to do or to attain through good works."

Hope is like a fertilized egg

In his keen insight, Augustine compares hope to a fertilized egg. Let us hear his words:

"Hope is compared to an egg. Hope has not yet reached fulfillment, just as an egg is something, but not yet a chick. Quadrupeds give birth to offspring, but birds give birth to the hope of offspring… If we hope for what we do not yet see, we wait for it with patience… It is an egg. Yes, it is an egg, but not yet a chick. It is covered with a shell; it cannot be seen because it is hidden. One must wait with patience; it must first be well warmed before it begins to live. Strain forward toward what lies ahead; forget what is behind. For what is seen is temporary. We do not fix our gaze—says the Apostle—on what is seen, but on what is unseen; for what is seen lasts only a short time, while what is unseen lasts forever . Fix, therefore, your hope on what is unseen: wait, be patient. Do not turn back to look behind you… Fear, rather, the scorpion for your egg… May the scorpion not destroy your egg; may this world not eliminate your hope with its venom, so to speak, opposed to it because it looks backward. How many things the world says to you, how much clamor it makes behind your back to make you turn and look behind—that is, to make you place your hope in present things… and turn your heart away from what Christ has promised and not yet given, but will give, for He is faithful, and from resting your heart in a world that is passing away."

Hope does not disappoint; it is not an illusion

In such a fragmented and complex world—one that does not forgive and immerses itself in the false satisfaction of having, in pleasure without limits, in hatred or indifference toward others in need—"hope is not an illusion," Augustine tells us, "but a certainty still on the way," one that helps us look forward, gives us the patience we need, "guides us through darkness," and "is the key that opens the doors of happiness." This hope never disappoints.

Hope as the companion of wisdom

Hope teaches us to evaluate our behavior rightly (wisdom), our way of seeing what happens around us—for better or worse—and to have the patience necessary to face the challenges and difficulties life presents (in family, in work, in relationships, in defeat and discouragement).

It makes us look forward, overcoming reality with faith and confronting the events of today's society. It gives us the righteous indignation needed to condemn the negative aspects of society, and the courage to change it for the better and to look ahead. Hope is also the "mother" that gives birth to patience and provides the strength not to give up. It is a "lamp" that illuminates our human journey and guides us through moments of existential darkness.

This, in short, is the teaching of the Bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine—a man who faced life amid doubt, uncertainty and opposing forces, yet always with hope in God's help. As a bishop, he was a pastor who knew how to welcome everyone with love and mercy; who worked to restore peace in a Church torn by discord and division; who fought tirelessly for the unity of the Church and its fidelity to the Gospel and the Word of God.

Finally, he faced the violence of the Vandals, who had occupied Roman Africa, and the hostility of heretics undermining the Church's unity—not only through words but through attacks and persecution. All this he bore despite great inner suffering, which he overcame through prayer, tears and continual appeals to his "enemies" and detractors who opposed Church doctrine and caused confusion among the faithful.

His variable relationship with representatives of the Roman Empire—always faithful, but critical when necessary—was shaped by the attitude, favorable or hostile, that various emperors and officials took toward the Catholic Church.

Augustine hoped and acted accordingly to the end, never losing his faith—indeed, deepening it—until August 28, 430 AD, when, at the age of 76, his hope became reality in the Kingdom of Heaven. Hippo, the city of Bishop Augustine, had been besieged by Vandal hordes for three months and fell shortly after his death. Finally, Augustine had reached the object of his hope—what he believed in for himself and for others—and his luminous teaching still has much to say to the generations of today.

Fr. Pietro Bellini
Former Procurator General of the Augustinian Order

Messengers of Hope in a World that Yearns for Peace

In these dramatic yet promise-filled times of ours, full of new opportunities and horizons of life, contrasting words chase one another — words that express an increasing awareness that all humanity is a caravan journeying together, longing for social solidarity. Peace and war, violence and dignity, hope and despair, communion and loneliness, the right to be born and to die... and the list could go on endlessly.

And in this kaleidoscope of words and meanings, we have come to Christmas, having traversed the time that prepares for it — patiently and faithfully, as happens with all great events: Advent. The waiting for Him who is to come into the world, the Prince of Peace, for He has come in time, He comes and He will come — as faithful as His Love is faithful to humanity and to all creation.

This good and beautiful news of salvation has been entrusted to us, who have received it as a gift — not to be stored away in archives or frozen in overprotected environments, but to be spread, transmitted to all those we have the chance to meet; transmitted above all through actions, and, if necessary, through words as well. Difficult times must not become an excuse for our laziness or silence. Indeed, the times were difficult too when Jesus, the Son of God, was born into the world.

While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son.* She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear.

The angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord.

And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.' (Lk 2:6–14)

Thus the evangelist Luke recounts that night — extraordinary for all humanity — when the Son of God saw the light in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. A night of life and light, yet also of

darkness and rejection, of warmth and of closed doors: there was no place for them in the inn!
Yet there were some who kept vigil — shepherds, spending the night outdoors, watching over their flocks, protecting the labor and the fragile means of life that their humble work provided for themselves and their families. These shepherds, guardians of the flocks, had eyes trained to read the stars and ears attentive to every whisper of the wind and sound of nature. And suddenly, the astonishing good and beautiful news broke in upon them: Do not be afraid! Great joy — for you and for all — is here, now. Today a Savior has been born: the long-awaited one through the ages, Christ the Lord!
The sign is scandalously small — and precisely for that reason, full of meaning: a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Do not be frightened: He is so small, so tender, so defenseless — He inspires no fear."
And to that solitary angelic voice there joined a chorus — a multitude of angels proclaiming: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."
It is Christmas — today, in the twenty-first century — in a world without peace. What message of hope do God's messengers, the angels, offer us? But who are the angels, and where are they today? Illuminating are the words of Pope St. Gregory the Great in his Homilies on the Gospels: "It must be known that the word 'angel' denotes an office, not a nature."
We should not focus on their angelic nature, but on their mission — to be messengers of good and beautiful news founded on Hope that does not disappoint, on Life that overcomes and conquers death, on Light that cannot be smothered by darkness.
Amid the glittering lights of Christmas decorations, amid the rush for gifts and feasts, what space do we leave for the truth of Christmas? What responsibility do we assume to become, ourselves, messengers of peace and hope?
The birth of a child is always a sign of hope — new life to be cherished and nurtured, so that it may grow and help build a more human and just world. Yet celebrating the birth of Jesus, the Son of God and of Mary of Nazareth, is something more: it means welcoming not only the joy of the feast, but the certainty of salvation — for me, for you, for all. It means that life, in every small detail of daily existence — in the beauty and struggle of relationships, work, study, political and social commitment, rest and recreation — finds its truest meaning in another horizon. My life is full because I am loved by God.
Christmas rekindles in us the certainty that God loves us — with a love that is utterly personal, because "He became like us to make us like Him." This is salvation:
"In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins." (1 Jn 4:9–10)
The time of grace of the Ordinary Jubilee of Hope is drawing to a close. We have been pilgrims of Hope, walking together and crossing — physically and symbolically — the Holy Door, in the awareness that these steps have required above all an exercise of reconciliation and peace.
May the most beautiful and fruitful wish for this Christmas of Hope be that we may be recognized among the messengers of peace — and even more, among the peacemakers who, according to the Beatitudes, shall be called Children of God (cf. Mt 5:9).

Sr. M. Micaela Monetti, PDDM
Pious Disciples of the Divine Master
Vatican telephone switchboard

At the End of the Jubilee of Hope, Christ Our Hope Remains

We now find ourselves close to the end of the "Jubilee of Hope," at the conclusion of the liturgical year and the beginning of a new liturgical year with the start of Advent. It is a wholesome moment to take stock of this time of grace that the Lord has given us, and to prepare ourselves with renewed enthusiasm and deep joy to welcome the Holy Child, who always desires to come and dwell in human hearts, bringing as a gift peace, hope, and charity.

Hope sinks its roots in the mystery of Christmas, in the mystery of the Incarnation of God-with-us, who becomes man like us so that we might become like Him. Heaven descends to earth so that earth may be drawn up to Heaven! Dying on the Cross for our salvation, Jesus allows His side to be pierced so that from it may flow the water springing up to eternal life (cf. Jn 7:38). Rising again, He gives us the hope of life without end, and in the light of the Resurrection our hearts are filled with an irrepressible joy that nothing in the world can ever take away.

"The Holy Spirit, through His constant presence along the Church's journey, continues to radiate the light of hope into believers: He keeps it burning like a torch that never goes out, giving support and strength to our lives" (Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025 – Spes non confundit).

The gift of the Jubilee Year has been, and continues to be, a sign of hope for all believers, living and deceased. In fact, the plenary indulgence connected with it completely frees the soul—truly repentant and moved by a spirit of charity—from the temporal punishment due for its sins. It may also be applied to the souls of our departed loved ones, thus giving them the possibility of entering the glory of Paradise as soon as possible. The gift of the Indulgence therefore allows us to discover how limitless God's mercy is and how great His forgiveness (cf. Spes non confundit, 23).

For us, the Missionaries of the Divine Revelation, this Jubilee Year has been—and continues to be—rich in apostolic commitments,

encounters, missions, catecheses, and personal conversations with souls who approach us, sometimes with a certain hesitation but driven by the desire to find truth within themselves.

We have accompanied many groups from all over Italy and various parts of the world, as well as simple families, engaged couples, friends… Most were more or less believers, others distant from the faith. Yet all of them, after being guided through visits to the sites of Christian Rome—especially the four Papal Basilicas, the Vatican Museums, the Lateran Palace, the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem where the relics of the Holy Cross are kept, and the Basilica of Saint Praxedes where the column of the flagellation is found—were touched in their hearts. And the greatest joy for us was hearing, at the end of the visit: "Sister, it's been many years since my last confession," or "I haven't confessed since my First Communion—may I confess now? I want to pass through the Holy Door!" Entire families, after the visit, even got in line at the confessionals for confession. I believe there can be no greater joy for a missionary! It is a joy that repays all the labors and sacrifices of the apostolate—as well as the small or great persecutions that are encountered when evangelizing. As is well known, the devil does not give up and always lashes his poisonous tail to place obstacles along the path.

We always move forward, founded on the Rock, as Psalm 72 says: "God is the rock of my heart, my portion forever" (Ps 73:26), in the solid certainty that the Lord accompanies and sustains us in our apostolate; also because it is not we who take the initiative, but we try to respond to the plan that He sets before us. It is He who shows us the Way through Most Holy Mary, Virgin of Revelation, Star of Evangelization. To her we dedicate our lives with the desire to offer to the generations of the Third Millennium Christ Jesus, "our hope" (1 Tim 1:1), to lead them to the true meaning of earthly life: to reach eternal life in the blessed visio pacis.

Missionaries of the Divine Revelation

How did we live the Jubilee Year in our community?

We are the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, a community of four sisters of different nationalities, living in the Vatican.
How did we live this Holy Year?
We lived it first of all by strengthening our missionary spirit and renewing each day our offering according to the Charism of the Institute: "I offer my life for the Church and for the salvation of the world." This is the core of our charism.
The Jubilee Year has given me and my community an immense richness: the opportunity to fully live our identity as FMM. We took part in the Jubilee celebrations in the Basilica, the prayer vigils in St. Peter's Square, the Eucharistic Adoration every Saturday, and the recitation of the Rosary for world peace during the month of October. In community we pray every day for the Pope and his collaborators, for the people we meet, and for all who entrust themselves to our prayers.
In the Vatican we have been called to carry out a service for the Church and the Pope, engaged above all in hidden, delicate, and precise work in the Workshop for the Restoration of tapestries and ancient textiles. Through this work we live:
•Among the warped and loosened wefts of the tapestries under restoration,
•In the weave of various encounters with people at work and outside it, welcoming those who knock at our door,
•Through the events of the Church and the teachings of the Pope we live the Jubilee Year together, maintaining our relationship with God and with one another.
In today's world, marked by so much violence and suffering, by wars, discord, and all the tragic news we receive daily, the Church offers us the Holy Year and invites us to enter the mystery of God who gives us true salvation. The Holy Door in the Basilica opens only from within and toward the inside; this may signify that only God opens for us the doors of salvation. Graces are received, not conquered. Passing through the Holy Door, I offer to God my life and the life of the world in which I live. The Church presents us with a God who opens doors, not one who closes them; we too want to do the same: to open ourselves to the needs of others with trust and humility, following the example of Mary. She is for us the model of joy in faith and hope. Mother of Hope! She walks with us.
This year has also been marked by sorrow: the death of Pope Francis, but also by great joy: the election of Pope Leo; and by many messages from the Church, especially through the canonization of many saints. In today's fast-paced world, where people want everything immediately and in abundance, the Year of HOPE tells us that there is still much beauty in people's hearts. There is new enthusiasm and great potential in young people: it was a great joy to see thousands of young people arrive from all continents, filling our streets and giving us beautiful moments of renewed energy; in Jesus Christ they find answers to their searching. When Pope Leo called them to be "the light of the world, artisans of peace" (St. Peter's Square, July 19, 2025), we also thought of the many young people in our countries who aspire to more just conditions so that they too may become artisans of justice and fairness.

The multitudes of people who come show us that the desire for the "Sacred" still remains.
At work, when I approach a tapestry—an artwork damaged by time—I reflect in my heart and already see its future restored to its original beauty through my work. I ask myself: with what care and love does the Merciful God draw near to the broken threads and torn wefts of our lives, never tiring of reweaving and restoring them? Even when I have to dye the threads of various colors needed for the restoration, I think that God too prepares for us "various colors"—which may be people, events, or His Word—to heal and restore to their original splendor humanity wounded by wars, violence, and injustice. This invites us to place everything into the healing Heart of Jesus. We are constantly challenged to go beyond ready-made answers and to respond each day with renewed trust. Jesus calls us to manifest His redemptive presence in the world, a humble presence that simply reflects—through the light we receive—something of the splendor of the Son. We are sent to a wounded humanity, to a wounded creation; it is not a matter of being perfect, but of being credible.
This year is also marked by the Canticle of the Creatures composed by St. Francis of Assisi in a very difficult period of his life. Though very ill and almost blind, Francis knew how to look beyond difficulties and place his trust in God; he composed this praise of God, creating the Canticle of the Creatures. With Laudato si', he wants to tell us that hope does not disappoint.
Together with the whole Church we repeat:
God of hope,
who in the Word made flesh
fills us with all joy and peace in our faith,
through the power of the Holy Spirit, be among us.
Blessed be the Lord, our Hope.
(Prayer for the pilgrimage to the Holy Door)

Sister Maria Smoleń, FMM
and the community of the Tapestry and Textile Restoration Workshop of the Vatican Museums

“On Raphael’s Thread”: Christmas in the Vatican Stamps

In commemoration of Christmas 2025, the Vatican Postal and Philatelic Service is issuing two postage stamps featuring details from the Adoration of the Shepherds, a treasured tapestry woven in wool, silk and silver thread. The work belongs to the series known as the New School of Raphael — depicting the Life of Christ, commissioned by the papacy from the same Flemish manufactory responsible for the famous Acts of the Apostles tapestries made for the Sistine Chapel.

The story of this remarkable work, featured on the double Christmas stamp, begins in the Vatican itself — with the meeting between Pope Leo X’s appreciation of tapestries and Raphael’s versatile artistic genius. Assisted by a large team of collaborators, Raphael designed major series of frescoes and tapestries which, after long being regarded as “minor” works compared to his main artistic production, have recently attracted renewed attention. They are now recognized as part of the evangelization through beauty carried out by some of the greatest artists in history. (“On Raphael’s Thread”, Sul Filo di Raffaello, was also the title of a recent exhibition that shed light on this lesser-known aspects of his artistic output.)

Although the tapestry was produced between 1524 and 1531 — after the master’s premature death — it can rightfully be considered part of the Raphaelesque sphere due to its expressive vocabulary and the compositional quality closely resembling a drawing of a similar subject by Raphael, now housed in the Louvre.

In his most recent Christmas Mass homily, Pope Francis chose words that resonate deeply with the scene depicted here — a copy of which, incidentally, was displayed behind him during the opening of the Holy Door. He compared the people of God to the shepherds, the first recipients of the Christian message, describing them as “pilgrims in search of the truth.”

The detail reproduced on the €1.30 stamp captures a group of shepherds in gestures typical of traditional nativity scenes, expressing naïve yet sincere devotion before the mystery of the Incarnation. The eldest stands with hands clasped in reverence; the younger ones honor “Christ the Lord” — announced by the heavenly hosts shown behind them, thanks to the narrative device of simultaneity — within a lush landscape that becomes a painting within the painting. One of the shepherds removes his cap, while another delights the child with the sound of a bagpipe.

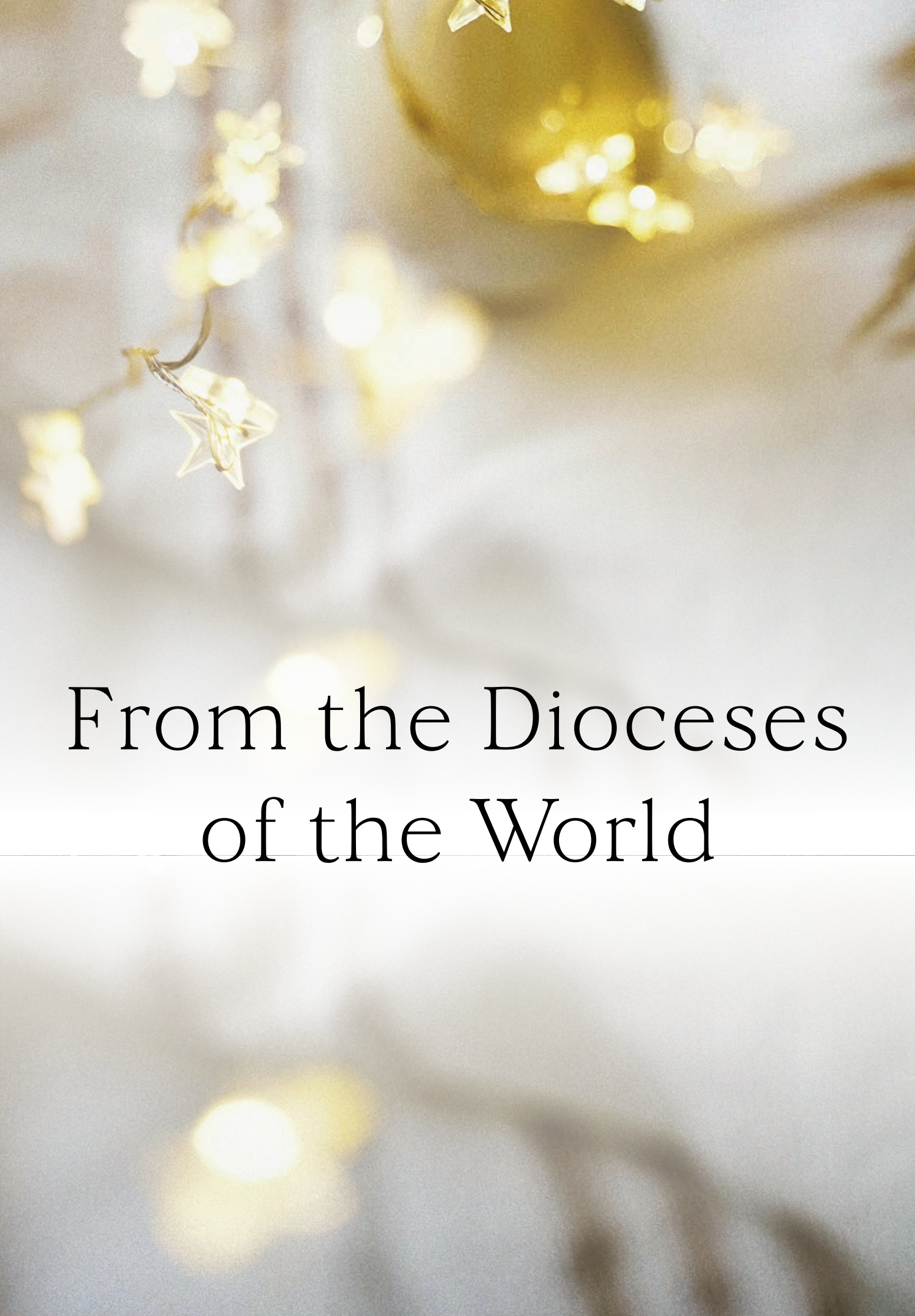
One of the most beautiful and meaningful moments in Christian art’s two-millennia-long depiction of Christ’s birth lies in the central scene, in which the Virgin Mary adores and at the same time lovingly tends to her newborn Son. The iconography of Christmas has always emphasized the centrality of the Mother–Child relationship, sometimes even at the expense of the other member of the Holy Family, Saint Joseph, who — when not entirely excluded — is portrayed as elderly, underscoring his detachment from the divine conception of the Savior.

The second stamp focuses on this central scene. Despite the refinement and sculptural grace of their poses and garments, the figures are depicted in natural and coherent attitudes that perfectly suit the event. The elderly Joseph points the shepherds toward the Child, who reaches out with open arms toward his Mother’s embrace. Mary, most likely captured as she lays the Child in the manger — just as described in the Gospel of Luke, the principal source for Nativity iconography — could also be shown lovingly responding to his desire to be held.

Also present within the composition are the ox and the donkey, nearly indispensable in traditional representations — though more for their symbolic value than for adherence to the Gospels, where they are never mentioned. Their inclusion, found only in apocryphal sources, more likely recalls Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 1:3 (“The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know”), referring to Israel’s unawareness of belonging to God; or Habakkuk 3:2, which in the Greek version may have contributed to the idea of “being known in the midst of two living creatures.”

In his revealing book on the infancy of Jesus, Pope Benedict XVI interpreted “the two animals as a representation of humanity itself — lacking in understanding, yet, before the Child, coming to knowledge.”

Federico Sgarbossa
Vatican Postal and Philatelic Service



From the Dioceses of the World

ALBANIA:
ARCHDIOCESE OF TIRANA-DURRËS

The Christmas That Rebuilds Us
Signs of Hope in Albania and in the World

+ Arjan Dodaj, FDC
Metropolitan Archbishop of Tirana-Durrës

As the Jubilee draws to a close, the heart of the Church opens to the mystery of Christmas with a profound sense of hope. It is a hope that does not end with the celebrations, but springs from the very heart of the Gospel: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Is 9:1). In a world wounded by war, division, and uncertainty, the birth of Christ once again becomes the promise that God does not abandon humanity but draws near, sharing in our fragility.

A Hope That Speaks to the Present

We live in a time when peace seems distant: armed conflicts, economic crises, forced migrations, and a widespread sense of disorientation. Even in Albania — a country that once endured the harshness of state atheism and now faces the challenges of modernity — many ask where to find a stable foundation for the future. The Christian answer is not an abstract theory but a person: Jesus Christ, God-with-us. In Him, hope takes flesh; it becomes tangible and daily. It is the hope of those who, even in poverty or trial, know that God is present and that goodness, though often silent, never fails.

The Jubilee of Hope has invited all the faithful to rediscover mercy and reconciliation as the beating heart of Christian life. Now, on the threshold of Christmas, the Church in Albania too is called to turn that grace into a concrete path of renewal. Our communities are invited to cherish the memory of what the Spirit has accomplished in this time of grace and to translate it into daily gestures of hope, welcome, and fraternity.

This vocation finds fertile ground in our Albanian identity, shaped by a long tradition of sincere and selfless hospitality. For centuries, the Albanian people have opened the doors of their homes and hearts to the stranger, to those in need, to those seeking refuge—or simply a smile. This culture of welcome, born from a deep sense of human dignity and the value of family, is a living testimony of Gospel hope. It reminds us that every time we welcome another person, we welcome Christ Himself who comes to visit us. In the spirit of this Christmas, the Church in Albania is called to let this vocation shine even more brightly: to be an open home, a place of encounter and dialogue. In a world marked by divisions and mistrust, our country offers a precious example of peaceful coexistence among religions. Christians, Muslims, Orthodox, and members of other communities have lived side by side for centuries, sharing respect, friendship, and cooperation. This fraternal atmosphere is one

of the most beautiful gifts Albania can offer to the Church and to Europe — a sign that peace is possible when we begin by recognizing the other as a brother, not as an adversary. Parishes, families, and young people are therefore called to be living signs of hope — through works of charity, solidarity with the weak, the promotion of peace, and sincere dialogue with all. Where bridges are built instead of walls, where hands are extended instead of voices raised, there the true spirit of Christmas is born. On this path of fraternity, the Church in Albania continues to bear witness that hope is not an idea but a way of life shaped by the Gospel that illuminates the present and prepares a future of peace.

The Hope That Calls: A Year of Prayer for Vocations

Christian hope is not mere optimism; it is the trust that God continues to work in history, even when the soil seems barren and the fruits few. It is the certainty that the Holy Spirit never ceases to speak to the human heart—to call, to invite, to draw it to follow Christ generously.

At this time, as the universal Church reflects on the meaning of hope and peace, the Metropolitan Archdiocese of Tirana-Durrës is called to translate this hope into a concrete commitment: prayer for priestly and religious vocations. I have desired that this year be dedicated precisely to this purpose, because our Church in Albania—born from the blood of the martyrs and strengthened by the faith of so many lay people and young people—needs new voices to answer "yes" to the Lord.

Hope takes on a face in those who respond to God's call. Every vocation is a sign that the Gospel continues to blossom; every young person who opens himself or herself to the gift of consecrated life is a luminous response to God's love. But vocations are not born in the silence of indifference—they are born in communities that pray, that accompany, that look to the future of the Church with faith. To pray for vocations, then, is to believe that God never ceases to call, even when our strength seems small or the times difficult. It is an act of hope: for where there is prayer, the Lord acts—He touches hearts, kindles new enthusiasm, and raises shepherds after His own heart.

I have invited every parish, every family, every consecrated person, and every young believer to feel part of this journey. The Year of Prayer for Vocations is not simply an initiative but a path of faith and trust—a time to let ourselves be challenged by God's voice and to renew our willingness to serve Him with joy.

The Peace Born of Hope

The message of Christmas does not ignore the pain of the world—it embraces it. In the Child of Bethlehem, God enters our history not as a powerful king but as a sign of tenderness and closeness. He brings a peace that is not merely the absence of war but a deep reconciliation between humanity and God, and therefore among human beings themselves. It is a peace that begins in the heart, that is built through forgiveness, and that is revealed in daily gestures of love, justice, and solidarity. To be artisans of peace means to make the hope of the Gospel visible in concrete life: in families that learn to forgive, in young people who choose goodness, in communities that overcome division. Christmas invites us to become bearers of this hope—beginning right where we live: in our local Church, in our daily relationships, in works of charity and service.

Christian hope is radiant because it springs from a certainty: God has chosen to dwell among us. And if God is with us, no darkness can extinguish the light that shines in the night. It is the same light that sustained the Albanian martyrs during persecution, and that illumined the life of Blessed Vincent Prennushi, my venerable predecessor on the See of Durrës. He bore courageous and faithful witness that hope cannot be imprisoned: even in the darkness of suffering, he continued to love the Church, to forgive, and to offer his life for Christ. His testimony remains for all of us a sign of unshakable trust in the victory of good over evil.

At the end of the Jubilee, Christmas calls us back to this same certainty: hope is not a fragile dream but a living promise renewed every time we welcome Christ into our hearts. In Albania, as throughout the world, this hope continues to grow—fragile like a child in the manger, yet strong like the love of God that saves.

We entrust this journey to the Mother of Good Counsel, patroness of our beloved Albania. She, who received the Word and kept it in the silence of her heart, may accompany our Church in its service to the Gospel. May she teach us to say our daily "yes" to God and to become, like her, signs of hope for a world still thirsty for peace and light.

May the light of Christmas, the fidelity of the martyrs, and the intercession of the Mother of Good Counsel guide us in the new year, so that our Church in Albania may continue to be a light of hope, an instrument of peace, and a home of mercy for all.

ALGERIA:
DIOCESE OF CONSTANTINE (HIPPO)

Following in the footsteps of the Child of the Nativity
Servants of Hope in Algeria

+ Michel Guillaud
Bishop of Constantine and Hippo

Like Jesus, who made himself poor

Jesus did not choose to be born into a privileged family or a protected environment. He was born in precarious circum-stances (birth during a journey, threats, refuge in Egypt, etc.). Our Church in Algeria is sensitive to this, because it too lives in difficult conditions.

But this choice challenges us, we who constantly dream of escaping our precarious situation, of having better living conditions—legal, institutional, financial, and so on. Yet Jesus did not want to rely on material security, but first of all on the security provided by the love of his parents, Joseph and Mary, on the happiness that comes from fraternal human relationships with all.

To savor simplicity as a blessing, to invest in fraternal relationships—these are the beautiful indications given by the Child Jesus and a promise that nourishes our hope.

Like Jesus, who gave value to the life of every person

To lead us to heaven, God came to earth. A grace that comes at a high cost for God: the life of His Son, as the theologian

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said.

In a country marked by emigration or the desire to emigrate, the arrival of missionaries is surprising. Setting out on a journey in this direction seems strange. Coming to Algeria, remaining here, expressing our joy in living in this country, our wonder at God's work in the lives of Muslim and Christian men and women, makes volunteers, priests, monks, and nuns servants of hope.

Like Jesus, welcoming everyone

The guests in the grotto of Bethlehem—angels, animals and humans, shepherds and Magi—already speak to us of the universal salvation brought by Jesus. On October 18, in our diocese, at the Basilica of Saint Augustine in Hippo, we celebrated an episcopal ordination with an assembly made up one-third of Muslims, one-third of Catholics, and one-third of Christians of other denominations. This is a precious sign from the Lord that the Good News we proclaim is not a threat or a competition, but is perceived as good news for all!

Like Jesus in the grotto

Jesus was not born in the comfort of a house or a palace, but in a stable.

The episcopal ordination of October 18 took place in the Basilica of Hippo and not in the diocesan Cathedral, because the latter, located in the city of Constantine, more central within the diocese, is a renovated basement of less than 100 square meters. The same is true for the places of worship in each of the other six parishes of the diocese. The richness of our Church does not lie in its buildings but in its people.

Like Jesus, transcending every border

Shortly after his birth, Jesus and his family left for Egypt, and he would continue traveling from Jewish to pagan lands, from Judea to Samaria, from the Decapolis to Galilee. He declared that his brothers, sisters, and mother were those who listened to and practiced the Word of God.

The Church in Algeria is a multicultural Church, composed of students and migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, native Arab and Berber children, expatriates, priests and religious from every continent. This Church of all nations is a blessing in a country that long believed Christianity was the religion of European colonialists, while Islam was the religion of liberation for developing nations.

A treasure offered

A few months ago, the head of one of our parishes was drilling a hole in the chapel wall to install a tabernacle. Hearing the noise, a Muslim neighbor shouted to him:

"Are you making a hole in the wall?"

"Yes."

"Is it to hide a treasure?"

"…Yes!"

"Will we be able to have a share of this treasure?"

A beautiful parable of our Church, in a country where the percentage of Christians is less than one in a thousand.

UAE, OMAN, and YEMEN: APOSTOLIC VICARIATE OF SOUTHERN ARABIA

Celebrating Christmas in Arabia in the Footsteps of St. Francis of Assisi

+ Paolo Martinelli, OFMCap
Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia

This year, Christmas is marked in a special way by the theme of hope. As we approach the close of the Jubilee, hearts turn to what is essential: the birth of Jesus, the mystery of the Incarna-tion, God among us forever. This is the foundation of the "hope that does not disappoint" (Rom 5:5).
Christians in the Persian Gulf are also preparing for the Jubilee Christmas of Hope. In the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Ara-bia, Catholics number over one million and live in very different contexts: the United Arab Emirates, a very modern country pro-jected into the future; the Sultanate of Oman, a gentle and wel-coming land; and Yemen, a reality marked by suffering and poverty due to a civil war that began more than ten years ago. In all these places, our faithful prepare for the coming of the Lord.
We live in countries deeply shaped by Islam, and our faithful —migrants from more than one hundred nations—love to relive their Christmas traditions. Our churches, already normally very crowded, become even fuller as the faithful gather for novenas and Christmas prayers.
One particularly heartfelt tradition is that of the Filipino faithful, our largest group: the Simbang Gabi, a Christmas novena in which believers gather for nine consecutive evenings, filling not only the churches but the entire compound, including the football field, as happens in the parish of St. Mary's in Dubai. Thirty thousand people gather to pray for nine days. This year, Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle has promised to visit us for the occasion. All our faithful await him with fervor.
Most of our clergy belong to the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin—the Franciscans. The Holy See entrusted this territory to them for pastoral care almost two hundred years ago. Their presence fosters a reference to Franciscan spirituality, especially at Christmas. For example, building the Nativity scene—together with the Christmas tree—is a well-rooted tradition. This year, as we draw near the eighth centenary of the death of St. Francis of Assisi, the spirituality of the Poverello is particularly tangible. All families are invited to set up a Nativity scene in their homes as a sign of awaiting Christ. In the parishes, each language community is invited to build a Nativity scene according to its own cultural tradition. In this way, each one can see not only their own representation but also that of other cultures. Our church compounds thus become colorful exhibitions of Nativity scenes.

It is not uncommon for parishes to organize live Nativity scenes, just like St. Francis did in Greccio. Even Christians who live with the Missionaries of Charity in Yemen, despite their poverty, celebrate Christmas with simple and profound joy.

Here we truly find ourselves in a unique situation. Our faithful speak different languages and come from different traditions and rites. Yet it is a great joy to recognize ourselves as united in the same Christian faith and to enrich one another with the spiritual gifts each one bears.

Being migrants in an Islamic land and belonging to a strongly intercultural Church are, paradoxically, two conditions that help us rediscover the Christian faith and celebrate it with intensity. When Pope Francis came to Abu Dhabi in 2019, recalling the meeting between St. Francis of Assisi and Sultan Malik al-Kamil, and to sign the Document on Human Fraternity with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, he described our Church during his homily as a "joyful polyphony of faith." Indeed, this is exactly the experience one can have in these lands. We are led to consider our Christian faith more deeply and to rediscover the roots of our hope.

Migrants know well that everything is provisional. They leave their homeland and often their families. This makes the question of hope even more pressing. Pope Leo XIV has reminded us that the migrant is a "missionary of hope": "Many migrants, refugees, and displaced persons are privileged witnesses of hope lived out daily, through their trust in God and their endurance of adversity in view of a future in which they glimpse the nearness of happiness" (Message for the 111th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2025).

Here the true foundation of Christian hope becomes clear: not a calculation of probabilities, nor reliance on our own strength, nor a vague optimism. Hope does not disappoint because it is rooted in the certainty of love. At Christmas we do not celebrate an event of the past but the presence of Christ today. With the invention of the Nativity scene, St. Francis wanted to tell the world that Jesus is born even now among us. Truly, "He is here. He is here as on the first day" (Ch. Péguy), even in Arabia.

ARGENTINA:
ARCHDIOCESE OF BUENOS AIRES

God Never Tires of Betting on the Small

+ Jorge Ignacio García Cuerva
Archbishop of Buenos Aires

Every Christmas, God reveals to us once again that His way of acting does not correspond to our criteria. We dream of greatness, and He chooses smallness. We seek noise, and He prefers silence. We build walls, and He opens doors. While humanity celebrates power and splendor, God continues to be born on the margins, in the humility of a manger, in the poverty of hearts that still dare to hope.

Where the world sees only fragility, love becomes flesh. In Bethlehem, the infinite becomes small, and from weakness springs the strongest hope. True hope is not born from what we possess, but from what we are capable of giving. It is born in simple places: in the fruitful silence of those who know they are loved, in the hidden gestures that sustain daily life.

This paradox was expressed by Pope Leo XIV in his exhortation Dilexi te: "I have loved you (Rev 3:9), says the Lord to a Christian community that, unlike others, had no relevance or resources and was exposed to violence and contempt."

The phrase "I have loved you" is the heart of the Gospel. It is the word that sustains the weary, heals the wounds of the soul, and restores dignity to those who feel forgotten. It is the voice that lifts up the fallen and that, in the midst of an unbelieving world, continues to say: "Live, because you are loved."

This love is still alive: Christ lives. He lives in simple hearts, in the peripheries of pain, in the silent faith of those who do not give up. He lives in every gesture of goodness that keeps the flame of the Gospel burning.

The Child of Bethlehem does not demand perfection nor promise honors, but He shows us the way of tenderness. In Him, every caress, every embrace, and every gratuitous gesture acquire the value of eternity. In a culture of disposability, the Child in the manger inspires in us a culture of care, the ability to stop before another person and recognize each other as brothers and sisters. Tenderness is the strength of God made visible, the concrete way in which God tells us that to live is to love.

The Holy Father tells us: "No gesture of affection, not even the smallest, will be forgotten, especially if directed to those who are suffering."

Christmas, then, is the school of love that becomes flesh. It is celebrated with hands that embrace, with eyes that see, with hearts that accompany. It is the feast of living hope, of the God who does not remain confined to ideas or mere words, but who

lives, loves, and walks among His people. He is the God who does not resign Himself to the death of the soul or to the indifference of the heart. The Nativity scene is not a household decoration: it is a sacred place where God teaches us to look at the world through smallness and simplicity. There, in precariousness, the love that saves is revealed. Where the world perceives misery, God reveals promise; where life seems to end, He inaugurates a beginning. Every contemporary manger—every suffering heart, every humble home, every hospital, every street—is a Bethlehem awaiting Christ, who is born and restores dignity.

Christian hope blossoms when love becomes life. It is expressed in the patience that accompanies, in the fidelity that sustains, in the mercy that gives itself. Love is credible when it becomes service. Faith becomes complete when our hands touch the wounds of those who suffer and our words become God's comfort for them. Christ lives there, too: in the streets, in prisons, in hospitals, at tables where bread is shared. A living Church is one that brings life, not complaint; that heals wounds, not merely diagnoses and describes them.

The hope of the Gospel lights up the night with its serene fire. It is a hope that accompanies pain with presence, that turns tears into prayer, that transforms weariness into a fertile seed. In Christ, love has a future. Contemplating God made Child, we understand that every dawn can be a resurrection, that every small beginning can be the start of something eternal. The Pope encourages us at the end of his exhortation: "It will be possible for that poor person to feel that the words of Jesus are addressed to him: 'I have loved you' (Rev 3:9)."

May this Christmas find us grateful and available, capable of beginning again. May it renew in us the certainty that Christ lives: He lives in the manger of our history, in the relationships that heal, in the poor who await, in every gesture that builds fraternity. God never tires of betting on the small. May we, who believe in Christ, not tire either.

AZERBAIJAN: APOSTOLIC PREFECTURE OF AZERBAIJAN

The commitment of the Salesians of Don Bosco

+ Vladimir Fakete, SDB
Bishop, Apostolic Prefect

The territory of modern-day Azerbaijan was annexed by former Russian Empire after the last Russo-Persian War in 1828, and later became one of the union republics of the USSR. Decades of persecution and forced atheization led to the almost complete destruction of the Catholic Church, which in this predominantly Muslim country consisted primarily of foreigners. Like most mosques and orthodox churches, catholic churches were also demolished, and the last catholic priest was executed back in 1936.

After the collapse of the USSR, an independent, democratic, and secular Azerbaijan emerged on the political map and began writing its own new history. Its territory fell under the jurisdiction of the Apostolic Administration, located in the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi. The Apostolic Administrator of Tbilisi took the first steps to restore the presence of the Catholic Church in Azerbaijan and, through priest Jerzy Pilus, succeeded in registering a Catholic community in Baku in 1999. By decision of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, a separate ecclesiastical structure was created in Azerbaijan, which was placed under the care of the Society of St. Francis de Sales – the Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB). In September of this year, the local Church celebrated the 25th anniversary of the creation of the "Missio sui iuris bakuensis" and its dedication to the spiritual care of the Salesians. Following the signing of an intergovernmental agreement between the Holy See and Azerbaijan on the legal status of the Catholic Church in Azerbaijan on August 4, 2011, the "Missio sui iuris" was transformed into the Apostolic Prefecture of Azerbaijan.

Pastoral care for local and foreign Catholics is currently provided only in the country's capital, where two parishes have been established. In addition to seven priests and religious from the Salesian congregation, sisters from two congregations—the Missionaries of Charity (MC) and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA)—participate in the local church's social projects, as well as catechesis and evangelization. Civil society highly values the shelter for the homeless and seriously ill, run by the MC sisters since 2006.

We wanted to use the jubilee year 2025—the year of hope announced and inaugurated by Pope Francis—to strengthen the spiritual life, faith, and Catholic identity of our faithful, especially local ones. Along with the liturgy and celebrations in Azerbaijan, from the very beginning of the year we informed parishioners about the history and significance of the jubilee pilgrimages to Rome and encouraged them to sign up for at least some of the pilgrimages to Rome this year, organized for them by their parishes.

It was an unpleasant surprise to us when we discovered that even the few who initially signed up for the pilgrimage ultimately declined to participate due to financial and other reasons.

However, what was not possible with adult parishioners proved possible for young believers. Even before Easter, three young parishioners, accompanied by Don Behbud Mustafayev, the first Azerbaijani priest, traveled to Rome. And at the beginning of the summer, seven more young believers from a Salesian-led

parish, along with the parish priest and two FMA sisters, set out on the same route. This was their first trip abroad, and they returned from the Eternal City full of strong impressions and deep experiences.

The witness they bore upon their return, both within their families and within the parish community, proved to be positively contagious. First their parents, and then other parishioners, came to the conclusion that it was worthwhile to take advantage of this jubilee year to make a pilgrimage to Rome. They, too, wanted to strengthen their faith and be spiritually enriched, having seen these fruits in their children and grandchildren.

Thus, what seemed impossible at the beginning of the year was finally accomplished six months later. In October, a group of foreign Catholics working in Azerbaijan made a jubilee pilgrimage to Rome. In November, another twenty of our adult parishioners departed from Baku on a jubilee pilgrimage. This was their first visit to Rome, including a visit to the major basilicas and participation in the general audience of the Holy Father Leo XIV.

Sometimes we are convinced that our task as adults is to protect, educate, and guide the youth. And this is certainly true. However, this event in our local church confirmed that young people are sometimes more effective "apostles" not only among their peers, but also, with their spontaneity and courage, they can make even us, adults, blush. Their living faith and lives, untainted by negative experiences, proved more effective in inspiring adult parishioners than the encouragement of religious and priests.

Therefore, if the Church has young people, and if the Church knows how to involve them in parish life and ministry, then such a Church has a future and hope for growth.

BELGIUM:
ARCHDIOCESE OF MECHELEN-BRUSSELS

"Walking with Hope"
One Year After Pope Francis' Visit to Belgium
+ Luc Terlinden
Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels

Last year, Pope Francis made a historic visit to Belgium, marked by a profound encounter with both society and the Church. The Holy Father visited the two major university communities of Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, where he engaged in dialogue with the academic world. He also met with the Belgian monarchs and the country's authorities. At the National Basilica of Koekelberg, he held in-depth discussions with pastoral leaders of the dioceses. In a more intimate setting, he met a group of people in difficulty and refugees attending a parish lunch, as well as the residents of the St. Joseph Home, run by the Little Sisters of the Poor. He also set aside a long meeting to listen to victims of sexual abuse—a moment of great human and spiritual intensity.
Finally, a Eucharistic celebration that gathered nearly 40,000 people at King Baudouin Stadium united the People of God around Peter in a contagious fervor.

A message of hope at the heart of private visits
The theme chosen for this visit, "Walking with Hope," unfolded throughout every encounter, both through the Pope's words and through the testimonies and human stories he encountered. Yet it was perhaps in his private visits that this hope manifested itself most strongly: there, where the truth of hearts emerges, where vulnerability is welcomed, and where authentic listening takes place.
Hope, embodied by the Pope, advances through wounds, but also through welcome, listening, and empathy. It connects deeply with the Face of Christ, who bends toward every human being. In turn, we are called not only to speak of hope but to live it in deeds.
Pilgrims of hope
The Jubilee Year that followed invited us to become "Pilgrims of Hope" ourselves. This means recognizing that we walk—like the shepherds on Christmas night—guided by a star leading us to Jesus, the Child in the manger.
Many were able to travel to Rome to pass through the Holy Door, receive the sacrament of reconciliation, and discover the beauty of the universal Church in its cultural diversity. Young people, families, catechumens, and their sponsors shared a deep spiritual experience, rich in encounters, celebrations, and a profound desire to draw closer to the Lord.
The youth pilgrimage in July was particularly vibrant: the joy of gathering, celebrating, and witnessing together revealed a living Church.
In Belgium, the Jubilee churches welcomed thousands of pilgrims with the same spirit. We saw a Church on the move, renewing itself—a luminous sign of hope.
Showing how believers are already living this hope—among the poorest, among young people, among catechumens, in prayer groups—means helping one another overcome oppressive loneliness and celebrating Christ present among us when two or three gather in his name.

Active hope in a troubled world

Our world remains marked by conflicts, wars, terrorist threats, and violence linked to drug cartels. COP30 in the Amazon reminded us of the climate emergency, with its potentially dramatic social and human consequences: increased poverty, mass migration, and new instabilities.

The Church in Belgium also seeks to bring hope in these areas. It has expressed solidarity with refugees and with populations affected by violence. Even when we feel powerless, hope calls us to persevere in prayer and in our commitment to justice.

During his visit, Pope Francis highlighted an essential characteristic of our country: "Belgium is a bridge that fosters exchange, connects civilizations, and encourages dialogue. A bridge, therefore, indispensable for building peace and rejecting war."

A crossroads of languages and cultures, our country thus embodies a true European vocation and becomes great when it devotes itself to serving peace and harmony.

Christmas: the fragility that saves

Christmas is welcoming the Son of God who comes to dwell among us. The fragility of the Child in the manger touches and disarms us. The crèches in our churches and squares also remind us of the respectful tenderness to which every child is entitled.

Jesus is our hope. In our country, this hope can be seen especially in the growing desire for baptism among young people, in renewed commitment to the poor and the vulnerable, and in the rekindled vitality of communities animated by the Spirit of the Lord.

A holy Christmas to all!

BENIN: ARCHDIOCESE OF COTONOU

An Invitation to Commitment Through Concrete Choices

+ Roger Houngbedji, OP
Archbishop of Cotonou

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those loved by the Lord.[1]" This is the angelic hymn that resounds in churches all over the world on Christmas night. But what do these words mean in a world marked by countless divisions, wars, terrorism, violence of every kind, and anxiety in hearts—even within families at times? How can we sing "peace to all" when entire populations see every hope of peace vanish into nothing? In this sense, Christmas must be seen as a prophecy: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they train for war anymore." For Christmas means that God has pitched His tent among us; He brings peace. As we celebrate Christmas, we can identify three sources of hope.

The first source of Christian hope in the face of the absence of peace in the world remains the Word of God. Already in the Old Testament, in chapters 7–9 of the Book of Isaiah, when, in the midst of the Syro-Ephraimite crisis (around 734 BC), the peace of the small kingdom of Judah was threatened, it was the Word of God that was addressed to King Ahaz in this oracle: "The young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel" (*Isaiah* 7:14). A little further on, in Isaiah 9:5–6, the royal child takes on an even clearer theological meaning and symbolizes peace.

[1] δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις θεῷ καὶ ἐπ γῆς εἰρήνη ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας (Lc 2,14)

The text says: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us… and he is named Wonder Counselor, God Hero, Father Forever, Prince of Peace." These titles, even if the author attributes them to the child, already evoke Jesus, the Prince of Peace (cf. *Mt* 1:22–23). Christmas thus becomes a proclamation of God's presence in the midst of a troubled world. God walks with His people. Ahaz's world was a world without peace. Ours is no different. Our first refuge is found in the Word of God.

The second source of hope lies in our sense of solidarity and mutual support for the sake of true peace. Here in Benin, as elsewhere, behind the joy of Christmas, many are experiencing real tragedies: the peace of many families and nations is threatened. Elsewhere, and unfortunately even here, concern is growing in the face of threats from extremist groups. Social peace, though relatively stable, is nevertheless threatened by political tensions.

All this requires from us a more attentive gaze for a more compassionate Church. As Pope Francis reminds us, the poverty of Christ is a wealth because it reveals the love of God and challenges our relationship with material goods, solidarity and fraternity. Pope Leo XIV, in his apostolic exhortation Dilexi te, invites us to remain attentive to every form of poverty. Consequently, celebrating the birth of the Prince of Peace in an environment where so many men and women struggle to find even the most basic material peace requires pastoral initiatives aimed at providing a concrete response to the problem of poverty and to threats against peace. It is important that such initiatives not be merely institutional but become spontaneous. Let us strive to be God's response to the difficult situations the world is undergoing.

Finally, the third source of hope to highlight here is the pastoral commitment of our dioceses and parishes. When Jesus says to His disciples—and also to us—"Give them some food yourselves" (*Lk* 9:13), is He referring only to meals? Is it not rather an invitation to commit ourselves through concrete choices, actions, commitments, and projects that make the presence of Christ visible among His people? It is in this dynamic that the pastoral approach adopted for the next two years by the Archdiocese of Cotonou is situated, centered on the theme: "Give them some food yourselves" (*Lk* 9:13). The Church is called to interpret people's anxieties as calls—calls to solidarity, creativity, mission, and charity in truth. Authentic Christian charity seeks to uplift people, stimulate their abilities, and enable them to become agents of their own development. It is also an opportunity to clarify the link between poverty and the absence of peace. In fact, even though societies where basic goods are easily accessible still experience war, poverty is undoubtedly a potential source of frustration and conflict and a fertile ground for recruiting young people into violent and terrorist acts. Here lies the truth of the now proverbial phrase of Saint Paul VI: "Development is the new name for peace." Inaction and silence are as guilty as evil itself. A Lenten hymn proclaims it forcefully: "May God keep watch over those who sing to the Lord: may they not at the same time be accomplices of the misfortune that binds their brothers." Christian hope is credible only when it becomes service, sharing, and commitment to human dignity.

Thus, in a world disfigured by violence, poverty, wars and divisions, the celebration of Christmas emerges as a light "for those who dwell in the land of darkness and the shadow of death" (cf. Mt 4:16). By proclaiming the Word, the Church bears witness that it is Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who brings true peace to the world. And by committing itself to feeding those who have nothing, it works for peace and human dignity, far from cameras and spotlights. Christmas becomes a commitment to serve, to love, to build, to uplift, to protect, to console and to encourage. This is the best way to say to the women and men of our time—to those who seek peace, to those who suffer, to those who still hope: "Merry Christmas!"

IVORY COAST: ARCHDIOCESE OF BOUAKÉ

Christmas and the Jubilee of Hope: what impact for our society in crisis?

+ Jacques Assanvo Ahiwa Archbishop of Bouaké

In opening the Great Jubilee that celebrates the 2025th anniversary of the birth of Christ in our world, Pope Francis has placed the event under the sign of hope and has called us to be bearers of this hope for our world in crisis.

1. "Hope does not disappoint," a prophetic word for a suffering world

The Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the year 2025, published by Pope Francis, proclaimed to the world—like a prophetic word—the powerful conviction of the Apostle Paul: "Hope does not disappoint" (Romans 5:5). In a world shaken by crises that cannot be solved by human means, this word carries a force of resurrection. In the inaugural Mass of this Jubilee, on Christmas Eve 2024, Pope Francis stated: "This is the night in which the door of hope opened to the world; this is the night in which God says to each one of us: there is hope for you too! There is hope for every one of us." Jesus Christ is our hope. He came into the world, becoming one of us, to experience the human condition with its joys and sorrows, and to make us aware that God is present, accompanies us, and cares for us in every circumstance of our lives. This certainty grounds our hope in a tomorrow that is always better, far beyond all crises.

2. Christmas! A hope for the world

The call to hope during this Jubilee responds to a vital need. We are living in a world trapped in a vortex of despair, a deep malaise with disastrous consequences for human life. Not a day passes without the media bombarding us with bad news: natural disasters caused by human aggression against nature, armed conflicts, injustices of every kind, and the domination of the strong over the weak. The young people of our society—especially in Africa, and the youth of our Archdiocese of Bouaké—face numerous difficulties that suffocate their desire to strive for a normal life and often lead them to succumb to dehumanizing vices: drugs, moral depravity, violence, and so on. Some embark on dangerous adventures such as banditry or crossing the sea, from which—if they are lucky—they emerge completely devastated. Others, at the cost of their dignity, choose easier paths toward quick wealth, which are nothing more than an unrealistic dream that ends in great loss. All these paths ultimately lead nowhere; they inevitably lead to a dead end.

The 2025 Ordinary Jubilee, placed under the sign of hope, arrives at just the right moment to give strength and courage to those destabilized and disappointed by a life that seems to have no way out; because "Christian hope," as the Pope affirms in the Bull of Indiction, "neither deceives nor disappoints, because it is founded on the certainty that nothing and no one can ever separate us from the love of God" (n. 3). Hope allows us to overcome difficulties and "thus enables us to move forward in life." In a world whose horizon is darkened by crises and wars, the Star of Bethlehem shines in the night of Christmas like a beacon of hope,

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and the glory of God covers the earth. And "the glory of God is peace," affirms Pope Benedict XVI. "Where He is, there is peace. He is present where people do not wish to make the earth a paradise on their own, resorting to violence." He is with those who keep watch in their hearts, with the humble, and with those who are "in tune" with His greatness—the greatness of humility and love. To them He gives His peace so that, through them, peace may enter this world. (Homily for Midnight Mass 2008)

3. Christmas! A hope for our Jubilee Church of Bouaké

Providence has willed that the celebration of the Great Jubilee of 2025 coincide with the centenary of the evangelization of Bouaké (1925–2025). The hope brought at Christmas by the Prince of Peace, who came to dwell in our world and save us, awakens our joy of living. We therefore gladly welcome the Pope's invitation to be pilgrims of hope in continuing our mission of evangelization. The people of our diocese still bear the painful wounds of the political–military crisis of 2002–2011, of which the city of Bouaké was the epicenter. But we must continue to "move forward in life." The hope brought by the Prince of Peace at Christmas invites us to rise again. The great challenge facing us at the end of this Jubilee is to awaken, nourish, and strengthen hope in the life of the People of God. In the difficult and arduous journey of building peace, the Star of Bethlehem appears to us as a beacon that ignites the hope that nothing is finished and that we must continue moving forward in life.

COSTA RICA: ARCHDIOCESE OF SAN JOSÉ

Christ Wants to Be Born in Our Hearts

+ José Rafael Quirós Quirós
Archbishop of San José, Costa Rica

"Today in the city of David a Savior has been born for you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." With this announcement, the angel communicates to us the central news of human history—the reason for immense joy for everyone without exception: in a humble stable, God is born as a child to give true life to those who welcome Him, and to offer reconciliation and peace to all peoples. He is our Peace, the one and only source of peace. With the extraordinary joy that this truth awakens in our hearts, we Christians desire that Christmas rekindle in each of us the longing to open our hearts and welcome Christ, who comes to meet us.

Today, like those shepherds, all humanity is called to set out on a journey and contemplate the mystery of the "Word made flesh." In the Eternal Word just born, "wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger," we recognize our Savior, "God with us," the Emmanuel who comes to guide our steps on the path of true peace. God, the one source of love, draws near to us in the humility of our human flesh to transform it. From birth, He does not belong to the realm of what is important and powerful in the world. And yet, the One who seems unimportant and powerless proves to be the truly powerful One, the One on whom, in the end, everything depends. (Cf. *Jesus of Nazareth*, by J. Ratzinger). Discovering the atmosphere of poverty, humility, and simplicity in which the Lord's birth took place should awaken in us the moral effort needed to live like Christ, who "though he was rich, became poor for our sake." It is Jesus Himself who sends us to be bearers of peace and to proclaim the message that the world needs today and always. With this, He tells us: enough with wars and contempt for life. Every person and every nation deserve respect. Let songs for life be heard instead of the sound of destructive gunfire. Since we are children of God, we value life as His gift, and our divine destiny makes us heirs of eternal life.

The incarnation of the Son of God tells all humanity that the human being cannot do everything alone; therefore, our message must always echo that voice which comes to us from heaven. From the lips of Jesus Himself, we have learned that He dwells among the fragile, the abandoned, and the needy: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." God is with the humble; He identifies with them and invites us not only to be sensitive toward families with limited resources or toward our "less privileged" brothers and sisters during this time of year, but also to embody the very sentiments of Christ, who made Himself poor to enrich us all with the noblest and most human of feelings. Certainly, the Lord from the manger invites us to share with those who have less, but above all, He calls us to act against all

selfishness and arrogance, against corrupt political calculations or unjust economic decisions that cause our brothers and sisters to be deprived of the satisfaction of their most basic needs.

Christmas will always be an invitation to a change of heart—one that reshapes relationships among human beings according to higher values such as the common good and the full development "of every man and of all men." (Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n.14).

Let us open our hearts to God, who comes to us as a child and desires to be embraced. This God "in weakness and fragility hides His power that creates and transforms all things. It seems impossible, but it is so: in Jesus, God became a child, and in this condition He chose to reveal the greatness of His love, which is shown in a smile and in the outstretched hands reaching toward everyone." (Pope Francis, *Admirabile signum*, 8)

This is the message for today and for always: Christ is our Hope

ECUADOR: ARCHDIOCESE OF QUITO

A CHRISTMAS OF HOPE

+ Alfredo José Espinoza Mateus, SDB
Archbishop of Quito and Primate of Ecuador

The great invitation from Pope Francis was that each of us be a "Pilgrim of Hope."
And we, in the light of the 53rd International Eucharistic Congress celebrated last year in Quito, Ecuador have embraced the challenge to "bring the dream of fraternity to life." Pope Francis reaffirmed this dream when he referred to fraternity as the foundation of the world's hope, doing so on the eve of this Holy Year 2025. "Yes," he declared, "the hope of the world lies in fraternity…" And he asked: "Is the hope of a fraternal humanity just a rhetorical slogan, or does it have a solid foundation on which to build something stable and lasting?"
Where do we find the answer to this question? "The answer is given by the Holy Mother of God as she shows us Jesus. The hope for a fraternal world is not an ideology, not an economic system, not technological progress; it is the incarnate Son, sent by the Father so that we may all become what we truly are: children of the Father who is in Heaven, and therefore brothers and sisters among ourselves" (Pope Francis).
What message of hope does Christmas offer in a world so often without peace? From the depths of our faith we can answer that hope comes to us through a Child born in a manger, whose home is a stable, and who is wrapped in simplicity and poverty.
In this Christmas season, I wish to highlight the figure of Joseph, the "great dreamer." He is "the man capable of dreaming," because God speaks to him in dreams—but he is not a fanciful dreamer; he is a man with his feet firmly on the ground, who acts upon what he has dreamed.
Like Joseph, we too must dream in God's yearning—for fraternity and for peace. God speaks to us this Christmas so that these dreams may become reality. We cannot remain dreamers; we must act, we must move forward. We are invited to undertake this journey as a synodal Church, and in doing so, we will give life to the great legacy of the Jubilee.
Christmas is much more than lights, gifts, carols, decorations and family gatherings. Although these elements are part of the celebration and fill us with joy, the deepest heart of Christmas is a message of complete trust in God—a trust that is not naïve or fragile, but strong and radiant, capable of sustaining us even in the most difficult times.
What voice should we listen to at Christmas? Is it possible, in this world so full of noise, social tension, wars and conflicts, to hear the voice that speaks to us from Christmas? Christmas bursts forth like a whisper of peace. It is not a shout or a loud

voice—it is a quiet one that reaches the heart of every person of faith who kneels before the mystery of Christmas and listens to that infant who speaks, saying that peace is possible, that fraternity is possible, and that the hope of a peaceful world can come true—but it is a peace that each one of us must embrace as an authentic "Pilgrim of Peace."

The light of Christ, born in Bethlehem, must illuminate the world. Jesus from Bethlehem tells us that we are not alone, that light continues to overcome darkness, and that love becomes present in the midst of everyday life.

Christmas speaks to us of a promise fulfilled. Israel waited for centuries for the Messiah, the Savior. In that silent night in Bethlehem, that hope was fulfilled in the most unexpected way: a child wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. He came in humility and tenderness. Jesus is the visible face of a God who is not distant, but who chooses to enter our history, to share our humanity, and to open for us a path of redemption.

This is the great hope that Christmas brings us. Today we must allow ourselves to be encountered by that God made flesh—who comes, who draws near, and who speaks to us of hope and peace. Today we must listen to that voice that reminds us that even when everything seems lost, God is at work, sowing seeds of renewal, seeds of peace. Let us allow ourselves to be surprised by this God; let us nurture those seeds within us and, at the same time, become sowers of hope and peace in the world—beginning with our own homes.

Pope Leo XIV invites us to build this peace; he said it from the very beginning when he spoke of "a peace that disarms and is disarming." He also affirmed: "God loves us, God loves everyone, and evil will not prevail! We are all in God's hands. Therefore, without fear, united hand in hand with God and with one another, let us move forward."

We cannot stop; we must move forward. This Jubilee is an invitation to walk, to continue journeying as messengers of hope. It is the commitment to which the Holy Father has called young people: "The world needs messages of hope: you are that message, and you must continue to bring hope to everyone."

As we contemplate the manger, we face that challenge—the great challenge that Jesus, Emmanuel, lying among the straw, brings to us. We are "messengers of hope," and at the same time, we are "a message of trust in God for others."

EGYPT:
VICARIATE OF ALEXANDRIA EGYPT

The Creation of Spaces for Dialogue

+ Claudio Lurati Bishop, Apostolic Vicar

We prepare for Christmas with relief at the fragile truce in the Holy Land, which is unfortunately contrasted by the tragic situation in Darfur, in western Sudan, where the recent conquest of El-Fasher by the Rapid Support Forces militias has caused terrible massacres, as the Pope has also recently recalled. All the conflicts in the region naturally have strong repercussions on Egypt, both because of the number of refugees arriving here —one million from Sudan alone in the past two years—and because of the worsening economic crisis, which as always affects the weakest segments of the population. More and more, we appreciate the value of the peace we enjoy in this country. Christmas is approaching with its rituals and deadlines. We even celebrate it twice: once according to the Western calendar on December 25, and once according to the Eastern calendar on January 7, which is also a national holiday for everyone. Many churches prepare Christmas carol concerts, which are enjoyed by all, including our brothers and sisters of other religions, and which always manage to convey a message of peace, hope, and joy. Often the concerts are accompanied by small markets where various charitable organizations work to collect funds for their activities.

It is not unusual to find Christmas trees set up in shops or public places, even outside Christian environments.

The Jubilee Year is also drawing to a close, and it has been a great occasion of grace because of the many initiatives we were able to propose and the response we encountered among the people, confirming that the expectation was great and that the word "hope" can awaken sentiments and actions that revive a youthfulness often dormant yet ardently desired. There have been many opportunities: for young people, children, the sick, the afflicted seeking consolation, consecrated per-sons and missionaries. These have allowed the various realities of the diocese to get to know each other and to express grati-tude for the shared journey of faith.

Among the many initiatives launched, our thoughts most often turn to the pilgrimage to Samalut—a town in Upper Egypt, 250 km south of Cairo—to the shrine where the 21 Martyrs of Libya are buried, those 21 Christians who suffered martyrdom in Libya at the hands of ISIS on February 15, 2015. I believe we all re-member those young workers in orange jumpsuits lined up along the beach, and shortly afterward, the images of their blood flowing into the water.

The Coptic Orthodox Church did everything possible to recover their bodies and bring them home: the shrine is located near the village from which most of these young men came. We often think of martyrs as something belonging to past centuries; however, standing in the place where the faith of these martyrs was formed and strengthened to the point of facing the ulti-mate sacrifice, meeting members of their families, immersing ourselves in a Church that keeps the memory of these sons so alive, being in the place where they are buried—all this greatly impressed everyone and revealed the face of a hope that knows for certain that "it does not disappoint" (Rom 5:5).

Our small community lives in a context marked by two great millennia-old religious traditions: the Christian-Coptic and the Muslim ones. The Pharaonic tradition belongs to history and… to tourists. There is the biblical history of Sinai and Moses, the Holy Family. And then the Christianity of the early Church, the theological school of Alexandria, and monasticism: St. Athanasius and St. Anthony the Great as great models. If we look closely, the Egyptian Church was also an important example of inculturation, because the Coptic language, descended from the ancient language of the pharaohs, was used from the beginning in the liturgy. This is probably not unrelated to the extraordinary fact that Egypt has maintained a significant Christian presence until today, whereas in the rest of North Africa Christianity disappeared. Today, the Coptic language has been practically replaced

by Arabic, but the vitality of this Church remains striking.

The other great tradition is Islam, which essentially permeates the structure of society. And it must be said from the outset that this is an Islamic society accustomed to living alongside a Christian presence that is also numerically significant. Places of worship, including Christian ones, are respected and protected. Local tensions do occur, but it is important to mention as well the creation of spaces for dialogue and conflict resolution.

Among the many areas in which the Catholic Church is present and active, I highlight two in particular, which are key to understanding what is meant by dialogue in daily life.

There are dozens of dispensaries and clinics that assist patients from all backgrounds every day, at minimal cost, valuing the generosity of many professionals who, alongside their paid work, dedicate time to those most in need.

Secondly, there are more than 170 Catholic schools, ranging from kindergarten to high school. This means that every year over 200,000 students—mostly Muslim—receive education in our institutions, where they learn mutual respect and understanding. It is a much-appreciated service.

I wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a joyful end to this year with your families!

ESTONIA:
DIOCESE OF TALLINN

Christmas nativity scenes also have an ecumenical dimension

+ Philippe Jean-Charles Jourdan
Bishop of Tallinn

The tradition of making Christmas nativity scenes is a much-loved and popular activity in many parts of the world, and in order to prevent it from being forgotten in Estonia, the tradition was revived in 2015. Every year, at the beginning of Advent, the Christmas nativity scene street opens in Tallinn's Old Town, where the windows of the Old Town are decorated with Christmas nativity scenes made by children, young people, schoolchildren, families, and people of different nationalities. This is a beautiful sign of the beginning of Advent, where in an area where November and December are very dark and there are only a few hours of daylight, there are beautiful Christmas scenes in the windows. This tradition was only renewed about ten years ago to bring the mystery of Christmas to people.
The Christmas nativity scene street is decorated with fir trees and garlands and light installations, which added even more to the beauty of the eyes. The beautifully designed and illuminated Christmas nativity scene street with its shop windows turned out to be more cheerful than expected and received so much positive about all over the world.
A beautiful revived tradition that was banned for half a century when Estonia was under foreign rule brings joy to many today.
Making a proper nativity scene is not easy, but with several skilled hands, a patient mind and a good team spirit, it will soon become a pleasant pastime that will make the eyes of both young and old sparkle. The makers themselves have described how to make nativity scenes. Everyone can let their imagination fly, because there are endless possibilities for making a nativity scene. You can use paper, wood, clay, clothes, salt dough or gingerbread dough to create a figure. All of this can be seen in the windows of Tallinn's Old Town.
In addition, Lutheran churches are also loving the Catholic tradition, and in December, nativity scenes are erected in front of churches to bring the message of the birth of the Prince of Peace. Christmas is a time that unites people and nations, gives hope and light to a troubled world, and it is gratifying that Christmas nativity scenes in Estonia also have an ecumenical dimension. Every year, various other institutions across Estonia want to display their own Christmas nativity scenes to bear witness to the miracle of Christmas.

In addition, the Christmas market is very popular, which is open throughout the Advent and Christmas season in Tallinn's Old Town. It has even been said that it has been considered one of the most beautiful Christmas markets in the world. The Christmas market, in front of Tallinn Town Hall, also features a nativity scene and a Christmas nativity scene.

In addition, there is a tradition of declaring Christmas peace in the largest Estonian cities. In Tallinn, the country's capital, the Mayor of Tallinn says to the gathered people from the window of Tallinn Town Hall at noon on December 24: I declare Christmas peace in the words of Queen Kristina: Tomorrow, if it pleases God, the gracious birthday of our Lord and Savior will arrive. The tradition of proclaiming Christmas peace dates back to the 17th century and began during the reign of Queen Christina of Sweden. Many people attend this event, and the message of Christmas peace is broadcast on the radio.

And when evening comes, Catholics gather in churches for midnight mass to be together, share the joy of the birth of our Lord and Savior, and bring this good news to many people who need it most.

In Estonia, where November-December is the darkest time, the joy of Christmas lights up people's hearts and when the snow finally arrives, which usually falls from the beginning of December, the whole land is filled with snow light and when you think of the Christmas nativity scenes on city streets and in people's homes and churches, it all testifies to the fact that darkness can always be conquered by light.

KINGDOM OF ESWATINI: DIOCESE OF MANZINI

Signs of hope

+ José Luis Gerardo Ponce de León, IMC
Bishop of Manzini

Eswatini is a small country in Southern Africa, placed between two "big brothers" (South Africa and Mozambique). Being also the number of Catholics small, there is only one diocese ("one diocese one country"). It is a diocese of very committed people being signs of hope in a troubled region. Looking back I can quickly identify three events from the past year we all carry in our hearts.

The end of 2024 was marked by violence in the neighbouring country of Mozambique as people were contesting the result of the presidential elections. We suddenly saw an influx of people crossing the border towards the "Malindza Refugee Welcome Centre". This is a small centre (comparing with other nations) that hosts about 400 refugees arriving particularly from the Great Lake region.

Suddenly, due to the violence, we saw the number of refugees quickly going to over 1.000, being many of them children.

Adding to this tragedy was the fact that those who crossed the border were not Mozambicans as such but foreigners who had escaped from war countries and had settled down in Mozambique.

Our diocese, with the support of our sister Caritas South Africa, was able to quickly provide mattresses and blankets to the Refugee Centre and to organize a collection of food from the all our parishes.

The generosity of our people was overwhelming. It was also beautiful to see at the Cathedral the priests, the religious sisters (and the bishop!) loading everything on our bakkies and on rented trucks and downloading them at Malindza with the help of refugees and those working at the centre.

His Majesty's government, the authorities at the Refugee Centre, other Christian Churches and the media acknowledged the quick response of the Catholic Church to this tragedy at a time when people were celebrating Christmas, the new year and were on holidays.

At a time when in some places there is a tendency to blame refugees for every problem, the Swazi nation raised to care for them in their need.

At the end of September our diocese hosted the "IMBISA Golden Jubilee". IMBISA is the "Interregional Meeting of Bishops of Southern Africa" gathering the dioceses of nine countries in Southern Africa. For the first time in our history we welcomed 75 bishops (four of them Cardinals), 25 priests and 25 lay people. It was the most important event since the visit of St John Paul II in 1988.

What will particularly remain in the hearts of everyone (visitors and locals) is the celebration of Mass on Sunday. Welcomed by the "St Theresa's Drum Majorettes" (girls high school) and the "Salesian brass band" (male high school), we all walked to the marquee where Mass would be celebrated. Men and women in traditional dresses danced welcoming the bishops. Special chasubles, for all bishops and priests, made locally, had been donated.

The event saw us as one body, one community, one family celebrating together, where everyone knew his or her role and did it naturally and beautifully. The choir – which could not have sung better and more beautifully – had carefully chosen hymns in Siswati, Sotho, Portuguese and English making local and guests feel at home.

Our visitors wondered how many times we had rehearsed the celebration and the answer was: "just once". We had naturally come together. There was no competition, no "showing off",

no fight for special places.
It was a sign of hope to ourselves (and to many!) as we often experience division and competition among the different diocesan associations. Not this time. We saw ourselves under a new light, a light that should lead us in the future.
Not long ago we witnessed a first in the history of our diocese. For some years, we have been working towards the development of the Pontifical Missionary Children (PMC). This year the response at deanery level was so good that a diocesan event was planned. Over 700 children from all over the diocese came to Manzini for a full day. We celebrated Mass together, followed by a competition among five of their choirs who had created their own music for the PMC hymn.
The parable of the Good Samaritan was dramatized by two parishes and other dances and local songs had been prepared. Their joy, energy and enthusiasm was a real Gospel to us who spent the day with them.
Our children are our hope for the present and the future. We hope to continue building our diocese with them.
Christmas is "bitter sweet". As we celebrate the birth of the child who is our Hope (with a capital H!) we also face their reality of their struggle to find a place at the inn and the challenge of becoming refugees. Together with the familiar characters of Mary, Joseph and the shepherds, I would like to imagine that there were many more who celebrated, welcomed, cared and protected the baby Jesus. Hidden characters in our history of salvation who also provided hope and strength to Mary and Joseph.
Our small nation is hardly known and it is hardly in the news. It is hidden like many characters in the Christmas' story but like the tiny seed of the Kingdom, our signs of hope have the power to grow and fill our region and the whole world.

GAMBIA:
DIOCESE OF BANJUL

The Birth of Jesus in the Jubilee Year of Hope

+ Gabriel Mendy, CSSP
Bishop of Banjul

As Christmas draws near, we recall the story of the birth of Jesus we know so well. We also relive his birth that began with the Annunciation, Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, his birth in a manger, the angels' announcement of peace on earth, the shepherds' encounter with the infant Jesus, and the wise men's offering of their symbolic gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We profoundly reflect on these events during the Christmas Season and we seek to understand their relevance in our situations in life.

In this Jubilee Year of Hope, we are invited to renew and reaffirm our hope and trust in Jesus, the door of our salvation with God. His birth at Christmas as God-with-us, as God made man, and the Savior of the human race should, consequently, reassure and strengthen our faith and hope in Jesus as the source of our reconciliation and salvation with God. Our celebration of our Savior's birth in this Jubilee Year should, therefore, inspire us to overcome our fears and doubts in his power to save us from the forces of evil. We should be fully convinced of his living presence and power in our midst and be confident that he will intervene at the proper time to resolve the tragedies and disasters we experience in our world today. For, the feast of Christmas assures us that the child Jesus is our hope of freedom and salvation and he remains with us even after Christmas. So, we should always hope in him even in times of pain and disappointment.

For us in The Gambia, we live in communities full of energy, warmth, resilience, and strong social bonds. There is joy, laughter, neighborliness, and a deep spirit of community life where Christians and Muslims co-exist. We regularly interact with each other, do business together, share meals, celebrate each other's feasts, and raise our children in the same neighborhoods. Unfortunately, we also encounter challenges and struggles. Our young people are also searching for meaning and direction in an increasingly unstable and divided world. Some families with very limited resources are also struggling to provide for their children. Others wake up each day with grave concerns about school fees, rent, sickness, and unemployment. The elderly members of our society also bear memories of better days in the past. Sometimes, they feel abandoned and forgotten. These situations often generate hopelessness and disappointment in their minds.

As narrated in the Scriptures, the birth of the child Jesus was not a comfortable and normal incident. His parents were compelled by Emperor Caesar Augustus' decree to return to their ancestral home and be registered for the census. As a result of this mass movement of peoples, there was no place for them to stay even in the guest house. Jesus was, subsequently, born in a manger so his life was surrounded by poverty and uncertainty from the onset. This is obviously significant for us because it indicates that God did not create a perfect situation before he came to us. Nor, did he wait for the world to be peaceful before his Son, Jesus was born. God, rather, came as a child into a family that was navigating poverty and hardship. So, God clearly revealed that there is no situation that is too bleak and unbearable for him to exist. If the child Jesus, the Son of God was born in a manger, he can also dwell even in our fragile homes and communities. He was born in a world of uncertainty. He can equally be born in hearts that are troubled, disappointed, and burdened. Considering the circumstances of Christ's birth, our hope in him as the door of our salvation should fully be strengthened and renewed. For, hope is not simply based on pure knowledge of what is obvious and certain. Our hope in Jesus is the strength to rise each morning and choose to become like him in his humility and solidarity with us. His birth at Christmas should, therefore, inspire and challenge us to offer hope to others by responding to their basic needs. We should equally be at the service of the elderly, sick, vulnerable, and outcasts of society. These acts of charity and service unseen by many are where the light of Christ shines more brightly. We can also be signs of hope to others when we choose to become instruments of peace and cordially relate to one another as neighbors than strangers. For, Jesus invited us in Mk. 12:31 to love our neighbors as ourselves. When we love one another irrespective of their status and identity, we become another Christ living in our community and our hope becomes even more authentic and visible to others.

Our hope in Jesus is not absolutely a denial of the difficulties and hardships of life. It is an assurance that inspires us to believe that God is present in our lives even in the midst of our suffering. As Job stated in Job 14:7-9, "there is hope for a tree even if it is cut down. That it will sprout again and its shoots will not cease. Even though its roots grow old in the ground, and its stump dies in the dry earth, its shoots, when watered, will sprout and bud like a young plant." This clearly indicates that even when there is destruction and uncertainty around us, there is possibility of new life.

In a world ravaged by war, violence, hatred, and environmental disaster, Jesus remains our source of hope as our prince of peace. He still offers us his peace based on his promise in Jn. 14:27. He assured us of his peace that the world cannot give so we should not let our hearts be troubled or afraid. The peace of Christ does not depend, in that case, on circumstances. Nor does is it a peace that is experienced only when things are perfect and right. It is, rather, a peace that assures and encourages us even when everything around us is uncertain. This is the miracle of Christmas that offers us our prince of peace and source of hope. He came into the disorder of our lives with his gentle strength and quiet love. He became our anchor in life who en-

ables us to withstand our struggles, pains, and uncertainties.

Our world today is clearly more divided, volatile and impoverished. There are currently natural and man-made disasters in some regions and countries. We also know about the internal conflicts that never make news but weigh heavily on the minds and hearts of individuals and minorities. Others may not carry weapons but they often carry anger, resentment, disappointment, or fear. In these situations, the peace of the Child Jesus challenges all to seek political and social resolution of the conflict and inner and spiritual reconciliation between God and humanity.

The birth of Jesus at Christmas invites us to live out the same love that God manifested through his Son, Jesus. This love forgives and embraces and it is the path to peace that begins in the heart, and extends to the world around us. When we love with compassion, forgive with mercy, and serve with humility, we become instruments of the same peace that the child Jesus brought into a restless world. As Mother Teresa affirmed, "the fruit of silence is prayer, the fruit of prayer is faith, the fruit of faith is love, the fruit of love is service, and the fruit of service is peace." So, the peace of Christ is not something illusive nor is it impossible. The gift of peace the child Jesus grants us is borne from love and it grows wherever love is practiced. It begins wherever hearts are open enough to care. In the Diocese of Banjul, we see Jesus who is God-with-us in real and concrete ways. He is present in our priests, religious, catechists and teachers who guide children and new believers with love and patience. We see him in women's and men's groups who support one another. He is also present in the Eucharist we celebrate, in moments of prayer, and retreats.

As we come to the end of the Jubilee Year of Hope, we are invited to reflect, forgive, and live out the peace of Christ in our relationship with others. For, the Jubilee Year was not just a celebration in time. It was a journey of our hearts towards reconciliation with God and one another. In our own case, it opened the door for healing; it awakened a desire to repair broken relationships; and it brought about renewal in our parishes and Diocese. There were many who found courage in the Sacrament of Reconciliation to seek forgiveness from God and forgive those who offended them. Others became more active again in their Christian and prayer life. But there were also some who faced their personal struggles with honesty and humility and they discovered, perhaps for the first time, God's unconditional love for them in Jesus, the hope of their salvation.

These positive fruits and rewards the Jubilee Year offered us will not cease when the Jubilee is concluded. The close of the Jubilee Year simply requires us to carry the spirit of hope in Jesus for the rest of our lives. We are expected at the end of the Jubilee Year, "to bring to completion the good work God has already begun in us." The grace of the Jubilee must now become the rhythm of our daily lives in how we love, forgive, and serve. We will, subsequently, be assisted and guided by Jesus who now dwells and lives with us in his humanity.

The feast of Christmas is not only, in that sense, a celebration for us. It is also a moment for us to be Christ-like and become a sign of God's presence to others. We become Christ-like when we speak gently even when others are aggressive, be patient in a fast moving world, forgive when it is difficult, give without expecting anything in return, offer support even when we have nothing, pray for others even those we who oppose us, be agents of peace in our society, and choose love where love does not seem to prevail.

For, Christmas reminds us that God is always with us and he became like us so that he can become like him. The child Jesus did not remain in the manger. He grew, worked and manifested God's glory, and changed the course of history. We too are invited to grow, keep working in faith, hope, and love and become like him. We may face challenges in life but we should understand that we cannot face them alone without Jesus. Jesus always walks with us and because he is with us, we can equally walk with the least of his brothers and sisters in our midst.

We should, therefore, continue to support one another with compassion, encourage our youth and guide them with wisdom and care tenderly for the elderly and the sick. When we live this way, hope in Jesus as the door of our salvation grows, our love deepens, and our faith becomes visible.

As the stars once guided the shepherds and the wise men to the manger, may the light of Christ guide our steps into the New Year. May we be a people of peace, a community of open hearts and a living sign of hope. Let us walk forward together renewed, forgiven, and filled with hope. The Jubilee Year of Hope may close, but God grace continues. The celebration may end, but the mission continues.

GERMANY:
ARCHDIOCESE OF HAMBURG

Christmas in the Archdiocese of Hamburg

+ Stefan Heße
Archbishop of Hamburg

For us Christians, Christmas is the feast of the Incarnation of God, which makes God's love visible and tangible. In the Archdiocese of Hamburg, this message comes to life in many ways, in the heart of a vibrant metropolis shaped by commerce, culture and internationalism, but also marked by loneliness and concern. It is precisely here that we see how the Church is not only a place of faith, but also a place of encounter and community.

A special characteristic of our Archdiocese is ecumenical cooperation, which is already palpable during Advent. In many districts, Catholic and Protestant communities jointly invite people to ecumenical services. These gatherings, which transcend denominational boundaries, express the shared hope we embrace during Advent and Christmas.

Music traditionally plays a central role in Hamburg during Advent and Christmas. Many of our parishes host performances of the Christmas Oratorio, a custom with particularly deep roots in the local Protestant churches. This festive yet spiritual music unites people of different backgrounds and ages and opens hearts to the message of peace and joy.

The city's Christmas culture is also an integral part of the experience: a particularly cherished tradition is the Scandinavian Christmas markets organized by the Nordic Seamen's Churches at the harbor. Visitors can enjoy typical Nordic specialties such as glögg (Swedish mulled wine), reindeer ham, and handmade crafts on two weekends in November. These markets combine Nordic charm with maritime tradition—an ideal match for Hamburg, a port city and city of immigrants.

A very special moment of Advent is the Peace Light, which is distributed each year on the third Sunday of Advent by the Scouts of the Archdiocese. This light from Bethlehem, passed from hand to hand around the world, is a powerful symbol of peace, hope and unity. It reminds us that Christmas is not only a commemoration of Christ's birth, but also a living invitation to bring light into the world, especially in uncertain times.

Furthermore, Hamburg's maritime community plays an important role. Since 1953, the radio program "Greetings on Board" of Northern German Broadcasting (NDR) has sent Christmas greetings to seafarers around the world, with recordings made, among other places, at the Seamen's Mission and at the Duckdalben Seamen's Club in Hamburg. This tradition vividly shows

that our Church and our city do not forget those who are far from home at Christmas and who long to remain united in faith and community.

Christmas is especially vivid in Hamburg's St. Mary's Cathedral: the cathedral's Nativity scene is gradually assembled during Advent. Each week, new landscapes and scenes appear, bringing to life the story of Christ's birth. For visitors, this makes the journey from Advent expectation to the celebration of the Nativity tangible. The changing scenes invite visitors to pause, contemplate, and reflect. This year, for the first time, a Crib Trail has also been set up, connecting the different churches.

Particularly moving is the commitment of Ukrainian refugee women, who sing traditional Ukrainian Christmas carols in the square of St. Mary's Cathedral. Their singing expresses hope, connection with their homeland, and faith in the power of community—right in the heart of Hamburg, where many people seek refuge and peace. These encounters make the Archdiocese of Hamburg a place of lived solidarity and cultural exchange during the Christmas season.

In this period, I invite all residents of Hamburg to reflect on what is essential, to seek community, and to share the Good News. Christmas is not only a feast of the past, but a living invitation to welcome Christ into our lives and into our city. May the light of the Nativity scene in St. Mary's Cathedral, the Peace Light of the Scouts, and the voices of those around us illuminate your hearts and accompany you throughout the Christmas season.

JAPAN:
DIOCESE OF NIIGATA

Witnessing to the Hope Inherited from the Martyrs

+ Daisuke Narui, SVD
Bishop of Niigata

Japan's population is approximately 125 million, of which 418,000 are Roman Catholics, accounting for about 0.4% of the population. While Catholics are an overwhelming minority, as Christmas approaches in Japan, towns are adorned with Christmas decorations, illuminations, and red and green ornaments. Christmas trees are displayed at various locations, and Christmas songs are being played. For some reason, Japan has a tradition of a "Christmas cake," sold in supermarkets and con-venience stores alike. On December 24th, children eat cake, young people enjoy themselves in town, and the atmosphere is festive. During that night, children receive presents from Santa Claus. Probably, very few people are aware that Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

What I find particularly meaningful about Christmas in Japan is what happens in Catholic kindergartens. Japan has about 750 kindergartens and nurseries run by the Catholic Church. Due to the aging clergy and religious, many of these facilities no longer have sisters, brothers, or priests working there. In fact, many don't even have teachers who are baptized. Despite this situa-tion, the Catholic kindergartens teach the [illegible] mas is not a day to celebrate by eating cake and delicious food. Christmas is the day that God, the Savior, was born among us. God especially cherishes those who are struggling. At Christmastime, let us be kind to those in need and offer prayers for them." The children then celebrate Jesus' birth, pray for those in need, and donate small amounts of money. While almost none of the children in Catholic kindergartens are baptized themselves, it is greatly hoped that, regardless of whether they are Catholics or not, they grow up learning the habit of praying specially at Christmas and performing acts of charity from a young age.

One notable aspect of Christianity in Japan is the example set by its martyrs. I belong to the Niigata Diocese. In Yonezawa, an area located in the middle of the Niigata diocese, 53 Christians were martyred on January 12, 1629, and were added to the list of the blessed in 2008.

The Christians martyred in Yonezawa—Luis Amakasu Uemon and 52 others—were all lay people. 30 men and 23 women. Among them were reportedly infants: 2 aged one, 5 aged three, and 2 aged five. There were no priests or religious among them. Many had been baptized during those past two years.

At that time, it is said that there were about 3,000 Christians in Yonezawa, including the 53 martyrs. No priests or religious lived in Yonezawa; they received the sacraments and studied the cat-

echism only when a priest occasionally came for a pastoral visit. In daily life, the faithful formed groups called the "Group of the Blessed Virgin" and the "Group of the Blessed Sacrament." They learned about the faith from lay leaders, prayed together, and practiced works of mercy together. They supported the sick, helped the poor, and served regardless of social status. And despite the fact that Christians were being persecuted and killed in many parts of Japan at that time, these people deliberately risked their lives to profess their faith. On Christmas Day in 1628, one Christian in Yonezawa was advised by officials that his life would be in grave danger unless he renounced his faith, but he refused and solemnly celebrated Christmas. They placed their hope in Christ alone. Because of their faith, and because of their acts of mercy, these people were deeply respected by the local community, even by the officials.

On January 11th of the following year, despite the officials' efforts to save their lives, the death sentence was finalized. The next day, the martyrs walked through the snow to the place of execution. At the execution place, officials reportedly told the people surrounding the martyrs: "Bow down before them, for those who die here are noble people who give their lives for their faith."

The word 'martyr' originates from the Greek word meaning "witness." The martyrs witnessed to their faith and their hope in Christ not only through their deaths, but also through their lives—by living in the way Jesus showed us. And that witness of hope has been passed down to the current Church.

In Japan today, freedom of religion is guaranteed, and no one dies for their faith. Conversely, there are very few people who believe in any religion, not just Christianity, and only a small number truly value their faith. In such a society, I see Christians, and those working together in kindergartens and other Catholic facilities, as a shining light of hope in the darkness espcially at Christmas, not through illuminations or decorations, but by bearing witness to the Gospel through prayer and acts of love. As Christmas approaches, I think of the memorial day for the martyrs of Yonezawa that follows soon after, and I reaffirm my determination to live as a witness to the Gospel.

Photo: Winter of Hokusanbara, the Martyrdom place in Yonezawa.

JORDAN:
PATRIARCHAL VICAR FOR THE LATINS

A Christmas Message of Hope in a World Without Peace

+ Iyad Twal
Bishop, Patriarchal Vicar for the Latins in Jordan

In a world torn by conflict, dislocation, and uncertainty, the approaching light of Christmas rises once again over the hills and deserts of Jordan — the very land that forms a bridge between the sacred memories of salvation history and the fragile hopes of the present. Here, where the River Jordan still flows quietly through the wilderness, the Church finds herself called to proclaim a message of hope that is not abstract or distant, but incarnate — lived, suffered, and shared.

The Christmas message in Jordan assumes a unique significance. It is born in a small country surrounded by turbulence, yet sustained by an unshakable vocation: to be a land of faith, coexistence, and mercy. The words of the angels over Bethlehem — "Peace on earth to people of goodwill" — echo not far from here, and their resonance continues to shape the conscience of Jordan's Christians as they serve humanity with humility and perseverance.

1. *Hope in the Land of the Baptism*

Few places on earth embody the paradox of divine hope as vividly as Jordan. From Mount Nebo, where Moses gazed upon the Promised Land, to Bethany beyond the Jordan, where Jesus was baptized by John, this land bears silent witness to God's promise fulfilled in history. Every year, thousands of pilgrims from around the world gather on the banks of the Jordan River, where heaven was opened and the Spirit descended in the form of a dove. For the Church in Jordan, this sacred geography is not simply a historical treasure — it is a living catechesis. The Baptism Site, now recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage site, is both a national and a spiritual symbol. It tells believers that hope begins with renewal, with cleansing, with rediscovering our identity as children of God. Amid the anxiety of a world without peace, Jordan reminds Christians everywhere that God's grace flows quietly, often away from the centers of power, in places of humility and simplicity.

2. *Hope through the Church's Presence and Service*

The Catholic Church in Jordan, small in number yet vast in its outreach, embodies the meaning of the Incarnation — God dwelling among His people. The 32 parishes across the kingdom serve not only their own faithful but all who come in need. In a population of over 11 million, Christians form less than 3%, yet their institutions — schools, hospitals, and charities — touch the lives of hundreds of thousands regardless of religion or background. Jordan's more than 100 Catholic and Christian schools educate over 35,000 students, the majority of whom are Muslim. These schools are more than centers of learning; they are living spaces of coexistence where children grow together in respect and mutual understanding. In cities like Madaba, Fuheis, and Zarqa, as well as in the heart of Amman, these institutions are daily laboratories of peace.

Among the shining examples of this educational mission stands the American University of Madaba (AUM) — a beacon of intellectual and moral formation established under the patronage of the Latin Patriarchate and inaugurated by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI. The University represents a vision of faith engaging reason, of Christianity engaging the modern world with confidence. AUM offers programs in business, engineering, nursing, and the humanities, nurturing young Jordanians to become ethical leaders who can serve society with integrity. Its international partnerships and community engagement reflect the Church's conviction that education is not merely about knowledge but about forming conscience and character.

3. *Hope through Charity and Humanitarian Outreach*

If Christmas is the feast of divine generosity, the Church in Jordan makes it visible through her works of mercy. Organizations like Caritas Jordan stand at the forefront of humanitarian service, assisting more than one million refugees and vulnerable families since the onset of regional conflicts. Jordan, with its limited resources, hosts large numbers of refugees from Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and other war-torn regions — an act of national compassion that the Church supports daily through clinics, food programs, and vocational training centers.

The Church's religious sisters — from the Rosary Sisters to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd — form the silent heartbeat of this mission. In schools, hospitals, and shelters, they embody the maternal tenderness of the Church, especially among children, the elderly, and the disabled. In places like Marka and Mafraq, where many displaced families live, the sisters' presence transforms despair into endurance, reminding everyone that even when peace seems absent, love is never defeated.

The Church's outreach also extends to interfaith initiatives. Through collaboration with Muslim charitable organisations, Christian leaders regularly emphasise shared human values — mercy, dignity, and solidarity. This cooperation, rooted in Jordan's Hashemite vision of religious coexistence, translates the Christmas message into concrete acts of compassion.

4. *Hope through Coexistence: The Hashemite Model*

In Jordan, coexistence is not an ideal on paper; it is a lived tradition. The Hashemite leadership has long championed the principle of religious harmony. The late King Hussein and His Majesty King Abdullah II have consistently defended the Christian presence in the Middle East, most notably through initiatives such as the Amman Message (2004) and the World Interfaith Harmony Week, later adopted by the United Nations.

Under this umbrella, the Church in Jordan finds both protection and purpose. Christians and Muslims celebrate each other's feasts; public holidays are shared; and at Christmas, mosques and churches alike display decorations that proclaim a common longing for peace. In a region fragmented by sectarianism, Jordan's example remains a modest yet radiant testimony that faiths can coexist without fear.

5. *Hope through Economic and Social Empowerment*

Amid challenging economic conditions, the Church's institutions have taken on an additional role: supporting youth employment and entrepreneurship. Through Caritas microfinance initiatives, vocational training in Mafraq and Karak, and women's empowerment programs led by parish organizations, hundreds of families are given the tools to rebuild their lives. The Church's focus is not

charity alone, but human dignity — enabling individuals to become agents of change within their communities.

The AUM's innovation hubs and Catholic youth centers also contribute to nurturing a generation of socially responsible leaders who can translate faith into public service. Their message is simple yet transformative: hope is not waiting for miracles, but working together to make them possible.

6. *Hope in the Digital and Ecological Age*

In recent years, Jordan's Catholic youth have begun using digital platforms to spread messages of faith and unity. Online prayer groups, social media initiatives such as "Light from Jordan", and podcasts produced by young parishioners have given the Gospel a new voice in the digital wilderness. This creativity reflects a Church that remains young — able to speak to the world in its own language while preserving the eternal Word.

At the same time, the Church in Jordan has become increasingly aware of the ecological dimension of hope. Inspired by Laudato Si', several parishes and schools have launched environmental awareness campaigns, tree-planting drives, and recycling projects. On Mount Nebo, where Moses once gazed across the Jordan Valley, the Franciscan community has installed solar panels — a small yet powerful sign that care for creation is a form of worship and hope for the future.

7. *Hope through the Witness of Refugees and the Marginalized*

Paradoxically, those who suffer most often become the greatest witnesses of hope. Jordan's Catholic parishes host thousands of Christian refugees from Iraq and Syria who, despite losing their homes, have not lost their faith. Their liturgies, often celebrated in simple halls or makeshift chapels, radiate a joy that no war can extinguish. Their songs of Christmas — in Arabic, Aramaic, and Chaldean — remind all of us that Bethlehem's night was itself marked by poverty, exile, and uncertainty.

Through partnerships between Caritas, UN agencies, and local parishes, refugee children receive education and psychosocial support. The Christmas message is thus translated into daily acts of accompaniment — walking with the suffering, not as outsiders but as brothers and sisters in one human family.

8. *Hope through the Diaspora and Global Connection*

The Jordanian Christian diaspora, now numbering in the hundreds of thousands across the Americas, Europe, and the Gulf, remains deeply tied to the Church of their homeland. Many support parish projects, scholarships, and humanitarian programs in Jordan. Their contributions — financial, spiritual, and cultural — form a bridge of solidarity that keeps the flame of hope burning across continents. At Christmas, Jordanian parishes abroad light candles for peace in the Holy Land, echoing the same prayer uttered in Madaba and Fuheis.

9. *Hope in the Marian Heart of Jordan*

It is no coincidence that Jordanian spirituality is deeply Marian. The Shrine of Our Lady of Mount Mary in Anjara and the Rosary Sisters' devotion reflect the gentle strength of Mary, who carried the Word of God into a broken world. In every Jordanian church, Mary stands not as a distant figure, but as a mother who understands hardship — a woman of the people who still whispers the words of hope: "My soul magnifies the Lord."

In a time when wars disfigure humanity, the figure of Mary offers a counter-image: tenderness stronger than violence, humility greater than pride, faith deeper than fear. The Church in Jordan, under her protection, continues to give birth to hope in small, quiet ways — much like the Child of Bethlehem.

10. *Hope as a National and Spiritual Vocation*

Hope, for the Church in Jordan, is not merely a theological virtue; it is a national mission. Situated at the crossroads of faiths and nations, Jordan carries the vocation of being a land of refuge, dialogue, and continuity. Its stability amid regional chaos is itself a form of grace — a reminder that peace, though fragile, can be nurtured by patience, wisdom, and faith.

The Church's voice joins the nation's call for peace in the Holy Land, for justice, and for the protection of human dignity. At Christmas, as the bells ring from Amman to Ajloun, the Church prays not only for the faithful but for all humanity — that the Prince of Peace may once again be born in every heart, and that the Jordan River, symbol of new beginnings, may flow into a future where mercy and truth meet.

Conclusion: The Christmas Hope of Jordan

In a world weary of war and division, Jordan stands as a small yet radiant star in the firmament of the Middle East — not because it is free of suffering, but because it refuses to surrender to despair. The Church here teaches that hope is not the absence of pain, but the steadfast presence of love; not an escape from reality, but the courage to transform it.

From the classrooms of Christian schools to the hospitals of the sisters, from the refugee camps to the university halls, from the silence of Mount Nebo to the waters of the Jordan — the message of Christmas shines: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

And so, in Jordan, the Church continues to proclaim that message, quietly yet powerfully: that even in a world without peace, Emmanuel — God with us — still walks among us, offering to every heart the promise of a peace that the world cannot give, and a hope that no war can destroy.

GUAM:
ARCHDIOCESE OF AGAÑA

Christmas on Guam

+Ryan Jimenez
Archbishop of Agaña
President, Episcopal Conference of the Pacific (CEPAC)

Guam might be a small island, but it has always a crossroads in the north Pacific. Christmas traditions reflect the potpourri of cultural features that have been stirred together to shape our current celebration. During December many island homes glitter with bulbs strung across the porch or upon a tree nearby; sometimes the colored lights might illuminate a creche on the lawn. Displays that may have originated in America have now been adopted by the island, just like the people who brought them. Guam may have a multi-cultural population, but somehow they join together in celebrating the feast of light and hope.

On each of the nine days before Christmas, well before sunrise, morning mass is celebrated in an overflowing church. Simpang Gabi, or the Missa de Gallo ("cockcrow mass" named because of its early hour), may have begun as a Filipino tradition, introduced along with a large segment of the island population from our Asian neighbor, but it is now widely embraced on Guam. The mass is festive, with especially fine singing, and is followed by a bountiful breakfast and the fellowship that accompanies it. Each morning some new feature is added to the decorative display in the church. Many Catholics believe that anyone who faithfully attends the mass each day will be granted his special request by the Christ Child. The Missa de Gallo might be early, but its good cheer radiates throughout the rest of the day. The gladness of the novena points ahead to the real celebration that is close at hand. It's as if the feast of the Incarnation

is so consequential that we can celebrate even the anticipation of the event to come.

Christmas Day itself is usually celebrated by a large family gathering that draw relatives from all parts of the island for the traditional family meal. Lechon, or roasted pig, is often the main dish, but other favorites are ham and turkey, along with breadfruit, taro and scalloped potatoes slathered with cheese, topped off by local pastries and fruits. Close relatives often gather around the barbeque grill, especially when the house is unable to seat the number invited to the party. Christmas dinners on Guam might host 50 or 60 persons, all of them constituting an extended family network. Such events don't happen often, even on a small island like Guam, but we might think of it as an anticipation of the day when our family, close kin and those more distant, will be joined for good.

Christmas mass is always well attended, but the liturgy just wouldn't be complete without the traditional kiss of the Infant. At the end of the mass, worshippers line up to kiss the image of the Christ Child that had been lying in the crib near the altar.

The celebration of Christmas, in the form of reverence for the image of the Infant, usually extends for another nine days after Christmas Day. The nine-day period of prayerful welcome of the Baby Jesus includes special novena prayers done with the family at home, but it is also marked by bringing the Child Jesus to others nearby. Bands of believers often join in procession carrying the image of the Infant, or Niño, from house to house. They announce their presence by the carols they sing and are invited in by the family to be treated to tasty holiday food. The singing can continue in the home for a while before the procession resumes and the Niño is brought to another home.

On Guam Christmas is more than a one-day feast. Here islanders celebrate Christmas even while anticipating the feast day itself, as in the novena of Missa de Gallo. The anticipation is marked with real joy because people envision the fuller joy that is to come.

The welcome of the Christ Child continues for a week or more after Christmas, as families venerate the Infant in their homes and bring the Infant to others in the community. It takes a while for people to make our way to the houses of our friends in the faith. The message presented may be read as this: How wonderful that Jesus is born in our midst, but if he is to reside with us, then he must be introduced to our families.

Christmas is a feast marked by waiting and hope. We celebrate a beginning of the promise that is contained in the Incarnation. It took time for Jesus to be born, more time for him to grow up and accomplish his mission in this world of ours. Then there are the generations and centuries that pass until the world that Christ entered is fully transformed. We can celebrate that with joy because of the confidence that our hope gives us that we will not be disappointed.

The customs on this island emphasize family and community, as if to remind us that the feast we celebrate binds us more strongly into a single people. It might not happen right away, especially given the differences that divide us. But we celebrate our strong belief that one day these universal family ties, extending to our entire human family, will be incontestable.

ICELAND: DIOCESE OF REYKJAVIK

Hope must be Visible and Tangible

+ David B. Tencer, OFMCap
Bishop of Reykjavik

In Iceland, as in all the Nordic countries, it is typical for the winter time not only to have a lot of snow, but the daily darkness is also very special - Polar night. Usually it starts at the end of October, and culminates in the end of December, when there are 20 hours of darkenss and only 4 hours of daylight. A big part of the culture of Christmas time is connected to candles.
In the past, the candles were quite precious. They were not for daily use, for economical and practical reasons. The farmers prepared a lot of candles for Christmas time, in their own way. The candles were made from the fat of their sheep. Traditionally, in the earliest time, there were no Christmas trees used, because christmas trees are not native to Iceland. But instead of a Christmas tree, they used a special Christmas candle, which was sometimes called the candle of the king (which means Jesus – the Christmas child), which is the gift of the Holy Trinity, and this is the reason why this candle had only one foot, but three branches. This was the main light in the house on Christmas Eve, but to be sure that the light would fill the whole house, all members of the family received a special and regular Christmas gift of two candles. Because on the Christmas eve and Christmas day, there can be no space for darkness in the house „The light has to reach every corner of the house too". It was a sign of the hope that the darkness is leaving our lives, and things will get better and better. The presence of the light of God wins the darkness of illness. The author, Guðbjörg from Broddanes, remembered when she was a little girl, her father was blind. But he asked to receive the lighted candle too, even if he could not see it. He took it in his hand and said to his whole family: „I cannot see the light of the King's candle, but I feel it." And so he wished a merry Christmas and

a happy new year to all his family.
Today, it is very common to use candles in Iceland. Especially during winter time, we find them in all windows, dining rooms, living rooms, bathrooms, etc. But still we have present the poor and dark past, and we appreciate the light a lot.
This is why we understand very well the story of the old man Simeon from Jerusalem temple and we take his word like a precious testimony when he said:
Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel." (Lc 2, 29-32)
This is why we understand very well the story of the old man from Petersburg, which in the hardest time of the second World War, during the seige of Leningrad, went out every evening to light a candle outside. And when the people asked him why he was doing it, his answer was: „So the children know the city still breathes." And survivors later recalled the single flame as the light they clung to. In a museum now, the soot-covered glass reads: „Hope must be visible".
Dear readers, this should perhaps be the message of hope and our Christmas wish to you from us in Iceland. Even during the greatest darkness of your life, think about how the child-Jesus, with his coming, lit up every corner of your lives, so illness would have no more place there.

Merry Christmas!, or as we say in Iceland: Gleðileg Jól!

ITALY:
ARCHDIOCESE OF SPOLETO-NORCIA

Christmas Conquers Fear and Founds Hope

+ *Renato Boccardo*
Archbishop of Spoleto-Norcia
former Secretary General of the Governorate

It has been said that three things are indispensable to human beings: bread, health and hope. On Christmas night we are not seeking bread and health, but all of us—each in our own way, personally and as a community—recognize ourselves as beggars of hope. Because today there is so much fear in the world: fear of a restless and sorrowful present, marked here and there by bloodshed and violence; fear of a tomorrow that is even more uncertain and obscure. Hope seems to grow weaker every day.
These weeks we seem submerged by lights, sounds, and colors that try at all costs to make us feel that there is something different in the air. But behind the lights, sounds, and colors, a careful eye perceives the same gestures of every day, the same monotonous drag of time: Yes, it's Christmas—we seem to hear—but it lasts twenty-four hours and then it's over, the dream fades and reality returns. And then, in such a situation, what can a science that is the daughter of a culture which has declared nonexistent everything invisible say to us? Why this insecurity, this unhappiness?
We are unhappy because we no longer believe that Christ can save us, that that Child can change anything. And when we no longer believe in something, we abandon it or replace it with something different, more concrete, made of immediate sensations: the golden calf is born (cf. Ex 32:1–6). So Scripture says, and this is what we see happening today.
Who among us—in our cities and towns—does not call for a savior, or at least for salvation? The world anxiously searches for a savior but continues to look in the wrong places: among the powerful, often the overbearing; among people of science, of technology; among those who know how to ignite fanaticism…
We keep giving new names to various "saviors," but the result never changes. Every time (and this is today's story as well) we merely multiply disappointments.
What if we listened to the angels of Bethlehem? The savior they announce has a precise name: Christ the Lord! (cf. Lk 2:11). Christmas seems to us the "same old" ritual because we fail to understand that Christ fills us only to the degree that we desire Him. Perhaps we are too discouraged—discouraged by institu-

tions, by humanity, by our brothers and sisters—and so we grow weary, we take refuge in anonymity: we are often a faceless society. But if we are without a face, Christ can give us one—His own. This is why He comes among us, into His own house (cf. Jn 1:1–11).

Christmas conquers fear and founds hope because there can be no fear if God is with us (cf. Rom 8:31–39). And this celebration assures us that God does not forget humanity, He does not abandon us in our powerlessness and solitude, but comes—continues to come—into the world, becoming man among men to give meaning to human life, to redeem us from our weakness, to offer direction and a path of salvation to our history, rescuing both humanity and history from insignificance, destruction, and the emptiness of despair and nothingness.

If someone today asked where the "sign" of Christ's presence among us is, the answer could only be the one the angel gave the shepherds (cf. Lk 2:12): a child, wrapped in simple cloths, lying in a manger… The Son of God entered our history and, among the many possible conditions, chose that of the defeated: a poor man, a refugee, a persecuted one. Thus Christian faith is compelled to perceive God's power first in a small, defenseless child, and later in the story of a crucified man.

Having come among us in human form, Christ wants us to continue seeking Him among human beings: He is the poor person who hungers and thirsts, the sick person awaiting a cure, the persecuted one asking for solidarity, the refugee, the migrant and foreigner imploring respect and welcome, the friend who longs to be loved, heard, supported. His mysterious presence takes place in the "breaking of the bread," a gesture that is at once fraternity (bread and wine shared) and sacrifice (bread broken, wine poured out); for where two or three gather in His name, He is in their midst (cf. Mt 14:18).

This Child seeks neither human homage nor service nor adoration. There are indeed things that cannot be commanded. Human adoration and service can be commanded—and humans know terribly well how to command; men, idols, myths know how to impose; small human powers need to force peoples into certain acknowledgments. Christ does not. He allowed the doors of Bethlehem to remain closed. He did not demand recognition, He did not complain. He was born as the least of humankind, without a home, without anything.

And what is the value of recognition that does not arise from the heart, that is not an offering coming from within us, freely given? Everything here below can be imposed; there is only one thing that cannot be imposed, and that is love. Only one thing must be born in our hearts without anyone maneuvering it, otherwise it loses its value—and that is love. It is for this love that Christ Jesus becomes a beggar on Christmas night, making Himself once again present in our midst and knocking at the door of our hearts. Will we be able to respond? As the shepherds did, who, upon receiving the announcement, immediately set out… Then fear will leave our hearts, hope will be reborn, and we will have peace and, with peace, joy. Then it will truly be Christmas. This is the wish I want to extend to the entire family of the Governorate, which was also mine, and which I remember with friendship and gratitude.

LATVIA:
ARCHDIOCESE OF RIGA

Hope for Latvia

+ Zbignevs Stankevics
Archbishop metropolitan of Riga

The Nativity of Christ in Latvia is also called "Winter Feast". It is a significant event for all Christians in Latvia. The largest Christian denominations here are Lutherans, Catholics, the Orthodox and Baptists. Different Christian denominations coexist peacefully in Latvia and cooperate actively in promoting Christian values in society. It's a sign of hope for Latvia.

During Christmas, we celebrate God's coming among us. Through the birth of Jesus, the light started to shine in the darkness (cf. Jn 1:4). He alone can enlighten us and give us the strength to face today's challenges facing Europe. What are the challenges facing Latvia?

For the fourth Christmas in a row, the war in nearby Ukraine is causing the greatest concern in Latvia. Every day, faithfuls pray for the end of war and for conversion of Russia.

Unfortunately, there is currently no sign that Russia is willing to end this conflict. Ukraine has heroically resisted the aggression, but without significant Western assistance, the chances of victory are slim. However, nothing is impossible for God; his mills grind slowly but surely.

Secondly, Latvian Christians hope for a spiritual revival of the nation, despite the crisis of vocations and the decline in the number of believers.

In the Catholic Church in Latvia, there are very few local vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life. Many of our churches are becoming emptier as the population declines and the majority of young people often consider faith to be "old-fashioned" or "irrelevant."

However, there are also signs of hope. In 2019, the Neocatechumenal Way's international missionary Major Seminary Redemptoris Mater began operating in Riga, preparing future priests for missionary work. We also have two Ad Gentes family missions, with 4 and 5 missionary families respectively.

In addition to local seminarians, our Interdiocesan Major Seminary also has missionaries – three seminarians from Nigeria and two seminarians from India.

In many places in Latvia, small but lively communities are forming, characterized by enthusiasm of evangelization and a deep spiritual life. Many parishes offer the "Alpha Course," which brings people seeking love, truth, and acceptance into the Church. Also active are several family associations, for example: "Encounter of Married Couples" and "Teams of Our Lady".

Radio Marija Latvija has been operating in Latvia for ten years, giving people the opportunity to be with God 24 hours a day. About 100 volunteers work for our radio station. Since June of this year,

EWTN Latvia has begun broadcasting as one of the television channels available throughout Latvia.

The material and spiritual needs of fellow human beings are cared for by the Caritas Latvia Foundation and Legion of Mary. Over the past 15 years, Caritas groups have been established in about 20 parishes. In The Bethlehem House of Mercy strives to help those suffering from various addictions.

The shortage of priests encourages lay people to take responsibility for their fellow human beings by getting involved in various social and pastoral activities. Our communities may become smaller in number, but deeper and more genuine.

Over the past five years, we have focused seriously on training young leaders. The first fruits are now visible—youth groups have been established in several congregations.

Thirdly, Latvia cannot yet boast a high level of material well-being. The risk of poverty remains high in society. Retirees, the unemployed, single-parent and large families, poor households, orphans, young people who are not in education, employment or training are particularly at risk.

Despite the bleak situation, there is good reason to hope for increased prosperity in Latvia — our country is rapidly developing a digital and green economy.

And most importantly, neither material nor spiritual prosperity is possible without population. We hope that the Latvian nation will not disappear, despite 30 years of depopulation (the entire period of restored independence).

Of course, depopulation is a problem not only in Latvia. Unfortunately, it has affected our country very painfully – in 30 years of independence, the population has fallen from 2,650,000 in 1991 to 1,857,000 in 2025 (by 30%). The main causes are emigration, low birth rates, and an aging population.

Latvians have survived foreign yoke, wars, famine, plague, and occupation — we hope that with God's help and the intercession of his saints, Latvia will not disappear from the world map. Lord Jesus, Light of the world, bless Latvia and its people! Give us the strength to overcome challenges, increase our faith and prosperity in families. May Your peace reign in our land and in the world. Help us to live in Your peace, strengthening one another in love and hope, so that Latvia may become a testimony of Your mercy. Amen.

MARTINIQUE:
ARCHDIOCESE OF FORT-DE-FRANCE

Christmas in the Caribbean: A Universal Message of Peace

+ David Macaire, OP
Archbishop of Fort-de-France

From afar, the Caribbean islands appear as an oasis of peace, beauty, tranquility, and a sweet way of life. Indeed, there is an abundance of fine sandy beaches, coconut palms, vibrant sunsets, and colorful, flower-filled landscapes. As if to crown this idyllic picture, the bell towers of our picturesque churches re-mind everyone that the people who live here—despite a history rooted in crime and violence—do not forget that they owe their liberation and salvation to Christ Jesus.

How can we imagine that Caribbean countries are still today at the center of many of the scourges afflicting our world? Various forms of trafficking, e specially d rug t rafficking, ar e so wing chaos. In addition to the degradation into which so many young people and families are falling everywhere, the easy and abundant money corrupts minds and heavily arms the most dangerous gangs. Violence and debauchery are daily realities, signs that people are suffering deeply and questioning their future. Overwhelmed by economic difficulties, the high cost of living, the mass exodus of young people to wealthy countries, unemployment, and precarious living conditions, families have few children, and the number of abortions is reaching record levels.

Finally, although nature in our country is extraordinarily generous, it is also a source of concern: volcanoes remain a threat, earthquakes are not rare, and climate change is having terrible effects through coastal erosion and the increasing fury of hurricanes that directly strike the population.

And yet, joy is present in our land. It is more present than ever: a deliberate and tenacious expression of the Hope and Faith born from the leaven of the Gospel. The Advent and Christmas season is one of the most significant moments of this resistance to the demon of apathy that tries to darken spirits and social re-lationships. We have so many reasons to complain and withdraw into ourselves… But for the vast majority of the population, Christmas remains the celebration of Christ's coming. The feast becomes a great popular profession of faith in the saving return of the Son of God. In families or on the streets, countless Chanté Nwel (popular gatherings to sing traditional carols recalling the mystery of the Nativity) perpetuate a deeply rooted tradition that unites young and old. Of course, culinary traditions and the frenzy of gift-giving excite the commercial world, as everywhere. But most people in the French Antilles have not forgotten what is essential: Christmas Masses are crowded, religious radio broadcasts and nativity scenes in streets and public squares (many of them "tropicalized") testify to a deep awareness that

the feast we celebrate turns us toward heaven and toward one another. Despite economic hardship, generosity toward the most vulnerable is abundant and ever-present.

In reality, the Caribbean is a microcosm that concentrates, in a few islands (and continental territories such as the Guianas), the great tensions and great hopes of our world. Like the Holy Land, and particularly the "Galilee of the Gentiles" where Jesus grew up, our islands are crossroads where the greatest world powers meet: Africa, Europe, Asia, America—the whole world is within us and in our homes. History and current geopolitics have shaped here mixed-race populations who have had to build, amid turmoil, a balance of peace. It has been necessary (and still is, daily) to constantly overcome the temptations of confrontation, to face oppositions, conflicts of values, and resentments. In recent years, the brutality of globalization has added to this—a globalization that seeks to crush individuals and societies by dissolving their cultural identity under the imperialist assault of a ideology that is atheist, violent, and dehumanizing. To live, not in a false peace—which would be nothing more than a simple balance of terror or mutual ignorance—but in a beneficial harmony, it has been necessary to develop a powerful immune response. (It was indeed due to the ethical questions raised by the colonial invasions in the Caribbean that European theologians reflected on the issue of the "rights of peoples," which would be formalized much later at the UN, in 1948, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights!) Rivalries, massacres, struggles, rejection, contempt, oppression, and crimes have marked our history. They remain a daily threat. But Providence has allowed us, for now, to be witnesses of the vital and divine antidote sung by the angels of Christmas: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to people of good will…"

Christmas in the Antilles reminds us that simple faith, handed down through tradition and popular customs, remains the greatest bulwark of the dignity of peoples and the greatest guarantee of true peace—the peace that comes from Christ.

MAURITANIA: DIOCESE OF NOUAKCHOTT

Christmas and the Hope of Those Who Seek Peace

+ Victor Ndione
Bishop of Nouakchott

"Hope does not disappoint" (Rom 5:5). This is the title of the Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee Year 2025, promulgated by Pope Francis of venerated memory.
The mystery of Christmas strengthens this truth every year. Indeed, through the Nativity of the Incarnate Word of God, the promises of the Old Covenant are fulfilled, and the hope of all those who awaited a Messiah-Savior according to God's plan is realized. Yes, the Child-God born of the Virgin Mary is proof that God does not forget the world. He does not abandon it to the forces of evil; He desires the happiness and salvation of all humanity. The Angels, announcing the event to the shepherds, present the Child born of the Virgin Mary as "the Savior," and Isaiah, in his prophecy, proclaims Him "Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father Forever, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:5). Jesus brings complete salvation to the world; He gives all salvation and salvation to all. He saves from sin and eternal death, and He also brings with Him the remedies to uproot the earthly evils of injustice, indifference, violence, and so on.

In a world marked by turbulent times like ours—armed conflicts, social tensions, fear of the future, inner loneliness—the feast of the Nativity resounds as a call: a call not to lose hope and to embrace the plan of this God who desires peace for us. In Jesus, the gift of true peace is placed as a precious offering before every human being. Offered, but not imposed, because each person is free to accept this gift or to choose another. The peace of Christmas is not established by force: it is offered in the tenderness of a child, in the simplicity of a gesture, in God's closeness to the lowliest. It is an inner peace that transforms the heart before transforming the world. This gradualness—carrying peace from the individual to the world, from the one to the whole—indicates the path of perseverance that keeps us away from discouragement. Even if a glance at the world tends to plunge some of our contemporaries into despair and helplessness, celebrating the coming of the Savior in our flesh reminds us that what God offers humanity through His presence remains forever, since Christ Himself is with His people "until the end of the age" (cf. Mt 28). In this sense, Christmas is not simply the memory of a past event, but the celebration of a presence: that of the God of hope (cf. Rom 15:13).
Hope, it should be recalled, pushes us toward the future because

we hope for what we do not yet possess. It is essential, however, to emphasize that hope is not a dream or an illusory reality, but a dynamism born of faith in Jesus Christ, which helps restore courage and perseverance to those marked by despair.

The better world that so many men and women long for cannot be reached without peace. This peace is given to us in Jesus, the Word of God, whose thoughts are thoughts of peace and not of woe, to give us a future and a hope (cf. Jer 29:11). Paul will therefore rightly say: "Christ is our peace" (cf. Eph 2:14). Thus, after His resurrection, the first gift that Christ gives to believers is that of peace: "Peace be with you!" (Jn 20:21).

Christmas therefore rekindles in us the certainty that, despite violence and fear, love is stronger than hatred and urges us to become, each in our own way, peacemakers: in our families, in our communities, in our nations. Consequently, celebrating Christmas does not limit us to welcoming God's Peace for humanity, but also to spreading it in a world that so desperately needs it. A peace founded on truth and a sign of love, a peace that harmonizes with justice to bring forth, like a symphony, the beginning of a more fraternal world.

This harmony recalls that brought by the "Shoot that sprouts from the stump of Jesse": "The cow and the bear shall graze together [...] the baby shall play by the viper's den. They shall not harm or destroy on all my holy mountain" (Isaiah 11:7–9). Living Christmas in hope allows us to keep our trust in God and in His promises, especially in times of trial.

In the unique context of our Church in Mauritania, where the small Christian community—composed entirely of foreigners—must overcome, among other challenges, that of otherness, particularly in this troubled period in which anti-immigration policies supported by the European Union weaken momentum and sow fear, the hope brought by the Christmas feast is more important than ever to cultivate in troubled and wounded hearts. The Child Jesus was born in a cave, laid in a manger because there was no room for His earthly parents in the common lodging (cf. Lk 2:7). How can we not think of the faithful who are hunted down and persecuted, rounded up and expelled with methods that sometimes trample their dignity because they are foreigners, especially sub-Saharan Africans? They thus fall into the despised categories, like the shepherds of Jesus' time. It is to them as well that this message of the Angel is addressed: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people, for today in the city of David a Savior has been born for you, who is Messiah and Lord" (Lk 2:10–11).

Merry Christmas to all!

MAURITIUS:
DIOCESE OF PORT LOUIS

Christmas: Hope at the Heart of a World in Search of Peace

+ Jean Michaël Durhône
Bishop of Port Louis

As the Jubilee Year draws to a close, the Diocese of Port Louis reflects on the past months as a journey of grace and commitment. This significant period in the life of the Church continues in a renewed sense of continuity: that of a Church rooted in its history, yet always on the move, open to the Spirit who makes all things new. From the passing of the pastoral torch—from Cardinal Maurice E. Piat to Bishop Jean Michaël Durhône—the same dynamic has endured: to be a Church that is close, fraternal, and missionary.

The Jubilee has given tangible form to this mission through several meaningful celebrations: the Jubilee of Families, of Artists, of the Poor, of Prisoners, of Victims of Violence, of Migrants, and of the Sick. These milestones have enabled the diocesan community to stand alongside those who, often living in the

shadows, are still searching for reasons to hope.

Each of these jubilees has been a sign of God's presence at the heart of human realities. The Jubilee of Families revealed the beauty of faithful love, even in the face of hardship. The Jubilee of Prisoners recalled the words of Christ: "I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Mt 25:36). The Jubilee of Victims of Violence highlighted the tragedy of evil but also the power of forgiveness and renewal. The Jubilee of Migrants echoed the Gospel's appeal: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35). Finally, the Jubilee of the Sick was a manifestation of Christ's compassion, who "heals the brokenhearted" (Ps 147:3).

For Christians, Christmas is the feast of hope. It has a face and a name: Jesus. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). The journey undertaken by Joseph and Mary for this hope to be fulfilled was long and difficult. They had to set out in search of a place where Jesus could be born. They met closed doors, and it was finally in the simplicity of a manger that the One who would fulfill the hopes of an entire people came into the world. By setting out on their journey, Joseph and Mary became pilgrims bearing the hope of a new world.

This symbol of journey and pilgrimage resounded with particular force at the beginning of the Jubilee Year. On Christmas night, Pope Francis opened the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica, inviting the faithful to become "pilgrims of hope." He reminded us that the world needs hope—it needs witnesses of hope, men and women who set out to sow hope along the pathways of humanity.

The year 2025 has been marked by major challenges for our country, Mauritius: revitalizing our economy; rethinking the governance of our institutions; reorganizing our education system to truly serve the development of Mauritian children; deepening our commitment to the fight against drugs; equipping ourselves with the tools needed to combat the violence afflicting couples and families. All these challenges can be met only if each of us chooses to stand up, take a step forward, and embark on the journey to become a pilgrim of hope. All of us—young and old—carry within us the hope sown in our hearts. Hand in hand, in the diversity of our religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, we set out and walk together as pilgrims bringing hope to the heart of our Mauritius.

Faithful to its mission, the Diocese of Port Louis continues to be present wherever life calls to be defended and restored. In prisons, hospitals, schools, shelters, and vulnerable neighborhoods, women and men of faith embody this active hope. Their quiet service reflects the words of Jesus: "You are the light of the world" (Mt 5:14).

At the close of the Jubilee Year, the celebration of Christmas invites everyone to recognize this light that never fades. In a world sometimes disoriented, the birth of Jesus opens up a horizon of peace and trust. It reminds us that, despite the wounds of history, God continues to dwell among humanity and to restore its confidence in the future.

This message of hope—rooted in faith and embodied in the life of the Diocese of Port Louis—is what the Church wishes to offer to Mauritian society: an invitation to walk together, to believe in the power of goodness, and to cultivate peace where it seems absent. For at Christmas, more than ever, the promise remains: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:5).

PRINCIPALITY OF MONACO: ARCHDIOCESE OF MONACO

Monaco, a little Bethlehem by the sea
Monaco's Nativity Scene Trail

+ Dominique-Marie David
Archbishop of Monaco

Every winter, when the sea turns mother-of-pearl and fog envelops Le Rocher [the Rock], a path opens up in the heart of the Principality: the Nativity Scene Trail. It's more than just a stroll; it's a gentle ascent toward the light, a pilgrimage of stars and carved wood, an invitation to rediscover the simplest miracle: that of a birth...

Founded in 2014 at the suggestion of Prince Albert II, the Nativity Scene Trail has become, over the years, a Christmas ritual. Nestled within Le Rocher, among centuries-old stones and the scent of pine, it connects earth and heaven, faith and beauty, tradition and the world.

It all begins at the foot of the Rampe Major. The first steps are taken on the cold stone, where the echoes of the harbor and the murmur of the salty wind still resonate. The nativity scenes are lined up there, modest and touching, like respite for the soul. Eyes rest there, hearts calm. Then, step by step, the city gradually fades; only the golden light of the streetlamps and the fragile presence of miniature figures remain. Monaco-Ville, with its narrow streets and ochre walls, becomes a living scene: that of a silent Gospel. Every step is a prayer, every detour a symbol: one climbs the hill as one climbs faith, humbly, slowly, toward the most impressive nativity scene erected on the Place du Palais.

On Le Rocher, nativity scenes from five continents keep watch beneath the pine trees and the lights.

Some are carved from olive wood, others modeled from the red earth of Madagascar; elsewhere, African hands have sculpted the Nativity in hammered metal, Asian artisans have fashioned it from gold paper. They all tell the same story: that of the expectation of Peace, of silence, and of giving.

In this diversity lies a rare brotherhood: that of peoples united around the same mystery. The Christ-child unites cultures, materials and faces. Monaco, a small kingdom perched on the sea, becomes for a moment the center of a reconciled world.

The Nativity Scene Trail is not just an exhibition, it's a school of vision. You learn to see differently: the hand of the craftsman, the patience of the gesture, the tenderness of the detail. Children play at recognizing countries, visitors scan QR codes to discover the origins of the works; and each, according to their age or faith, finds a different light. Behind the faces of the holy men, there is an entire invisible people keeping watch: mothers, shepherds, travelers, dreamers... Their humble presence reminds us that Christmas is not a showcase, but a

breath of the heart.
As evening falls, the trail illuminates with lights. The nativity scenes sparkle, the garlands are lit, and the Palace and the Cathedral keep watch. Under the pine trees, the air is filled with salt and incense. Families walk in silence; all that can be heard is the footsteps of the Prince's Carabiniere guarding the Palace entrance, a child's laughter, the whisper of a prayer. At the turn of a walk, down an alley, time seems suspended. Faces soften, voices fall silent: before the nativity scene, everyone becomes a pilgrim: believer or not, child or elderly, all are enveloped by the sweetness of the mystery.
As winter touches the walls, the sea falls asleep under the moon, the nativity scenes continue to keep watch—silent guardians of a world still seeking peace. Monaco's Nativity Trail is more than just a path: it is an open-air poem, an inner journey. Following it, one discovers much more than just works of art: one rediscovers the world's infancy, the simplicity of gesture, the beauty of silence; those silences in which God's work is forged. In this small place, between the sky and the Mediterranean, the Nativity finds a singular treasure chest.
The Path of the Nativity Scenes is more than just a festive decoration: it is a golden thread woven between cultures, a bridge between the visible and the invisible. Every figure, every lantern, every stone speaks of the promise of a light that never goes out: that of the Prince of Peace.

NETHERLANDS: DIOCESE OF HAARLEM-AMSTERDAM

Pilgrims of Hope in a secular Society

+ Johannes Hendriks
Bishop of Haarlem-Amsterdam

In the 1960s, the Catholic Church in the Netherlands was undergoing rapid change. The end of Catholicism seemed near. Churches and monasteries were emptying at a high speed. Was there still hope? Yes! Trials are always an invitation to greater faith and trust.

The Netherlands, a small country, was known for the many missionaries it sent out; in 1960, there were 9,726! Now it is a secularised country. 58% of the population is not religious, only 17% is Catholic (2023). However, in 2024, the number of believers rose slightly: 44% of the population indicated that they belonged to a church or religious community. Church attendance also seems to be increasing, especially in more urbanised areas.

The atmosphere within the Catholic Church in the Netherlands has changed considerably. In the 1960s, the so-called 'Pastoral Council', which, in the presence of all the bishops, advocated a more 'horizontal', socially critical liturgy, the abolition of celibacy and a more liberal sexual doctrine. Confession seemed to have been abolished. A Dutch Catechism was introduced, seminaries were closed, lay people were appointed as pastoral workers, and so on.

All this caused great division among the faithful, and church life was characterised by strong polarisation. The whole world watched when Pope John Paul II visited the Netherlands in 1985 – forty years ago this year – and anti-pope demonstrations dominated the scene with streets full of smoke bombs! The Pope did not let this upset him and said, with the apostle: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel".

Catholic education, ecclesiastical justice, catechesis, the pastoral council, theological education, the celebration of the liturgy, the identity of the priest: in all areas of ecclesiastical life, Roman Dicasteries have had to make strenuous efforts to adjust the course. All this culminated in a Special Synod for the Netherlands, held in Rome in January 1980 under the leadership of the Holy Father. Two great saints, Pope Paul VI and John Paul II, with much patience and perseverance, restored the identity of the Catholic Church in the Netherlands. But it has gone through some very difficult times...

At the end of 2011, the report was published by the investigative commission (Deetman Commission) set up by the Episcopal Conference to investigate sexual abuse by clergy and religious over the past seventy years.

This caused a shockwave: who could have imagined that so many clergy and religious had committed such reprehensible acts? This led to a further decline in church involvement. Many

no longer had their children baptised or receive first Holy Communion. The Church was openly portrayed as a 'criminal organisation'.

The serious handling of these abuse cases and the compensation given to the victims ultimately contributed to the processing and healing of the spiritual wounds. The Catholic Church had taken responsibility. In the Netherlands, more and more cases of abuse in non-church sectors of society subsequently came to light.

So many breaches there were in the bastion of the once seemingly powerful Church. Yet hope was not lost! Jesus Christ remains the same, yesterday, today and forever. We do not rely on the applause or our own achievements, but on God's grace. Those who trust in God will not be put to shame.

Those who continue with that trust, kindly and resolutely, in faithfulness to Christ and His Church, will recognise again and again how the Lord does not abandon His people and that the message of the Gospel is an answer to the needs of every age. 'Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age' (Mt 28:20).

The situation in the world has changed. In the 1960s, people in the Netherlands and other rich countries thought that prosperity would only grow. Meanwhile, serious climate problems, the threat of war, a lack of sufficient housing, the ageing of the native population and problems surrounding migration are strongly felt. At the same time, there has been a sharp increase in individualism. In a rich and prosperous country like the Netherlands, this situation evokes feelings of uncertainty and fear for the future in many people. 52% of young people between the ages of 16 and 25 suffer from anxiety and depression (figure: annual survey by the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM)).

It seems that the change in the social situation has contributed to young people reflecting on the meaning of life. Many of them tell me that they have had a personal experience of God. There is a desire to know Jesus Christ and to learn more about the Catholic faith. This year (2025), 325 young people have become Catholics in our diocese of Haarlem-Amsterdam, and many more are preparing for baptism. The numbers are higher in urban areas and larger parishes than in rural parishes. Preparing and guiding these young people demands a lot from the priests, but at the same time, they would not want to do anything else!

The general climate of Dutch society is secular, although there are small signs of a change and more openness. The spiritual climate within the Catholic Church has changed significantly. Hot topics are of little interest to young people; they are more concerned with deepening their faith through knowledge and the growth of their spiritual life. They are looking for sacrality, solidity and stability.

In the last decades of the previous century, the question arose regularly: Will the Catholic Church still exist in our country in the near future? That question has fallen silent. We see God's hand in all kinds of signs of His grace. We experience gratitude for what God's goodness gives us. We continue on our way, as pilgrims of hope!

PAKISTAN:
DIOCESE OF ISLAMABAD-RAWALPINDI

Christmas: The Dawn of Hope

+ Joseph Arshad
Archbishop-Bishop of Islamabad-Rawalpindi

As the Jubilee Year draws to a close, our hearts return to Bethlehem, to the humble cradle where God's promise of salvation took flesh. In a world weary of war, division and uncertainty, Christmas proclaims that hope is not an illusion. Hope is Jesus Christ, who is born among us.

From the heart of Pakistan, where Christians live as a small flock among a majority of other faiths, this message is our daily bread. The faithful of the Diocese of Islamabad–Rawalpindi, families in the northern mountains, parish communities in the plains of Punjab, religious sisters in schools and hospitals, live their faith often quietly, but courageously and always joyfully. They remind us that light can shine even where the night seems deepest.

In our parishes, we have seen hope blossom in simple gestures: children learning the Gospel under the shade of a tree; Muslim neighbors sharing our Christmas meals; young people serving flood victims with generosity that transcends religion. These moments, born of love, are the living manger where Christ continues to be born today.

The end of the Jubilee invites us to carry forward its graces—to be witnesses of mercy and builders of bridges. Hope, as Pope Francis reminds us, does not disappoint because it is rooted in God's fidelity. This conviction sustains us when the news speak only of conflicts, when poverty wounds human dignity, and when intolerance hardens hearts. We look to the Child in the manger, fragile yet radiant, and discover anew that peace is possible—born in every heart that welcomes Him.

For our community in Pakistan, Christmas is also a time of witness. The star that shone over Bethlehem still guides us to live in trust, not fear; in dialogue, not distance. It teaches us to see in every human face the reflection of God's image—Christian or Muslim, rich or poor, friend or stranger. Hope grows whenever we choose compassion over indifference.

This year our diocesan yearly theme has also been "Hope". We have reflected over Faith that Builds Hope. We have encouraged families to pray together, to help the poor and needy, to educate their children in peace, and to care for the earth, our common home. In the quiet perseverance of our people, I see the steadfast hope that animated Mary and Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem: a hope that believes when the road is uncertain and rejoices even when the stable seems too poor for a King.

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, I wish to send a message from the peripheries of the world to the heart of the Church: the light of Christ is never extinguished. It flickers in the small lamps of our homes, in the smiles of children, in the courage of those who forgive, and in the tireless hands that serve the poor. This is the hope that sustains humanity.

May the Child of Bethlehem renew our hearts and our community that we may be artisans of peace, especially where conflict reigns, and sowers of hope where despair threatens to prevail. The Jubilee may end, but its grace continues wherever love becomes incarnate.

In the quiet glow of Christmas, we remember that hope is not only a promise for the future but a presence that transforms the present. From the humble cradle of Bethlehem to every home that opens its heart to love, Christ continues to be born where faith and compassion dwell. In a world fractured by conflict and indifference, the Church in Islamabad–Rawalpindi invites each of us to bear that divine light: to speak kindness where there is bitterness, to build bridges where there are walls, and to believe—even in darkness—that dawn is near.

From Islamabad–Rawalpindi, with gratitude and faith, I send this Christmas greeting: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:5). Christ is our hope, yesterday, today and forever.

PARAGUAY:
DIOCESE OF CAACUPÉ

For a Christmas Free of Gunpowder

+ Ricardo Jorge Valenzuela
Bishop of Caacupé

Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, with the collapse of the communist era in the Soviet Union, humanity has never been so on the brink of war as in recent years and especially this year, with the possibility and probability of reaching the largest area on the planet.

The wars between Ukraine and Russia, and between Israel and the Gaza Strip, have demanded and continue to demand from their governments and allies billions of dollars in armaments, munitions, logistics, and equipment, which could have been invested in saving the souls of millions of people on earth, suffering from hunger, malnutrition, pain, and the absolute lack of basic services.

The mad pursuit of absolute control of the world by a single power, a combination of nations, or worse still, a single person, disregards the most basic values that adorn a person's life in their relationship with God.

Certainly, particular formulas for the prosperity of peoples work wonderfully on earth. Some strive to preserve their acquired comforts, but they fail to see beyond the gray side of life faced by their brothers and sisters on the other side of the globe.

There are countries. Yes, countries with people like ours, with abundant natural resources, yet they endure more than 80 percent extreme poverty among their populations. Such would be the cases of South Sudan, with 82.3% of its population living in extreme poverty, Somalia, Niger, Burundi, and others that no

one talks about, no one protests against.
But yes, in those countries, their governments spend billions on fraudulent arms purchases to keep civil conflict simmering. That is, money is spent on weapons to kill the weakest and strengthen the most violent, instead of spending that money on food, health, and education, which allow humble people to access more dignified life opportunities, according to Our Lord's plan.
In these conditions, can there be hope for a Christmas without violence for people at war, or for people without war, but without food and justice?
Peace is founded on the primary relationship between every created being and God himself. Humans often alter the divine order, and as a result, the world experiences painful bloodshed and division: violence thus manifests itself in interpersonal and social relationships, but peace and violence cannot coexist, because where there is violence, God cannot be.
As we well know, peace is much more than the mere absence of war; it is not even a simple stable balance between opposing forces, much less the feigned suspension of hostilities. Peace is equally endangered when man is not given his due, as a human being; when their dignity is not respected and when coexistence is not oriented toward the common good. This is why it is essential to defend and promote human rights among those peoples who, while not enduring fratricidal wars, survive the violent abuses of their rulers.
Peace is the effect of God's blessing on his people. Jesus proclaims that Christians can become peacemakers and therefore participants in the Kingdom of God, as he himself proclaims: "Blessed are those who work for peace, for they will be called children of God."
The meaning and foundation of Christian commitment in the world derive from the certainty that God offers the real possibility of overcoming evil and achieving good, and the Church knows that the human person possesses sufficient qualities and energies because they are the image of their Creator.
Our Christian mission is to persevere in seeking more hearts around the world capable of seeing the other side of the planet, where life is a constant conflict, and to seek to transform it, as soon as possible, into the fruit of the order planted in the whole of human society by its divine Founder, "and which men, ever thirsting for a more perfect justice, must bring to fulfillment."
May Christmas this year finally be free of the smell of gunpowder.

PORTUGAL:
PATRIARCHATE OF LISBON

Christmas in Lisbon, When Hope Becomes Nearer

+ Archbishop Rui Manuel Sousa Valério
Patriarch of Lisbon

Christmas comes to Lisbon with the same fragrance of eternity that two thousand years ago wrapped the silence of Bethlehem. In the heart of this ancient and evernew city, God continues to draw near, to be born in human peripheries, and to kindle light where there once seemed to be only darkness. This is the silent miracle of Christmas: God does not give up on humanity, and even less on this city that recognizes and serves Him in its streets and in the faces of its people.

Today, Lisbon is a land where the Gospel takes concrete form. On its hills and in its neighborhoods, in parish communities, social institutions, and the simple homes of those who live by providence, Christmas has already begun. I see it in the teams that, every night, walk the streets bringing hot soup and friendship to those without shelter; in the volunteers who listen to and ac-company those who have lost almost everything except their dignity; in the religious sisters and laypeople who, without noise or acclaim, make service the altar on which they adore the God-made-man. Every act of charity is a flame that overcomes the night and restores hope to those who believed they had been forgotten.

The Patriarchate of Lisbon is living this Christmas as an extension of the jubilee journey that the Church walks as a Pilgrim of Hope. The Jubilee of 2025 has been for us a time of grace and rediscovery. After the strength of World Youth Day 2023, which transformed Lisbon into the capital of joy and faith, our Church sought to keep that flame alive, helping young people discover that hope is mission and that the Gospel is a path of new life.

The Diocesan Jubilee Day, celebrated on May 31, was an expression of this communion. Thousands of faithful gathered—a shining sign of a people on an inner pilgrimage. The Jubilee of Charity showed us that hope becomes concrete in service to the poor; the Jubilee of Authorities reminded us that the common good is also an expression of faith; the Youth Jubilee once again brought the fresh air of the Church's early days; and the Jubilee of Mission reminded us that hope becomes proclamation and witness, not theory.

For all this, Lisbon is today a jubilee city: a place where the Spirit renews the life of the Church and urges her to go forth in service. Here, Christmas finds its most authentic face: that of a people who, in the midst of the contradictions of the present time, continue to believe that "in everything God works for the good of those who love Him" (Rom 8:28).

We live in times when peace seems distant and fragile. Wars, loneliness, poverty, and indifference challenge the human heart. But Christmas reminds us that Christian hope does not arise from political calculations or social strategies: it is born from a manger. And a manger is the opposite of force: it is poverty embraced out of love, weakness transformed into gift, the tenderness of God overcoming the harshness of the world.

For this reason, Christmas in Lisbon is also an invitation to conversion. May every Christian become a place of hospitality, and

may every community be a home open to the pain and joy of the women and men of this city. The Church is called to be God's presence beside the least, bearing witness that charity is the most beautiful name of hope—the same hope that the Holy Spirit makes germinate in the hearts of those who pray, who serve, who believe that even amid the world's chaos, God's love remains faithful.

Between river and sea, hill and valley, Lisbon renews its "yes" to the Gospel of peace. Here, hope has concrete faces: the volunteer who visits the poor, the young person who rediscovers faith, the elderly person who prays silently for their loved ones, the migrant who dreams of a better future. All of them are the living manger in which God desires to be born.

This Christmas, the Patriarchate of Lisbon wants to be a sign of this presence: a Church that walks, listens, and serves; a Church that believes that the Spirit is the great engine of history and the conductor of mission; a Church that, born from the Heart of Christ, knows that hope is not an illusion but the certainty that the final word belongs to love.

May Mary, Mother of Hope and Star of Lisbon, teach us to look at the world with God's gaze, to recognize—even in the darkest nights—the gentle glimmer of the light that comes from Bethlehem. For this is Christmas: the certainty that God continues to be born, every day, in every act of goodness, in every word of forgiveness, in every heart that allows itself to be illuminated by peace.

CZECH REPUBLIC: DIOCESE OF PLZEŇ

Ave crux, spes unica – The Hope of the Cross in a Time When the World Is Shaken

+ Tomáš Holub
Bishop of Plzeň

The main question that appears with increasing urgency today is what message of hope Christianity can offer to a world in which peace is no longer something we can take for granted. I am convinced that the most important thing Christianity brings into such a situation is not pointing to various worldly mechanisms or systems that are supposed to secure peace for us. In recent times we have discovered that many things, many different fixed points we relied upon, shaped by the way the world is organized and by the safeguards rooted in political systems, the integrity of individuals or cultural traditions, can fail very quickly.

In such a situation, Christian hope invites us to return to what is real and lasting. It does not arise from the strength of human structures but from the love of Jesus for this world. His love is shown in his willingness to give himself completely so that this world may live in truth and so that it may have a future that does not end in death. This is a foundation that does not shake even when human certainties collapse.

As Christians, we are invited to offer this perspective of hope to the world with great humility and without triumphalism. We are aware that we ourselves often struggle to keep this hope alive in our own hearts. At the same time, we know that it rests on God's faithfulness and not on our own strength.

Our world needs people who do not close their eyes to reality and who still believe that God does not abandon this world. It needs people who can speak about the cross as the place where a new future is born. The cross is the firm point that stands even when many other certainties begin to shake.

Let us be those who speak of the cross as the one hope for this world, as the Christian tradition has always offered it. Ave crux spes unica.

Hail to the cross, our only hope.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO: ARCHDIOCESE OF BUKAVU

A day will come when the light will shine

+ François Xavier Maroy Rusengo
Metropolitan Archbishop of Bukavu

We are celebrating the Jubilee Year: 2025 years since the coming of Christ to Earth, a Jubilee whose theme is "Pilgrims of Hope." With this theme, the Holy Father, Pope Francis, was like a prophet for us. The war currently raging in our country reached our Archdiocese at the beginning of this year, 2025, shortly after the official and solemn opening of this Jubilee. Some parishes and communities, even now, cannot celebrate this great event of our faith because of the sound of marching boots, the crackling of bullets, and the explosion of bombs. Either we are huddled under our beds or we are fleeing, spending nights under the open sky—if we can still call that sky beautiful! Despite all this, the Angel's mes-sage comforts us: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy for all the people" (Lk 2:10). Yes, "hope does not disappoint" (Rom 5:5), and Christmas is a great feast of Hope because God reveals Himself to us in poverty, in utter misery. He was born in a stable and laid in a manger without clothes, yet accompanied by the song of angels and shepherds. And now the Magi come from the East to offer Him their gifts. This King, accessible to all, contrasts sharply with the world of today: a King born in a village, far from His family, without cameras in this age of digital technology and artificial intelligence,
a King without an army, and yet a Prince of Peace, at a time when world powers boast of longrange nuclear weapons of mass destruction! Yes, He is the King of Hope for all, in the midst of a "piecemeal world war," as Pope Francis called it. If we were to replace weapons with the cross of Christ, the world would have true peace!
This is the condition in which we are currently living; people suffer, deprived of everything except Christ, abandoned by some and persecuted by others, yet comforted by the Child Jesus. From afar, we hear talk of Agreements, Talks, Conventions for peace, reconciliation, and development; but here, on the ground, the suffering continues because there is nothing to eat or drink, no medical care, no schools, not even clothes to wear outdoors. Fortunately, faith remains, and hope for a better to-morrow does not waver. Here today, villages are empty due to extreme insecurity caused by all kinds of warring factions. No one goes to the fields for fear of being massacred or raped, and thus hunger prevails.
In the city, there is overcrowding in small huts without water or electricity. The streets are full of people, even at night. Children can be seen who have become "street children," as though the street itself had taken the place of their parents. But hope remains, because happiness is before us; the night may last, but the day will eventually come.

A day will come when the light will shine, for the end of the tunnel is always in sight for those who believe in God and hope in Jesus Christ.

Thus, the liturgy is celebrated with great participation from the faithful of all ages, and there, faces—though hungry and thin—dance for Christ, the newborn of December 25, 2025, in the Christmas crib of the Archdiocese of Bukavu. And as everywhere, Hope never disappoints.

In the appendix, a short hymn that warms the hearts of those who suffer but do not give up, because their witness of life is founded solely on Truth and Love for all, without hypocrisy.

In faith, hope, and charity—those theological virtues strengthened in us by the Coming of Christ into the world—we prepare for the closing of this Jubilee Year on Sunday, December 28, 2025, even in our Cathedral. Although we have not celebrated as planned in our calendar, and thus have not reached our goal of joy, we offer to those who have left us the mercy of God, and for us who have survived, our thanksgiving to God is immeasurable, even though true peace is awaited in the hope of the children of Abraham, that ancestor who hoped against all hope.

Thank you to those who pray with us and for us.

SLOVENIA:
ARCHDIOCESE OF LJUBLJANA

The Porch of the Mystery of the Second Virtue (Ch. Péguy)

+ Stanislav Zore, OFM
Metropolitan Archbishop of Ljubljana

Every year we choose a "word of the year": a word that has resonated in a special way throughout the year and has marked people, their thoughts, and also their relationships and actions. Naturally, it was not the word hope, as some might think. The chosen word was "six-seven," and no one really knows what it means. It was chosen because young people use it constantly.
Among Christians, however, in the year we are slowly leaving behind, the word hope has returned to the forefront in reflections, conversations, pilgrimages, and jubilee events. A hope that does not arise from an expectation or a desire; such hope remains at a human level, may or may not be fulfilled, and life goes on—and the failure to fulfill such an expectation does not fundamentally shape an individual's life. The hope on which we have reflected in this Holy Year is a hope that "does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:5).
I am reminded of the beginning of a poem by Charles Péguy with the mysteriously beautiful title The Portal of the Mystery of Hope. The opening of this poem makes us think that God is speaking to himself and at the same time reveals to us in what light he sees human beings and what lies deepest within them. And he says: "The faith that I love most, says God, is hope.
Faith does not surprise me… Charity does not surprise me, says God. There is nothing strange there… But hope, says God—hope astonishes me. Even me. That is what is surprising. That these poor children see how things are going and believe that tomorrow will be better… The little girl (Hope) advances between her two older sisters (faith and charity) completely unnoticed." And we, blind as we are, do not see the one in the middle, this little girl who pulls her older sisters forward.
This little girl, says Péguy, came into the world last year on Christmas Day. She spoke to us once again of God's unshakable faithfulness to his promises, for even if we are "unfaithful, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself" (2 Tim 2:13).
This little girl—Hope—is God's gift with which he accompanies humanity throughout the whole history of salvation, showing us the way out of every dead end into which we fall and remain trapped because of our inattentiveness or a false understanding of freedom. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers: they will strike at your head, while you strike at their heel" (Gen 3:15). When human beings doubted God and his absolute love and denied God's sovereignty over the knowledge of good and evil, when their decisions and actions annulled the paradise God had created for them, God did not turn his back on humanity. Why not? "He cannot deny himself"; therefore he remains faithful and, in the

midst of fear, nakedness, broken relationships, and the terror of knowing their own mortality, he pronounces the promise of a new offspring who would defeat the adversary of God and of humankind.

To the patriarch Moses, the guide of the people from the house of slavery to the Promised Land, he revealed his face and his name: "But the LORD said: I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry against their taskmasters, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them.." (Exod 3:7–8).

The God of hope is not a God who remains distant, but a God who accompanies humanity and experiences hardship, oppression and injustice together with them. He is not an idol who has eyes but does not see, who has ears but does not hear, but is love that sees, that hears, that knows as only love can know. And he does not stop at conclusions. Our God is not a statistician who records events, but love that is moved by what he sees and hears, that steps forward, that saves. And God's salvation is not the conclusion of deceitful contracts, the uttering of empty words, or the selling of promises while keeping a fig in the pocket. "For when peaceful stillness encompassed everything and the night in its swift course was half spent,Your all-powerful word from heaven's royal throne

leapt into the doomed land, a fierce warrior bearing the sharp sword of your inexorable decree," (Wis 18:14–15).

Our God is locked in a tumultuous struggle against evil, wickedness, violence, oppression, and everything that deprives human beings of their dignity as children of God and destroys the image of God within them. He does not send others. He is not a strategist who safely plans to achieve his goals through others.

No. God himself, as the Book of Wisdom vividly says, "leapt down as a warrior into the midst of the doomed land." He exposes himself. He stakes himself. For humanity and its life. For humanity and its eternity. This is why he is wounded; they nail his hands and feet, they pierce his heart with a spear, and he does not retain even a single drop of life for himself. At the same time, he prays the prayer of love to the end: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

This entire story of promise and faithfulness on God's part, and of expectation, longing, and hope on humanity's part, is summed up in the truth that Jesus expressed in the words addressed to the somewhat fearful seeker Nicodemus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The feast of the birth of Jesus renews and enlivens our hope every year. If we know how to approach the mystery of his helplessness and fragility with simplicity and humility, it fills us with a light that penetrates deeply and shines even in dark moments and in places where the sun seems to have gone out.

The love of God, which shows us its purest form in the birth of the Son of God, is our indestructible hope.

SPAIN: ARCHDIOCESE OF SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

CHRISTMAS, A LIVING AND INCARNATE HOPE

+ Francisco José Prieto Fernández
Archbishop of Santiago de Compostela

As we approach the conclusion of the Roman Jubilee Year 2025, proclaimed by Pope Francis under the sign of the hope that does not disappoint (Rom 5:5), Christ — whom we must proclaim as our hope (1 Tim 1:1) — Christmas reminds us that the Incarnation is the first great sign of hope that God sends into the world. Christmas is God becoming flesh and blood, tears and laughter, wounds and marks. A God who draws near to the small, and by entering and descending, makes them great (without ceasing to be small). "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:1): God becomes incarnate in humanity, because to love is to be human — fervently, intensely, with longing — and to learn to make that love into a story. It is human to weep when days grow rough or difficulties mount; but it is also human to trust that someone will cradle your anxieties and embrace your sleepless nights. It is human to journey through all places and still long for something new. It is human to lift your gaze, undefeated, even when everything invites surrender. It is human, finally, that a beating heart is capable of resonating with others — a heart like the one that begins to beat on a cold night, which, touched by Life, becomes the Holy Night. And to learn that love gives itself first — you give it (even if it's not accepted) — but it asks nothing in return. This is a God who becomes incarnate in what is small in the eyes of the world.

In the Bull of Indiction for the Jubilee Year 2025, Spes non confundit, Pope Francis invited us to "be tangible signs of hope for so many brothers and sisters who live in conditions of hardship" (no. 10). This hope is founded on the love of God, manifested in mercy and reconciliation, and it extends to peoples who suffer from wars and conflicts. In his message for the Jubilee of Indigenous Peoples, Pope Leo XIV emphasized that the Jubilee is "a moment of living and personal encounter with the Lord Jesus... an occasion of reconciliation, of grateful remembrance and of shared hope." Moreover, in his celebration of the World Day of the Poor, he recalled that the hope of the Jubilee must inspire policies that combat poverty and promote peace, recognizing

that "hope... will not be in vain."
In a world fragmented by violence, the light of Christmas invites us to live this hope through prayer, charity and forgiveness, following the call of the 2025 Jubilee to be "pilgrims of hope" and builders of peace. The celebration of Christmas must therefore be a renewal of our commitment to be bearers of the peace that Christ brought to humanity. For this reason, the Incarnation is the starting point of Christian hope: God becomes man to open the future of salvation to all men and women.
The birth of the Son of God is a source of hope because the incarnate Christ gives us the strength to walk with Him toward the fullness of life and to stand beside the struggle for human dignity, especially that of the most fragile. In this sense, "hope is not evasion, but decision. This attitude is the result of profound prayer in which God is not asked to spare us from suffering, but rather to give us the strength to persevere in love, knowing that life offered freely for love cannot be taken away by anyone." (Pope Leo XIV, Audience of August 27, 2025).
The incarnate Word is the "light that illuminates the hope" of the people of God. In his commentary on Psalm 127, Augustine of Hippo affirms that hope is born of the love of God and that "we are all brothers and sisters in the One." These words shed light on the communal dimension of Christmas: the birth of Christ calls us to recognize ourselves as one great human family, called to fraternity and peace.
How can we not recall here the Second Vatican Council, which in Gaudium et Spes 22 declares:
"The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light.... For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin."
Here lies the profound root of every Christian hope: by becoming incarnate, God not only opens the door to salvation, but assures the new life that the believer awaits with trust — a life that makes one a witness, a true artisan of that peace which is both God's gift and the disciple's mission, in a world scattered with discord, violence, and wars that cannot silence the song which, from that holy night of Bethlehem, reaches all humanity.
The angel's announcement to the shepherds — "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Lk 2:14) — proclaims, before the birth of the Savior, a message of peace that extends to all humankind. This peace is not the absence of conflict, but the definitive peace that, as a gift, springs from the encounter with Christ, the "door" of salvation.
Therefore, glory to God in the highest!
Your glory, Lord, is that my life may reflect You.
Your glory is the hand I extend and the one I receive, the word that grants me esteem and hope, the gaze that perceives possibility.
Your glory is that my very being trembles as I discover that the other is my brother.
That the unjust wound may heal.
And that the oppressor may lay down his weapon forever.
And peace on earth!
Because there are too many cries.
Too many sticks, barriers, and hunger.
Too many people live amid storms and tears.
Peace for those who hide old sorrows and new wounds.
For those who weep over failures or helplessness.
For those who fall along the way, victims of abysses that devour dreams and lives.
Peace for those who tremble before an uncertain future and for those who cannot forget.
For those who feel alone.
For the prisoner, confined by walls of stone or of prejudice.
Therefore, peace to all people of good will!

TOGO:
DIOCESE OF KARA

Christmas, a Constantly Renewed Hope

+ Jacques Danka Longa
Bishop of Kara

Christian hope is not naivety. It is an inner strength, a gaze turned toward the future with trust. At Christmas, God draws near, poor among the poor, vulnerable like a child. He comes to dwell in our fragilities, our doubts, our wounds. For the diocesan community of Kara in Togo, this means that every act of solidar-ity, every shared prayer, every offering of forgiveness becomes a seed of hope. Thus, every year, the Catholic community of the Diocese of Kara lives Christmas as a call to hope and joy:
Joy given and received through the organization of Christmas celebrations for children in the parishes, and hope for a better tomorrow.
Joy shared within families, where everyone is invited to gather for a convivial toast, just like Abraham, who offered hospitality and openness to the three visitors (cf. Gen 18).
Joy made manifest through the outreach of the diocesan Caritas (OCDI/CARITAS) to various poor and rural parishes to celebrate Christmas Day with children and the poor: a shared festive meal and food kits.
Thus, Christmas is lived as a concrete expression of the Hope received, lived, and shared with the smallest and the poorest.
Christmas, a hope constantly renewed.
The liturgy as a path of encounter with God and with one's neighbor: …you did it to me (Mt 25:40). In this encounter with others, Christmas is not merely a word, but a reality. Emphasis is placed on the liturgy as a place of living encounter with God, but also as a space of fraternity and solidarity. The appeal of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew (Mt 25:40) invites every believer to recognize Christ in the face of their neighbor, especially the most vulnerable.
The year 2025, a Jubilee year, has therefore represented an important spiritual milestone for the Diocese of Kara, with this significant event lived in the spirit of the theme: "The liturgy as a path of encounter with God and with one's neighbor: '…you did it to me' (Mt 25:40)."
Christmas, a hope ever renewed.

As the diocesan community of Kara concludes its Jubilee year—marked by prayer, reconciliation, and the celebration of faith—a profound question arises: what message of hope can Christmas still offer in a world so often without peace? This Jubilee, a time of grace and renewal, has allowed everyone to revisit the foundations of their faith, to draw closer to God and to one another. But hope does not end with the close of the Jubilee. It finds an inexhaustible source in Christmas.

At the end of the Jubilee, Christmas invites us not to close a spiritual parenthesis, but to widen it. To be bearers of hope means choosing to believe that good is possible, that peace can take root even in the most arid lands. It means welcoming Christ into our lives and allowing Him to transform our perspectives, our words, and our commitments. For "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7).

The document "Church in the Diocese of Kara, Become What You Are by Vocation, the Church of Communion", the culmination of a process of reflection begun in 2019 with the silver jubilee of the founding of the Diocese of Kara, was published on June 8, 2025. By striving to be a Church of Communion, then Christmas will be, as much as possible, truly the hope constantly renewed. This will be achieved through a Church in which all feel like brothers and sisters, and in which every person is valued for who they are: a person created and saved by God.

TUNISIA:
ARCHDIOCESE OF TUNIS

In Tunisia, the Atmosphere of the "First Christmas"

+ Nicolas Lhernould
Archbishop of Tunis

In Tunisia, the Catholic Church numbers about 30,000 faithful out of a population of 13 million. This small flock, representing around 80 nationalities, reflects the universality of the Church in its diversity. The country is 99.9% Muslim. At Christmas, external signs are rare—slightly less so in the cities and tourist areas. In shops in the larger towns, one may sometimes find Christmas trees, ornaments and garlands. Here and there, traditional carol concerts and Christmas markets are also held. All these are signs and customs imported from other contexts. Overall, the Christmas atmosphere is imbued with a silence and simplicity that no doubt recall what the "first Christmas" must have been like.

For Islam, Christmas commemorates the birth of Sidi Aïssa, the "prophet Jesus." Many of our Muslim friends wish us happy holidays. In turn, we take advantage of every Muslim feast to draw closer to others—each one being an opportunity to know one another better, to meet, and to build fraternity: "The first ground of our encounter is that of our common humanity, starting from good neighborliness and conviviality. In this lies the solid foundation of true dialogue, understood in a broader sense than a simple exchange of words or observations about our respective religions" (Conference of Bishops of the Region of North Africa [CERNA], Servants of Hope, 3.3, December 1, 2014).

In the south, among the nomads and shepherds, everything evokes even more vividly the atmosphere of the first Christmas, when the Word became flesh amid the activities and challenges of the world. It is truly beautiful to celebrate the feast in such simplicity, to meditate on the mystery of the Incarnation while sharing the life of today's shepherds—raising our eyes to the desert sky filled with winter stars, and remembering that some, guided by the Holy Spirit whom they did not yet know, were once led to the manger by looking at the sky… "Let us look at the sky. Contemplating after millennia the same sky, the same stars appear. They illuminate the darkest nights because they shine together. The sky thus gives us a message of unity: the Most High above us invites us never to separate ourselves from the brother beside us. The Beyond of God refers us to the other—our brother" (Pope Francis, Interreligious Meeting, 1,

Plain of Ur, March 6, 2021).
Two anecdotes may help to glimpse this atmosphere, where the simplicity of daily life allows us to experience firsthand the mystery of the Nativity.
The first story is told by a Franciscan sister who had lived in Morocco, in the Atlas Mountains. Christmas was approaching. At home, the sisters were preparing the Nativity scene. A Muslim shepherd knocked at the door and asked what they were doing. He knew nothing of the mystery of Christmas. One of the sisters explained it to him... Then a second shepherd arrived and asked the same question. The sister was about to begin her explanation again when the first one interrupted her, saying: "Sister, let me continue, because if I understood correctly, it was the shepherds who were entrusted with announcing the news."
The second story takes place in Tunisia: a mother and her daughter, both Muslims, driven by curiosity, asked a sister to help them read the Gospel. One day, the mother asked the sister, "Sister, tell me now, what should we believe?" The sister replied, "You asked me to help you understand what I believe; I cannot tell you what you should believe. Only you, with God, can answer that question." Then the mother, who had never read the Gospel of the Epiphany, said, "My daughter and I felt a light rise within us. We don't know what it is, but we felt the desire to walk and see where it leads."
Life offers us many opportunities to welcome and meditate on the mystery, drawing on all these "open pages of the Gospel" found in the lives of people who, for the most part, have no knowledge of the Christian faith.
This contemplative and missionary attitude, Marian in spirit, was recalled by Pope Francis: "Mary is able to recognize the traces of God's Spirit in events great and small. She constantly contemplates the mystery of God in our world, in human history and in our daily lives. She is the woman of prayer and work in Nazareth, and she is also Our Lady of Help, who sets out from her town "with haste" (Lk 1:39) to be of service to others. This interplay of justice and tenderness, of contemplation and concern for others, is what makes the ecclesial community look to Mary as a model of evangelization. We implore her maternal intercession that the Church may become a home for many peoples, a mother for all peoples, and that the way may be opened to the birth of a new world. It is the Risen Christ who tells us, with a power that fills us with confidence and unshakeable hope: "Behold, I make all things new" (Evangelii Gaudium, 288, November 24, 2013).

TURKEY:
APOSTOLIC VICARIATE OF ANATOLIA

Joining Faith with the Future

+ Paolo Bizzeti, SJ
Emeritus Apostolic Vicar of Anatolia
President of Amici del Medio Oriente ODV

I should begin by saying that my reflection on hope—the guid-ing theme of this Jubilee Holy Year chosen by Pope Francis—arises from my past ten years spent in Turkey, an important country whose events I have followed since as far back as 1980. When I arrived in southern Turkey in the autumn of 2015, ISIS terrorists were still active in the area, and frankly, there was a palpable sense of fear: the specter of ISIS threatened the fragile balance of the Middle East. The following year, on the night of July 15, 2016, part of the military attempted a coup d'état against

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. I remember waking up with a start to the sound of sirens and gunfire in the center of

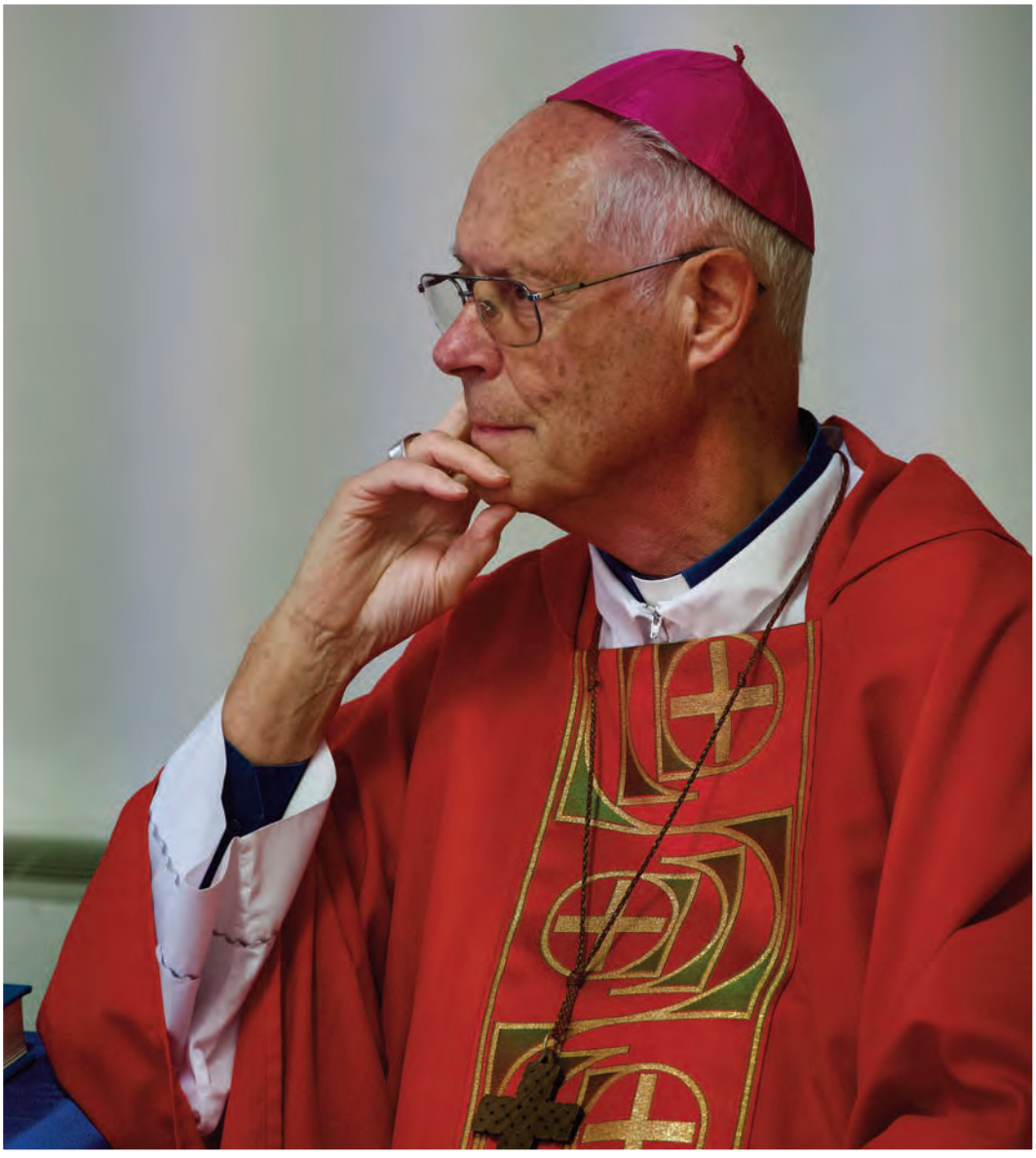
İskenderun. The beginning of my ministry in the land where Christianity grew—starting from Antioch on the Orontes—was therefore marked by events and circumstances that certainly did not inspire hope for peaceful years ahead. Moreover, my predecessor, Bishop Luigi Padovese, had been brutally murdered on June 3, 2010. In Italy, many people were quite worried for me and for the small flock that the Bishop of Rome had en-trusted to me. During these ten years there was also the terri-ble Covid-19 pandemic, during which I myself was at death's door for several days, while my dear friend, Bishop Ruben Tierrablanca of Istanbul, re-turned to the Creator. Finally, the great earthquake of Febru-ary 6, 2023—one hundred thousand deaths and at least a million displaced—severely tested all those involved in var-ious ways. As president of Car-itas Turkey, I had to face the despair of those who had lost their loved ones, all their pos-sessions, and often their jobs. In short, these were not exactly years free of upheaval! Throughout this period, how-ever, I discovered—or con-firmed—what life had already taught me: that we must join faith with the future, that is, cultivate hope, and there are plenty of reasons to do so. Let me explain.

When I was young, a song by Ornella Vanoni, Domani è un altro giorno ("Tomorrow Is Another Day"), with lyrics by Giorgio Cal-abrese, became very popular. Its first verse says:

It's one of those days that melancholy takes hold of you,
and doesn't leave you until evening.
My faith is too shaken now, but I pray and think to myself:
let's try with God too—you never know.

Even then, I wondered what the difference was between this honest openness to tomorrow—in some way to God—and the Christian hope, however weak, that lived within me. Over the years, I came to realize that one could easily agree with the wise Qohelet:

What has been will be,



and what has been done will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there anything of which one can say,
"Look, this is new"?
It has already happened
in the ages that preceded us. (Eccl 1:9–10)

I have always found it comforting that these words entered the spiritual heritage of the People of God: a naïve vision of hope is not allowed when one looks closely at cataclysms, wars, injustices, and the abuses of the powerful.

Yet it is precisely the Word of God and my years in Turkey that strengthened my theological hope. On one hand, the text of Qohelet is a necessary step toward adulthood; on the other, it must be joined with the Gospels and with the prophetic rereading of history found in the Book of Revelation.

The Gospels present to us the story of the carpenter of Nazareth, pure transparency of God's goodness (cf. Jn 1:18; 14:9), who descended into the pit in a harrowing, humiliating, and ignominious way. Everything seemed finished, and yet those who encountered him not only affirm that he conquered death and human wickedness, but are ready to lose their lives rather than break—even out of fear (cf. Heb 2:14–15)—their relationship with him. The land of Turkey has borne witness for nearly two thousand years to the hope of many disciples of Jesus. Amid countless difficulties, persecutions, divisions, and misfortunes—sometimes caused by false brethren—there are still small but significant Christian communities that nothing and no one has been able to uproot. The Good News proclaimed by Barnabas, Paul, Luke, John, Ignatius of Antioch, Papias, Polycarp, Ephrem the Syrian, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, and many others up to today, has upheld the hope that no one will ever prevent Christ from having the last word.

I have also met men and women from Afghanistan and Iran who have encountered Jesus—a Jesus so alive that they were moved to leave everything and everyone in order to know him better and to give themselves to him and to their brothers and sisters in the Churches. Today, some of them are preparing to become apostles of the Gospel in the world, wherever the Lord will send them.

I have also received the testimony of Muslims who find in Jesus and in the Blessed Virgin Mary a point of reference and inspiration. How many times have people—whom we too easily consider strangers to the Spirit of the Risen One—asked me for a blessing and offered me a word of life!

Lastly, I have met extremely poor people: refugees with no security about tomorrow, marginalized and harshly exploited, yet sustained by a hopeful outlook that carries them forward and drives them to struggle for life—often with more hope than many others in our satiated Western world who have lost the desire to invest in the future, turned in on themselves and their possessions.

Yes, the hope that the Lord Jesus gives us is alive in Turkey!

VIETNAM:
ARCHDIOCESE OF DI HÀ NÔI

Catholic Church in Vietnam: Hope Aflame Amid Trials

+ Joseph Vu Van Thien
Archbishop of Hà Nôi

A Land of Faith

Vietnam, a small nation in Southeast Asia, endures harsh natural disasters every year—storms, floods, droughts, and crop failures. Yet the Vietnamese people remain industrious, hospitable, and resilient. And amidst these challenges, something ancient continues to grow anew: a seed planted two thousand years ago is taking root in hard soil.

Catholics make up just 7–8% of Vietnam's population—roughly seven million people—but you'd never guess it. Catholic parishes are everywhere: grand, stunning structures where East meets West. The faith here is unmistakably alive. While the Church's vitality is evident in many parts of the world (Catholicism in Asia is growing as a whole), the Church in Vietnam stands out for its sheer expressiveness. It is dynamic. It is vibrant. It is growing.

Seeds of Gospel in Vietnamese Soil

The Catholic faith was received through missionaries from several religious orders—Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans, and members of the Paris Foreign Missions Society. From their first arrival in the early seventeenth century, they recognized Vietnam as fertile ground for the Gospel: Christian teachings resonated deeply with Vietnamese culture. The call to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lv 19:18; Mk 12:31) reflected a long-standing moral principle shared by the Vietnamese. Likewise, the biblical command to honor one's parents mirrored the deeply rooted tradition of filial piety. These natural points of convergence allowed Christian communities to grow rapidly.

Faith Through Fire

Like the early Christians in Rome, Vietnamese Catholics faced severe persecutions—especially under the Nguyễn dynasty in the nineteenth century, when an estimated 130,000 Christians were killed for their faith. Among them, 117 martyrs were canonized in 1988, and Blessed Andrew of Phú Yên was beatified in 2000. The history of the Church in Vietnam bears both moments of prosperity and painful chapters of suffering. Yet through every trial, it has remained faithful to its vocation of testimony—its quiet "martyrdom" lived daily through steadfast witness.

A Living Church

Nearly five centuries after the first evangelization, Vietnamese

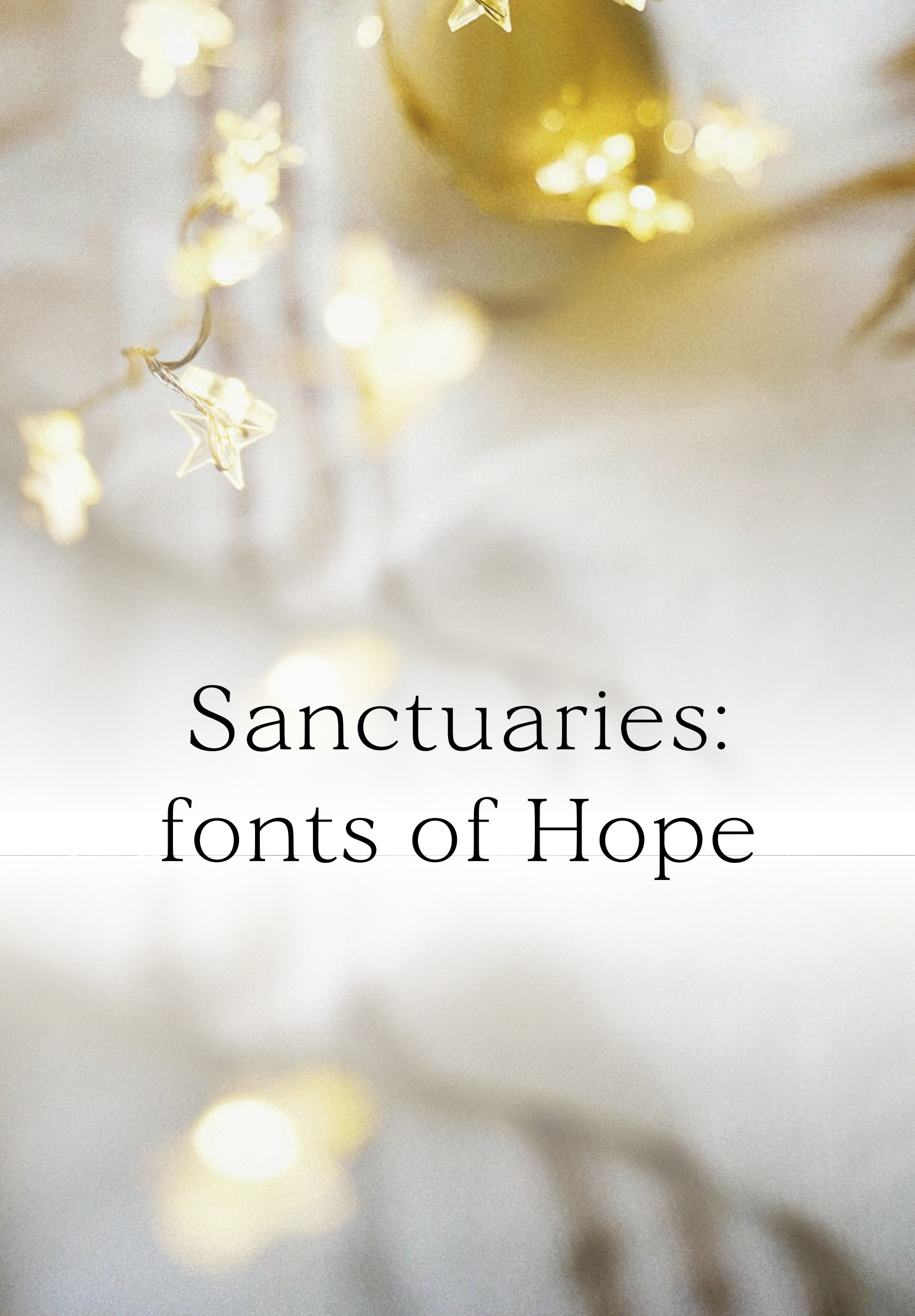
Catholics—though a minority within a population of over 100 million—play a vital role in national life. The Church contributes to culture, healthcare, education, charitable outreach, disaster relief, and economic development.

Priestly and religious vocations are numerous, and many serve communities abroad. On Sundays, churches overflow with children, youth, and families. Faith is shared and sustained within households: parents and grandparents actively hand down the tradition. Children join the Eucharistic Youth Movement at a young age, growing in service, community, and love for Christ.
Despite ongoing limitations on religious expression, the Church in Vietnam remains extraordinarily lively and buoyant—a community that is not only surviving but flourishing. Amid challenges, hope remains fervent.
The Church in Vietnam is joyful, humble, and deeply rooted in the culture. Rosaries sway from taxi mirrors. Shrines and crucifixes adorn doorways and neighborhoods. Public displays of faith are not performative—they are familial and natural. The Catholic faith belongs to the Vietnamese people—and they claim it with quiet confidence.

Christmas in Vietnam: A Celebration of Joy
Across the country, both Catholics and non-Catholics embrace Christmas with enthusiasm. For many, it has become a time of strolling through streets filled with lights, exchanging gifts, and enjoying time with family.
On Christmas Eve, thousands gather at churches for hymns and Midnight Mass. Nativity scenes fill courtyards as communities recall the birth of the Son of God. Civil authorities often visit parishes to offer greetings and flowers—sharing hopes for peace among all people.

Walking Together: Synodality and Renewal
In response to Pope Francis' call for a synodal Church, the Catholic community in Vietnam is working to strengthen parish life and empower laypeople for mission. The Archdiocese of Hanoi recently held a local synod (2021–2022) under the theme "Renewing the Life of Faith," aligning with the global Synod on Synodality.
Yet contemporary pressures—secularism, consumerism, and distorted views of freedom, love, and sexuality—are strongly felt, especially among youth. The bishops of Vietnam, in their 2025 pastoral letter, encourage the faithful to deepen their life of prayer, engage more fully with Scripture, and carry out missionary service beginning in the home and workplace.
In 2026, the Church in Vietnam will continue this path of renewal, embracing its missionary and prophetic identity rooted in Baptism. Responding to the call of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV, the Archdiocese of Hanoi also dedicates the pastoral year 2026 to renew the mission of Catholic education. That is to underline the role of families and parish communities in transmitting the faith from one generation to the next. The families and the parish communities must be the first school where the children grow and develop in all aspects of human life.

Toward the 500th Anniversary: A Jubilee of Hope
Looking ahead, the Church is preparing to commemorate 500 years of Catholic presence in Vietnam (1533–2033). Every Vietnamese Christian is invited to rediscover the beauty of the faith and reveal the sanctity of the Church—the Body of Christ—to the world.
The Jubilee Year of Hope may conclude, yet Christian hope does not fade. It rises. It calls. It sustains. Our hope is Jesus Christ Himself. Those who place their trust in Him will never be disappointed.



Sanctuaries: fonts of Hope

ANDORRA:
SANCTUARY OF OUR LADY OF MERITXELL

2025 Youth Christmas, Jubilee Christmas of Peace

The angels sing from the nativity scene in Bethlehem: "Peace on earth!" The girls and boys sing in the AINA nativity scene at the foot of the cussol on the summit of Casamanya: "In the snow a star ap-peared / that came to us / from a foreign land / on Casamanya." The star is called Meritxell, a "wild rose garden" of Peace. The young peo-ple, amidst a good, soft snow, promise through their actions to sow rose gardens of hope and peace to fill our world with love. We leave the star hanging on the Christmas tree to reaffirm and share our commitment: Aina, Seed of Peace and Hope, Commitment to Creation.

The committed young people of AINA hosted a silent meeting, the testimony of the Anhais of Doctors Without Borders, and the Prayer for Peace of Saint Francis of Assisi: "Lord, make us instruments of your peace." We sang as we do at bonfires: "Hevenu Shalom Alei-chem." To educate from hope, we must have peace in our hearts. Seeds of Hope to walk synodally in this Jubilee Year, for which Pope Francis has given the motto: "We are pilgrims of Hope. Hope never disappoints."

Seeds of Creation to love even more the Canticle of the Creatures of Saint Francis of Assisi on the 800th anniversary: "Laudato si' for our mother earth..." To celebrate the tenth anniversary of Pope Francis's encyclical Laudato si'. And at the same time, to walk together as citizens without needing to show a baptismal certificate. On the 15th, 16th, and 17th, the AINA hosted the Cosmovision group, and on the 25th, 26th, and 27th, the Fifth Trans-Pyrenean Youth Forum, which unites the Basque Country, Navarre, Aragon, Catalonia, Andorra, Occitania, and Aquitaine. Our national sanctuary is open to creation. From the foot of the Virgin of Meritxell, I contemplate the Roc de la Salve, the Mereig, the Roc del Quer, the Casamanya, the Canna forest, and, on the other side, the mountains of Encamp and Escaldes. At the center of the sanctuary's church, the round table unites the cloister of the fountain and mirrors, the Christian temple, and the cloister of the arches that support the blue sky. The Valira d'Orient accompanies contemplation with its melody, which like a lyre plays day and night for the Patron Saint of Andorra, Virtus Unita Fortior.

Returning from the nativity scene carried to the top of Casamanya, we conclude the 2025 Youth Christmas with the story of Peace. It makes me happy to share it.

There was a young man who went around talking about peace. He went to Gaza to discuss peace, but they silenced him. He went to Ukraine to discuss peace, but they silenced him. He went to visit the refugee camp for expelled workers, but abandonment and hunger silenced him.

The disoriented young man changed course. He frequented wealthy companies, rising entrepreneurial ventures, but the arms trade and the "law of the strongest" silenced him.

He headed toward a more virgin world, that of young people, but the noise of fun and good company, and even addictions, silenced him.

He entered schools. His gaze saddened when he saw children bullied by their peers who dared not speak out of fear or because they did not want to be called "spies."

The young man did not lose the illusion of sowing peace. Tired of wandering so much, he also entered the social residences of the Elderly, embittered by loneliness.

He climbed mountains where he found polluted air. He took off his shoes to dip his feet in rivers and found them poisoned. The disap-

pointed young man returned home, but his family wouldn't let him in for fear he would speak to them of peace.
Without hesitation, and rather stunned, he asked himself: What shall I do? And the inner voice of a God who loves without limits said to him: "Do not be stubborn in speaking peace; be a young man of peace. Make the eight-hundred-year-old prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi your own."
Oh! Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.
O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

The good young man listened to the prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi, and to the extent that he made it a reality, the cannons stopped thundering, the refugees were welcomed, the grandparents began to sing, the young people became volunteer supervisors to create bonds of true friendship among the children... and the family opened its doors to him. And at Christmas dinner, they sang the Christmas carol with the angels: "Peace on Earth that loves the Lord."

Mossèn Ramon de Canillo

ARGENTINA:
SHRINE OF OUR LADY, LUJÁN

Christmas in Luján: When Hope Becomes Pilgrimage

Every year, millions of pilgrims arrive at the Shrine of Our Lady of Luján, in Argentina, searching for hope, carrying with them petitions and stories of pain. They are driven—some literally, others spiritually—by a deep desire to find comfort, meaning, and especially hope. There, before the small image of the Virgin who nearly four centuries ago chose to remain on this land, they discover that they are not alone. This humble, radiant certainty is the heart of Christian hope.

This year, as the Jubilee draws to a close and the world continues to be wounded by wars, divisions, and a widespread sense of inner weariness, Christmas breaks in once again as a startling proclamation: God does not abandon us. He does not come through power or might, but through the fragility of a Child lying in a manger. What we contemplate in Bethlehem, we see every day in Luján: the tenderness of God bending down to lift up the lowly.

The hope born at Christmas—as Pope Francis has often reminded us—is not "laboratory optimism," but the certainty that God continues to act in the midst of our miseries. It does not deny suffering or hide the shadows. Rather, it enters into them. In Bethlehem, the injustices of the world did not disappear, but something new began: God decided to walk within our history from the inside.

In Luján, that promise draws near when a young mother prays for her child, when a sick person touches Mary's mantle seeking relief, when a man broken by pain rises again because he feels seen with mercy.

The Virgin of Luján is like the Star of Bethlehem for our people: she points the way to Jesus and sustains us on our weary journey. She reminds us that Christian hope is not built in isolation. It is communal, shared and contagious. Every pilgrim who advances—sometimes in tears, sometimes singing—becomes a prophet of a new human-

ity that refuses to give in to despair.
That is why speaking of Christmas from Luján means speaking of a God who continues to be born wherever there is trust, wherever someone opens their heart, wherever a hand reaches out to help another. In a time when the words "peace" and "future" seem distant, Christmas tells us that the true revolution begins in what is hidden, small, and defenseless. God becomes a Child so that no one need fear drawing near to Him.
From the National Shrine of Luján, we lift up this Christmas both a desire and a certainty: that every heart may once again hear the angels' message to the shepherds—the poor of then and of today—"Do not be afraid. For today a Savior has been born for you." This is our hope: we do not walk alone. God has made Himself our companion on the journey, and Mary gives Him to us again and again.
May this Christmas, in harmony with Pope Francis's invitation to be "witnesses of hope in times of darkness," we carry that light into a world thirsting for peace. And may we, like the pilgrims who come to Luján, continue to walk with trust, knowing that a Mother awaits us and a Child saves us.

Father Lucas García
Rector

BELGIUM: SHRINE OF OUR LADY (VIRGIN OF THE POOR), BANNEUX

Banneux – Oasis of Hope

Green, hope! The color green is the symbol of hope. It is there-fore no surprise that trees and shrubs that stay green all year round are so dear to us. Thus, the fir tree brightens the dark and cold winter season. During Advent and Christmas time, it adorns our squares, our churches, our living rooms. Boxwood is especially cherished on Palm Sunday. Once blessed, we bring it home to place it on our crucifixes or, in some regions, on the graves of our departed loved ones. Green—hope!

But it is precisely so: fir and boxwood have a hard life. Repeated droughts have weakened the firs, making them easy prey for beetles. Boxwoods are attacked by the caterpillars of the box tree moth, a nocturnal insect still unknown until recently. The symbols of hope are under attack from parasites. Is it not the same with hope itself? Is it not severely tested by repeated crises? Hope takes a beating, and the temptation to slide down the slippery slope of resignation and despair is strong.

But I know one who stands against it! When everything falls apart on our earth, she no longer remains in heaven but comes to us: the Virgin Mary always manifests her maternal presence in the dark moments of history, preventing us from sinking. On August 15th, the great Marian feast in the heart of summer, the Church turns to her in whom Christian hope is fully realized.

Banneux Notre-Dame

It is not in the heart of summer, but in the depth of winter that she leaves heaven to visit our corner of the earth.

Banneux Notre-Dame is the full name of the small Belgian village where the Virgin appeared to little Mariette Beco. Yet the name "Notre-Dame" has nothing to do with the Marian apparitions of the winter of 1933.

At the beginning of the First World War, the villagers had sought refuge under the protection of the Virgin Mary. They had heard of German reprisals against the civilian population during the conquest of Liège. The inhabitants of Banneux prayed to Mary and vowed to consecrate their village to her if she spared them from misfortune. All the inhabitants and all the houses were preserved. In 1919, the villagers kept their promise: Banneux became Banneux Notre-Dame.

The name Banneux means "banal" or "commonplace": indeed, Banneux is a village without any particular distinction. "Banal" also refers to a medieval custom whereby a lord granted his vassals the privilege of using one of his possessions. The Benedictines of the Abbey of Stavelot-Malmédy had granted the villagers the right to collect firewood in the surrounding forests. At the edge of one of these forests, a kilometer from the village, Julien Beco had built a small house for his large family. In 1933, in the garden of this house, events took place that made Banneux famous far beyond Belgium's borders. The small, quiet vil-

lage, far from major roads, became an international pilgrimage center.

Light in the Night

Between January 15 and March 2, 1933, the Virgin Mary appeared eight times to Mariette Beco, an 11-year-old girl. All the apparitions occurred in the evening, in darkness and cold. The Beautiful Lady shone with a soft light; her smile warmed the child's heart.
Four times she led the girl to a spring at the edge of the path. This spring, said the Lady, is "for all nations, for the sick." On February 11, she identified herself as the Virgin of the Poor and explained the reason for her visits: "I come to relieve suffering." She urged faith and prayer.
The Virgin offers us this new place of pilgrimage, nestled in the green, at a key moment in history. During the period of the apparitions, a certain Adolf Hitler was rising to power in Germany. One of the darkest periods in history was on the horizon. Twelve years later, war, the Holocaust, and atomic bombs left humanity decimated and the world in ruins. And this question remained: must we despair of humanity? At Our Lady of Banneux, hope is reborn, and a better future seems possible.

The Chapel of St. Michael

At the explicit request of German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, a small chapel was built in the woods of Banneux in 1960.
Adenauer had been dismissed by the Nazis from his position as mayor of Cologne and had retired to the village of Rhöndorf. In a small Marian chapel on the banks of the Rhine, during the Second World War, Christians gathered daily to pray the rosary for all prisoners of war, regardless of nationality.
To visitors in Banneux whom he welcomed in the winter of 1959, the chancellor proposed building a replica of the Rhöndorf chapel. He had the intuition that this chapel should have two patrons: St. Michael the Archangel, patron of Germany, and St. Joan of Arc, patroness of France. All pilgrims—especially Germans and French—would, in this place of grace, pray for reconciliation and peace between nations that had so often clashed violently. During the blessing of the foundation stone, Abbot Paul Adenauer, the chancellor's son, expressed this wish: "May Banneux become the epicenter of a wave of peace throughout the world. I hope that in this chapel a fervent prayer will rise for all victims of human cruelty and for all the builders of a new world."

Fr. Leo Palm
Rector

BELGIUM:
SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF BEAURAING

A radiant smile of hope

Testimony of the Virgin Mary at Beauraing

This is a place of apparitions of the Virgin Mary, recognized by the Church. From 29 November 1932 to 3 January 1933, the Virgin Mary appeared to five children from the small village of Beauraing, in southern Belgium, about thirty times—almost every day, but not on Christmas Day: on that day, they were to go to the manger to receive God's Gift in the newborn Child. Mary presented herself as the Immaculate Virgin, the Mother of God and Queen of Heaven, revealing her golden heart and inviting them to prayer and conversion.

But here is what is most touching in the children's description: "She smiled at us!" Few words, yet a gradual taming of the children, a trust, a friendship forged with them. The children looked at her, admired her, and she smiled at them: this was more than enough! Was anything else needed? Of course, questions were asked of the Virgin Mary by the children, encouraged by adults who wanted to know and understand. They whispered questions into their ears to relay. But words came later, born of the trust that was developing between the children and the Virgin Mary.

For a long time, without saying a word, Mary smiled at them. A trust was formed without a single spoken word… unless one counts the Hail Marys of the Rosary, recited by the children, one after the other, even before she appeared, and then, in a completely different tone, with a transfigured voice, when she was there. Here is, in this regard, a meaningful anecdote told by the children. At the end of about ten decades of the Rosary, the children found that this was the moment the Virgin Mary chose to leave: in fact, she was waiting for the decade to end. So the children sped up the last Hail Mary to immediately begin another decade, skipping the Glory Be and the Our Father, of little use for their purpose. During the tenth Hail Mary, the Virgin Mary opened her arms, as if preparing to leave, then, noticing the children's sudden haste, she closed them again, smiling even more radiantly, joining the game of these children who did not want her to go.

I never tire of the hopeful smile of Our Lady of Beauraing. If the children recognized the quality of the sculptor's work, it was surely—so I believe—because of the beauty of her smile. "She smiled at us," they said, and in the first days there was little else to see but that beautiful smile! Mary never lost it, day after day, and that same smile is hers even now as I write these lines, as

the reader reads them, at every moment when the pilgrim turns to her. Her smile is neither excessive nor mocking, much less derisive; above all, it is not forced. It is a simple and genuine smile, respectful and benevolent.

Simple, because natural, spontaneously accompanying the disposition of her heart: the Gospels teach us that this was precisely Mary's habitual attitude, who kept and pondered many things in her heart (cf. Lk 2:19, 51). Then, welcoming the Word of God that illuminated her life, that beautiful smile of hope appeared on her lips.

Genuine, because sincere and profound: she, the humble Handmaid of the Lord, recognized the marvels God was working in her life and in ours; her gaze always sought to see as God truly sees, going beyond appearances and pretenses. Thus, discovering the inner beauty of each person in God's plan, that wonderful smile of hope appeared on her lips.

Respectful, because it was full of great gentleness toward the children of Beauraing, just as it had been, already in the Gospels, toward every person she encountered—from her cousin Elizabeth to the servants at Cana and to so many others who, like her, accompanied her Son. Recognizing in the other a brother, a sister, a disciple, and an infinitely beloved friend, called to God's happiness regardless of what anyone said of them, that wonderful smile of hope appeared on her lips.

Above all, it was benevolent, overflowing with a deep desire for happiness for every person who turned to her: "Blessed are you who, like me, have believed all the words spoken for you, for your happiness, for your abundant and overflowing joy!" Then, translating such desires for love and conversion into this single, small sign, that wonderful smile of hope appeared on her lips.

Indeed, I never tire of the smile of Our Lady of Beauraing. Sometimes, when I celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation, I give a special penance: to go to the hawthorn and look there, for a moment, at the beautiful smile of Mary. And then everything becomes grace and joy. In the spirit of conversion and forgiveness, with a heart full of Christmas hope!

Canon Joël Rochette
Rector and Vicar General of the Diocese of Namur

BRAZIL:
NATIONAL SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF APARECIDA

Marian Shrines as Signs of Hope

Like all pilgrimage centers, Marian Shrines are places of spirituality and hope. They are signs and bear their own message, each with unique characteristics. By uncovering this message, we can understand the importance of Shrines as places of encounter with the sacred and as sources of inspiration for Christian life. Marian Shrines are the sign of the hope dwelling in those who are drawn by the tenderness of the Mother of God.

In Brazil, the National Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida represents the country's most prominent Marian devotion. More than 11 million pilgrims visit each year the Black Virgin, whose image was found in the muddy waters of the Paraíba do Sul River in 1717. For this reason, Aparecida is among the largest and most important Marian Shrines in the world.

Located in the state of São Paulo, the Shrine does not originate from an apparition as such, but from the discovery of an image. The Marian manifestation surrounding the history, devotion and worship of Aparecida is not associated with any vision or supernatural revelation. There are no accounts of seers or visionaries. In Aparecida, God's revelation is synonymous with encounter.

The hermeneutics of Aparecida, within the context of a social Mariology, highlights the inspiration that the Mother of God can offer for the social commitment of Christians. The Virgin appears in the history of Brazil's poor and responds to the cry of those seeking help, care and justice. As a sign of hope, the Shrine of Aparecida is a place where faith is celebrated, pain finds healing and the pilgrim discovers mission.

The small terracotta image is blackened due to the effects of time, river water, candle and torch smoke. It measures 37 centimeters in height, with hands joined in prayer and a compas-

sionate face. It represents Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, clothed in a blue mantle and crown. Famous are the miracles of the freed slave, the healed blind girl, the hunter saved from a jaguar and the child rescued from drowning.

On October 28, 1894, at the invitation of Dom Joaquim Arcoverde, then Bishop of São Paulo, several Redemptorist missionaries arrived from Germany and became custodians of the image. Since then, its administration and pastoral care have been entrusted to the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. On September 8, 1904, with the approval of Pope Pius X, the Black Virgin of Aparecida was crowned Queen of Brazil.

Emphasis, Methodology and Pastoral Strategy of Marian Shrines

As signs of Hope, Marian Shrines awaken faith, promote synodality and proclaim the Gospel, especially to the poor. The explicit preaching of the Word of God, the promotion of citizenry through social works, the expressions of faith and popular piety, team-based pastoral ministry and sacramental life are essential elements of the evangelizing mission of the Shrines.

The pastoral strategies of Shrines—Marian or otherwise—are rooted in hospitality and evangelization. More than a simple slogan, hospitality and evangelization are pastoral pillars. The very purpose of every Shrine is to welcome pilgrims well and send them forth on mission, integrating them into the Church's missionary action.

In harmony with the General Guidelines for the Evangelizing Action of the Church in Brazil, the pastoral emphasis of the Shrine of Aparecida offers pilgrims the opportunity for a profound experience of God, highlighting the Trinitarian dimension of faith. The Marian Shrine, a House of Prayer and a House for Pilgrims of Hope, seeks to center faith in Jesus Christ—the Savior who, in the power of the Spirit, shows the way to the Father.

As a Shrine—a place of brief yet restorative and meaningful passage in the life of every pilgrim—we primarily offer the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. Strengthened by these celebrations, we seek to send the faithful back to their home communities more aware and more willing to serve in pastoral ministries.

On December 27, 2015, speaking about pilgrimages to Shrines during his homily for the Mass of Families, Pope Francis reminded us that "A pilgrimage does not end when we arrive at our destination, but when we return home and resume our everyday lives, putting into practice the spiritual fruits of our experience." The Shrine is not only a destination—it is a starting point!

In the mystery of the Incarnation, when God came into this world, He desired a mother for Himself. God was born of a woman, just as each of us was born one day! To venerate the Blessed Virgin through the mystery of Christ is an indispensable task.

Christmas celebrates the mercy of God. The pilgrimage we make to Marian Shrines reveals who we are: we are people on a journey, and along the way we discover ourselves. We discover that we need God at every step of the pilgrimage of our lives.

Father Eduardo Catalfo, CSSR
Rector

PHILIPPINES:
SHRINE OF THE VIRGIN OF PEACE AND GOOD JOURNEY, ANTIPOLO

Hope That Walks Beside Us: A Christmas Reflection from Antipolo

+Ruperto Cruz Santos, D.D.
Bishop of Antipolo and CBCP Episcopal Promoter of Stella Maris-Philippine

As the Jubilee Year draws to a close, we find ourselves standing at a threshold—between the graces we have received and the journey that continues. In this sacred pause, Christmas arrives not as a conclusion, but as a quiet beginning. It is the season when heaven bends low to meet the earth, and hope takes the form of a Child. In a world often without peace, where conflict, division, and uncertainty seem to echo louder than the angels' song, Christmas offers a message that does not deny suffering but dares to speak light into it. The birth of Christ is not a distant memory; it is a present reality. Emmanuel—God with us—remains the heartbeat of our hope. This hope is not abstract. It is incarnate. It walks beside us in the weary pilgrim, the grieving mother, the struggling youth, and the silent prayers of the poor. It is the hope that has drawn millions to the International Shrine of Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage in Antipolo. There, under the gaze of the Virgin who journeyed across oceans, we witness people who continue to walk in faith—bringing their burdens, their thanksgiving, and their longing for peace. Antipolo is more than a destination; it is a testimony. Each candle lit, each footstep taken, each whispered prayer beneath the image of Our Lady is a proclamation: that hope is not extinguished. That even in the tremors of life, faith can stand firm.

That in every tear, hope can rise. And that in every wound, healing can flow from the heart of our compassionate God. As we celebrate Christmas, let us remember that the manger was not a place of comfort, but of radical trust. Mary and Joseph did not find peace in their surroundings, but in the presence of the One who is Peace. So too must we. The world may not offer us peace, but Christ does. And He offers it not as the world gives, but as a gift that transforms hearts and communities. May this Christmas renew our courage to hope. May it inspire us to be bearers of peace, pilgrims of mercy, and witnesses to the love that was born in Bethlehem and continues to be born in every act of compassion. And as we leave behind the Jubilee Year, may we carry forward its light—walking with Our Lady of Antipolo, toward the God who journeys with us.

FRANCE: SANCTUARY OF THE HOLY CURÉ, ARS-SUR-FORMANS

"I will show you the way to Heaven"

This path of hope, opened by Father Jean-Marie Vianney in 1818 to the young Antoine Givre, is also the path of the manger, followed by the shepherds and the Magi. Speaking about Christmas, the Holy Curé of Ars said that "Jesus Christ, far from seeking what might exalt Him in the eyes of men, desired, on the contrary, to be born in obscurity and forgetfulness; He wished that the poor shepherds should be secretly informed of His birth by an Angel, so that the first acts of adoration He would receive might come from the lowliest among men."

The village of Ars, north of Lyon, became the cradle of a renewal of faith and Christian life in the first half of the 19th century. In this small village of 258 souls, a young priest of 32, Father Vianney, was sent to spread the love of God, as requested by the Vicar General of Lyon who appointed him there. For 41 years, John Mary Vianney devoted himself entirely to God — and equally to humanity. It is said that in February 1818, as he approached the village, lost in the cold fog and searching for the road, it was a young shepherd, Antoine Givre, who guided him. "You have shown me the way to Ars; I will show you the way to Heaven," were the words Antoine received in gratitude. The first act of Father Vianney was to kneel and kiss the ground of his new parish — a gesture that Saint John Paul II, then a young priest on pilgrimage to Ars, adopted from the Holy Curé and kept throughout his life. "How small it is!" murmured the Curé of Ars to himself. An inner voice added: "And this village will not be large enough to hold all those who will come here..."

He began his ministry by opening the church at 4 a.m., where the villagers could once again see light after so long. It was a gift for the few who had remained faithful, those who had lost hope in such a providential arrival. Most of the inhabitants of Ars had forgotten even the most basic practices of Christian life — their livestock and the tavern feasts being their only concerns or forms of amusement.

"Grant me the grace of the conversion of my parish."

The Sanctuary of Ars is unique, for it is, in fact, a parish that became a sanctuary. In this rural setting, it was not miracles that drew people in,

but above all the attitude of a priest who lived life to the fullest — in simplicity and total self-giving — the extraordinary in the ordinary rhythm of daily life. Having reached the priesthood with great difficulty in a harsh post-revolutionary context, yet with intelligence and realism, Saint John Mary Vianney felt unworthy of the pastoral ministry, a burden that weighed heavily on him. Far from despairing, he chose to surrender himself completely to the Lord's mercy. "Man is a poor creature who must ask everything of God," he said.
He remained, all his life, like a child in the hands of God. Perhaps this is why so many come to Ars "in search of a father" and leave renewed by his great mercy — the mercy that made him so close to the small and humble. Indeed, one approaches the mystery of Ars only in humility, just as one recognizes the Savior in the manger by kneeling.

"The priesthood is the love of the Heart of Jesus."

Even today, Ars continues to attract pilgrims and visitors. When Pope Benedict XVI opened the Year for Priests in 2009 in Rome, he asked to be accompanied by the relic of the Curé of Ars's heart. A year later, 500,000 people traveled to Ars to venerate the Saint's relics, to go to confession, to pray for priests, and to rediscover how God's mercy is a torrent overflowing and sweeping away everything in its path. The Jubilee Year of the Universal Church also coincided with the centenary of the canonization of three saints: Thérèse of Lisieux, John Eudes, and John Mary Vianney.

"This Christian heritage," wrote Pope Leo XIII to the Catholics of France, "still belongs to you; it continues to permeate your culture deeply and remains alive in many hearts." So much so that in October 2025, in Ars, 300 priests deepened their understanding of this mystery of grace — that of the Holy Patron of all the priests of France — spending several days with this humble parish priest, this sublime "old child" so dear to Bernanos, for whom, at Christmas, Jesus Christ revealed Himself as "gentle and humble of heart." It was fraternal charity and simplicity that impressed the priests gathered there, as well as the volunteers who welcomed them, at times offering them hospitality. Considering the weight of the trials experienced by priests in France in recent years, one realizes how the evangelical life lived daily could become a kind of early Christmas balm.

Christmas! Joyful news, concluded the Holy Curé of Ars, "that the Angel announces to us from heaven through the shepherds — for with it we have everything: heaven, the salvation of our souls, and our God!"

Father Rémi Griveaux
Current Curé of Ars and Rector

FRANCE:
SHRINE OF THE CHILD JESUS, BEAUNE

The "Little King of Grace"

Founded in 1619, the Carmel of Beaune, located in the Diocese of Dijon, was originally situated in the center of the city, where it remained until the French Revolution. Driven out by the revolutionary turmoil, the Carmelites first lived in hiding, dressed as laywomen, before eventually moving into their present monastery on Rue de Chorey — a former wine estate with vaulted cellars said to have belonged to the Knights of Malta. They purchased it in 1836, enlarged it, and built the main wing and the novitiate.

The chapel of the Carmel today, chosen by the Archbishop of Dijon as a Jubilee Church, is a place of prayer dedicated to the Child Jesus. His statue reigns majestically within a glass globe, dressed according to the liturgical seasons, wearing a crown topped with a cross. He holds a scepter adorned with a lily, a sign of His mysterious kingship. The "Little King of Grace" is one of the principal miraculous "Child Jesus" figures, along with the Santo Bambino of Aracoeli in Rome and the famous Infant of Prague. The statue was given by Baron de Renty to Sister Marguerite du Saint-Sacrement, a Carmelite of Beaune, declared Venerable in 1905.

Venerable Marguerite entered the Carmel of Beaune at the age of twelve. She experienced terrible sufferings of both soul and body, but also the grace of receiving an apparition of the Child Jesus during her solemn profession on June 24, 1635. In a time of great trials for France, marked by epidemics and wars, Jesus confided to Marguerite: "It is through the merits of the mystery of my infancy that you will overcome all difficulties."

Marguerite then founded the "Family of the Holy Child Jesus," based on the recitation of the "Little Crown," which consists in meditating on the mysteries of the Lord's Holy Childhood: the Incarnation, the stay of the Word in Mary's womb, the Nativity, His dwelling in the stable, His circumcision, the Epiphany, the Presentation in the Temple, the flight into Egypt and the return to Nazareth, His hidden life, His travels with Joseph and Mary, and His stay in the Temple among the doctors.

To the right and left of the altar in the sanctuary, the Virgin and Saint Joseph stand beside the great cross of the Crucified — the central axis of the building. "From the manger to the cross, God entrusts us with a profound mystery," says the Christmas hymn. Christ was born outside the city, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger; He died outside the city, wrapped in burial cloths and laid in a tomb. His birth and death express God's gift of Himself into human hands, in utter poverty and humility. "He took so completely the last place that no one will ever be able to take it from Him," said Abbé Huvelin to Saint Charles de Foucauld. And He has received from the Father the first place, which no one can surpass: "…the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 14:11).

To come and adore the Child Jesus is to contemplate the humility of God, who reigns through His cross, even into the depths of

death. "A straw from His manger, a strip of His swaddling cloths, is enough to make His enemies tremble," said Marguerite of the Blessed Sacrament.
In The Portal of the Mystery of the Second Virtue, Charles Péguy depicts Hope as a little girl:
"What surprises me," says God, "is Hope. And I cannot get over it. Hope is a little girl of nothing. She came into the world last Christmas. This little girl of nothing — she alone, carrying the others, crossed the worlds gone by... Hope does not go for herself. Hope does not go alone. To hope, my daughter, one must be blessed, one must have received a great grace."
No doubt it is this "great grace" that pilgrims come to seek on the Jubilee path to the sanctuary of Beaune. For them, the "child Hope" is a Child — a little King of Grace, who seems insignificant to those who measure life only by what can be seen, weighed, or counted, but who is the Almighty, for the power of God is made perfect in weakness. Here the faithful come to weep before the Child of the manger; here they come to sing God's praises. In turn, we pass from laughter to tears, from great sorrows to thanksgiving, but amid the changes of our fleeting lives, contemplation of the Child King allows us to enter the stability of the heart, into supernatural peace, into the certainty of the Lord's victory — the Lord who reveals Himself to the lowly and the humble.
"Help me to forget myself entirely so that I may rest in You, motionless and at peace, as if my soul were already in eternity!" said Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity, Carmelite of Dijon. The sanctuary of the Little King is a place of hope, helping us to overcome the temptation of despair, the withdrawal into our darkness, and the anguish before the world's obscurity. Not through our own strength, but by rediscovering the spirit of childhood — trust in the work of God and in His divine Providence. "I have lost too much of my childhood," wrote Georges Bernanos. "I can recover it only through holiness."

Fr. Dominique Garnier
Rector

FRANCE:
SANCTUARY OF OUR LADY OF LAUS, SAINT-ÉTIENNE-LE-LAUS

Christmas Opens Us to Hope

The Jubilee of the "Pilgrims of Hope" began on December 24, 2024, and will end on January 6, 2026.

These dates place the mystery of Christmas at the heart of the theme chosen by the Holy Father.
This period, however, has also seen terrible conflicts erupt across the world. Uncertainty and trials have marked our Jubilee journey.

Faced with the opacity of sin, amid the confusion born of the loss of moral and institutional reference points, the mystery of the Incarnation emerges—reminding everyone of the freshness of God's initiative and of the plan of salvation offered to all through the Father's goodness. Hope, therefore, keeps open the possibility of happiness. Yet it cannot control the future; it presupposes total trust in God. All the hope of the people of the Bible lies there: they experience God's fidelity to His promises through trials. This is the foundation of hope. God promised a Messiah. At Christmas, He fulfills His promise. Hope now has a face and a name: Jesus Christ. To celebrate the birth of the Savior is to celebrate the solidity of hope in the fragility of our humanity. God does what He says. Christmas, then, becomes the feast of hope. God is near, He is faithful.

The birth of a child in a human family is the fruit of everyone's hope. Hope always has the face of a child. Like a child, hope is open to all possibilities—it is always full of wonder. Hope is powerful; it stands at the center of our journey of faith. It sustains and animates us. In this sense, Christ is our hope (1 Tim 1:1). Pope Francis, drawing on this affirmation of St. Paul, continued: "This hope—it's curious—does not belong to us," because "hope is not a possession that we can put in our pocket! No, it doesn't belong to us. It is a gift to be shared, a light to be passed on" (January 10, 2025).
Christ comes to us at Christmas as a child who is given to us, but who does not belong to us—as a light to be transmitted. He is hope and life.
Commercial Christmas is so intrusive that it leaves little room for

hope, eager as it is to burden us with material goods. We must therefore contemplate the Child in the manger and let our eyes meet His. It is then that the innocence of God restores our hope. This Child does not come to judge the world, but to save it (John 12:44–50). And it is His innocence that will save the world. The theological virtue of hope rests on the certainty that weakness is stronger than strength. Violence is never a victory. Christmas bears witness to this even through the blood of the Holy Innocents, whom we commemorate at this time. They could not yet speak, and yet they already bore witness to Christ and proclaimed the hope of salvation. In the heart of the conflicts that devastate our world, so many innocent children remind us that no civilization is possible without the sacred respect for the smallest among us.

The message of Christmas is thus an invitation to look upon the world with new eyes. The conversion to which the crib calls us is that of a renewed gaze—a gaze that is never weary or indifferent. Jesus invites us to keep watch, that is, to maintain an attentive gaze. We are called to enter into Christ's own way of seeing the world—a gaze never accustomed to evil or sin, a gaze that offers peace. With the joyful coming of the Savior, Christmas opens human history to the goodness of God. History is never finished. It is to be built—sustained by the hope of seeing love drive out every form of hatred.

The return of Christmas each year is truly necessary to open our hearts and minds to a hope that does not give up, but reaches out to others. Peace is possible. Of course, it is a long-term endeavor requiring patience. We must rediscover patience as the art of living daily life. It is not a matter of cultivating passivity or apathy. Patience is a lever that can convert us to hope. Patience can be considered a Christian virtue.

Looking to the future—and thus to endurance—is difficult for many of our contemporaries, immersed as they are in the cult of the instant. But in this light, endurance means relinquishing control over the future. One cannot commit to what is unknown. Yet the Child of Bethlehem does not come to sanctify a single moment—the 25th of December each year. Christmas does not come to express a fleeting moment of emotion, but to impress within us a relationship with time perceived in its permanence.

In the face of the uncertainty of the future, Christmas returns each year to give meaning to the passage of time and to nourish our patience. Patience dwells in the hearts of the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph. The event that fills their hearts with wonder illuminates not only a moment of emotion, but the long hope of the people of the Bible—and already immerses them in the eternal joy of a hope fully realized, in the peace of the Kingdom of God revealed in the manger.

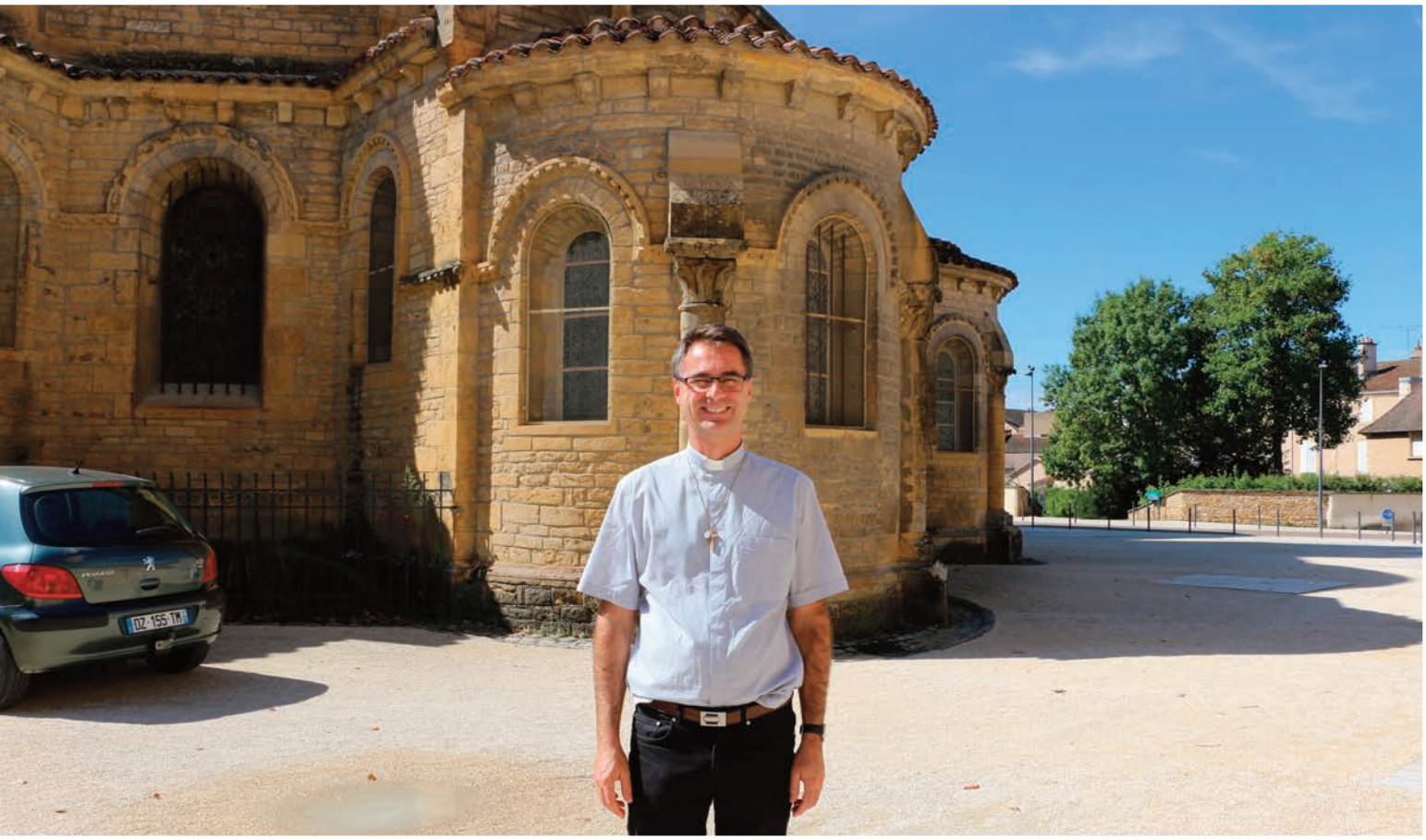
Hope illumines our vision of the past, sustains our present, and projects us into the future. It therefore engages our whole being and our entire experience in a conversion that allows us to enter into God's plan for us and for the world—a plan of love and peace. The impossible becomes possible when God dwells among us. A new world has already been born. Christmas is truly the feast of Hope.

Father Michel Desplanches
Rector

FRANCE:
SHRINE OF THE SACRED HEART, PARAY-LE-MONIAL

If you believe, you will see the power of the Heart of Jesus!

"I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!" (Luke 12:49). This is the Gospel proclaimed in the liturgy of 24 October 2024, the day Dilexit nos was published. It is this fire of the Holy Spirit, flowing from the Heart of Jesus, whose power and gentleness we experience daily at the Shrine of Paray-le-Monial. Is it an exaggeration to say that we are wit-nessing a true springtime of devotion to the Sacred Heart in France? The impact of the Jubilee commemorating the 350th an-niversary of the Apparitions to Saint Margaret Mary, followed by the extraordinary success of the documentary Sacred Heart, directed by Steven and Sabrina Gunnell, are signs of this renewal. What is happening that moves crowds of people to flock to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, when this devotion—once considered out-dated and obsolete—was on the verge of being forgotten?



"By his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). The Lord's Heart is a wounded heart, able to reach us in our most intimate and painful wounds. But the mortal wound of his Heart does not have the last word, for "at once there came out blood and water" (John 19:34), a sign of the Lord's victory and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus knows what it means to be betrayed—He was betrayed by Judas; He was abandoned by the apostles. He was unjustly condemned by Pilate; rejected by the people who shouted "Crucify him!" only days after acclaiming and blessing the One who comes in the name of the Lord; he was humiliated by the soldiers. And yet He is able to reach those wounded by life. He leans toward them and comforts them, for His Heart has remained gentle and humble, and He loved to the end.

Such is the Hope offered by devotion to the Sacred Heart: there is no wound God cannot heal, no tear He cannot dry, no pain He cannot console, no failure from which He cannot raise us up, no sin He cannot forgive. This is the hope that does not disappoint, and of which the rivers of living water flowing from the pierced Heart are the sign. This is "the restorative power of the Heart of Christ" evoked by Pope Francis (DN 200).

"He appeared to me and let me rest for a long time upon His Heart," recounts Saint Margaret Mary. What she experienced mystically, we are all called to live with great simplicity, by responding to Christ's invitation: "Come to me, all you who labor

and are burdened,* and I will give you rest.Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves" (Mt 11:28–29). These burdens may be those of family divisions, grief, violence suffered, or even sexual assault.

Numerous testimonies show how, in Paray, God visits those wounded by life. The Lord visits and transforms; He consoles and heals hearts. Such is the story of this woman who came on pilgrimage last summer: "For two years I had lost the sense of my life. My husband and I were separated for professional reasons and on the verge of divorce due to frequent arguments. I found rest in the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The Lord took care of everything. He brought us back together as a family: my husband left his job to join us and started his own business. Every day we experience divine Providence."

Or a mother, inconsolable after the death of her daughter: "When I left the Chapel of the Apparitions, I was filled with joy. I had rediscovered the joy of living. It was incomprehensible, and I myself could hardly believe it. The Lord had comforted me and healed all my sorrow."

An experience of consolation. An experience of liberation—and also of forgiveness. Such was the case for an elderly woman, deeply moved: "For decades I had harbored resentment toward my father. I blamed him for raising me and my siblings in fear and for not making our mother happy. I wanted to forgive him, but I couldn't. At Paray I received this grace. And thanks to the Jubilee, I was able to make the jubilee pilgrimage, asking for the plenary indulgence for him. It was a liberation for me. Thank you, Lord!"

Or again, this young woman, victim of sexual violence by a teacher during adolescence: "During the jubilee pilgrimage, in the Chapel of the Apparitions, everything I had lived through came back to me. God showed me His unconditional love for me. Yes, the Lord loved me despite everything. I had never lost my dignity before Him. On the contrary, He suffered with me and continues to suffer with me for what I endured. I understood that His Heart was pierced by my cry—the cry I could not let go."

"If you believe, you will see the power of my Heart." At Paray we witness the fulfillment of this promise made by Jesus to the Visitandine. The Heart of Jesus remains more open than ever so that all may come and drink with joy at the living springs of Salvation.

Fr. Etienne Kern
Rector

FRANCE:
SANCTUARY OF OUR LADY, PONTMAIN

The Mother of Hope

In the shadow of the walls that divide peoples and the violence of the powerful of this world, the Prince of Peace comes as a fragile light. Yet no human being, no barrier can stop Him. He came in our flesh to tear down the walls of hatred and fear, so that beneath our feet the holy ground of brotherhood may be illuminated.

The child we celebrate began His life and ended it under persecution. And yet He left us the joy of hope. If so many nations are in turmoil, so many citizens face social hardship or are burdened by age and illness, so many parts of creation suffer, we will not give in, nor will we forget to look upward. Tender gestures of kindness, bold acts, and powerful words manifest love and truth, peace and justice.

While human hope is often strewn with illusions, Christian hope is given to us in God's promises. Our mission is to recognize its signs. "Hope sees what is not yet and what will be," wrote the poet Charles Péguy. As Hebrews 6:19 reminds us: "This hope is like an anchor for the soul, firm and secure." In his New Year's greetings for 2025, Bishop Matthieu Dupont of Laval, France, invited us to "cast with joy the anchor of hope toward heaven."

To convert our gaze means always looking at our world and our Church from above. Benedict XVI, in Spe Salvi, stated: "The fact that this future exists, Heaven, changes the present. The present is touched by the future reality." This is our mission: "If we ourselves do not have this hope, how can you expect the world to live from it?"

This is the story of the ordinary people of Pontmain in western France, who passed from despair to hope after the apparition of the Virgin Mary on the evening of 17 January 1871. The preceding months had been dreadful: a scorching summer with no harvest and no hay, followed by a very harsh winter; the Franco-Prussian War raging at the region's doorstep, mobilizing 38 young men from the village, none of whom had been heard from; an earthquake and threatening auroras; and above all, spiritual desolation. At the previous Sunday Mass, no one joined Father Michel Guérin, the parish priest, in singing the hymn

Mother of Hope. At Vespers, as the four candles on the Virgin's altar were being lit, a man in the back of the church shouted: "Don't light them, Father! It's useless! What's the point of praying? God doesn't hear us…" Who could restore hope to all these desperate people?

On 17 January, around 5:30 p.m., the encounter with the Beautiful Lady began, seen only by the children. As the apparition unfolded, hope grew. At the heart of this silent three-hour meeting, Our Lady of Pontmain left a written message:

"But pray, my children. God will answer you very soon.

My Son allows Himself to be moved."

On the morning of 18 January, it was still cold. The day seemed like any other. Father Guérin asked the two young seers who had come to serve Mass: "Did you sleep well?" They replied, "Of course, Father." In fact, the entire village was at peace, and witnesses attested: "Do you know what everyone said that morning in Pontmain? 'We slept well!'"

The anguish of the previous days had vanished.

Yet, seemingly, nothing had changed. The Prussians were still nearby. There was still no news of the 38 young soldiers. The cold remained bitter, but fear was gone. Observing this, Bishop Wicart of Laval wrote a few weeks later: "A grace, fruitful with blessings, had permeated everything, emanating from hearts."

Even today, pilgrims come to pray to Our Lady of Pontmain. Like the mother who lost her only daughter to cancer on the night of Easter two years ago. She had prayed for her healing at the foot of the Virgin Mary's statue. She was devastated and bewildered. But little by little, she discovered a profound bond with the Mother of God, who had also lost her only Son. She came to know that God does not first answer our expectations, but always our needs. Since then, she has been leading Sunday services at the sanctuary. The Lord has filled her with signs of communion and grace so that she may continue to be a witness full of hope despite her suffering.

The hope dwelling within us is stronger than the despair that seems to overwhelm us. "Our only human obligation is to open wide clearings of peace within ourselves and extend them little by little until this peace radiates to others. And the more peace there is within human beings, the more there will be in this world in turmoil," wrote Etty Hillesum.

Under the gaze of Our Lady of Pontmain, Mother of Hope, we share with you the Joy brought by the Child Jesus: praying in a fraternal church, welcoming the Good News, contemplating the signs of the Holy Spirit. Merry Christmas! A Happy and Holy New Year 2026!

Father Vincent Gruber, OMI

Rector

GERMANY: CONSOLING SHRINE OF THE AFFLICTED, KEVELAER

A Christmas of Hope in Uncertain Times

"The greatest things," Albert Schweizer once said, "are not born when everything is certain, but when someone dares to hope despite everything!" Perhaps this statement captures the senti-ments and feelings of many of the protagonists presented to us in the Christmas Gospels. Everyone would have agreed: neither the situation, nor the circumstances, nor the setting of Jesus' birth convey the slightest sense of security. Everything begins in uncertainty. God focuses on Mary. A simple, young, naive woman. Her family situation with Joseph: uncertain. But first she says a resounding YES. Then, after everything becomes clear to him in a dream, so does Joseph. The child is born during the journey. There is no room for them in the inn. They find their

All this is possible because people have remained open to the principle of hope in their concrete lives. In the twists and turns and turmoil. In questions and requests. On the run, without a homeland.

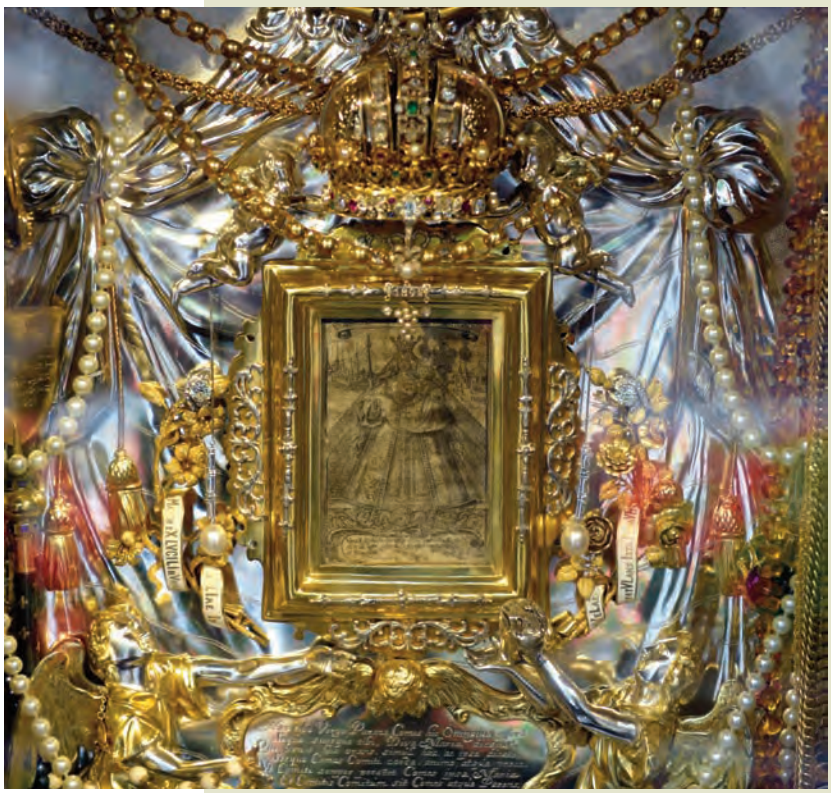
The Holy Year 2025 concludes these weeks. What Pope Francis inaugurated, Pope Leo concludes. In between, there are countless stories of pilgrimages of hope. People have set out. They have left their worries and daily routines, their overload, fear, and anxiety. People have set out on pilgrimages to sacred places. In the midst of a world torn

only safety in a stable. No safety! Without a doubt. The shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem: insecure in the fields. The Magi, cultured and studied people. They too discover it at the latest when they encounter Herod's cunning: even on a sacred mission, we are not safe. The Christmas romance with the ox and the donkey ends at the latest when the young family is forced to flee to Egypt before Herod's wrath, who has long since become a murderer of children and of the future. It wasn't safe! Yet, in this uncertainty, God writes history with the history of this humanity. These are simple, ordinary people. These are circumstances without frills. It is the province of Bethlehem. No one had ever heard of this provincial place, and no one would ever have expected it. Yet it is precisely in this context that one of the greatest stories of our time unfolds. God becomes man!

apart by all sorts of worries. There is war and crisis zones on this planet. In many places, hatred and radicalization are felt. There are concerns for our creation and the duty to preserve and protect it. Yet the effects of climate change are felt everywhere. Amid this great uncertainty of recent decades, Christianity has proclaimed a Holy Year. The motto could not have been more apt. We need the willingness to become pilgrims. If we are touched and moved by the message of the Gospel, we must be moved and become pilgrims ourselves. We must want to change something. First in ourselves, then in the world. And to do that, we also need ourselves. Despite all the promises that God will never abandon us, we need engines of hope within us. Despite all the circumstances. This requires courage. Why? Because we experience this uncertainty even today. We feel just like the peo-

ple in the Christmas Gospel.
The questions remain similar: with Mary, we ask ourselves: "Am I the right one? Am I not insignificant and humble?" With Joseph, we ask ourselves: "Isn't it better to leave? Better to play it safe!" With the shepherds, we cannot trust our eyes and ears. "Are there really heavenly hosts and angels in the fields of our daily lives?" With the astrologers, we remain driven and restless. We search and explore. We search and search and search until the star rises in the darkest night, showing us the way.
This often overwhelms and frightens us.
The times are uncertain. Not in the world, and probably not even within ourselves. Yet God wants and can continue to write a great story within us. If only we set out on a pilgrimage.
In Kevelaer, where we have the privilege of working, a pilgrimage site in the Lower Rhine region of Germany, around 800,000 pilgrims come every year. From May to September, they are drawn to a postcard-sized sacred image. It depicts the Mother of God as Consolatrix afflictorum, comforter of the afflicted. People pour out their worries and fears, their desires and requests before the small image in the center of the chapel square. They light candles and contrast the small, defenseless light with the great darkness. They ask for comfort. Comfort, ultimately, is not a cure. Those who undertake the journey back from the pilgrimage are greeted at home by the same daily routine, the same daily challenges they left behind when they left. Consolation is not a cure. But comfort is. Solitude is the first moment of crisis in which we can regain hope. Why? Because in our places of pilgrimage and in our faith, it is clear to us: God continues to create great things. He still needs us. Ultimately, this requires a willingness to be flexible. Hope re-quires spontaneity, to adapt to the current situation. That is why Mary and Joseph had the strength to flee after the birth with the child. For the love of life! And that is why the Magi trusted their instincts and did not return to Herod. Those who make pilgrimages of hope often return home by a different route. Their homeland is no better, no safer, afterward. But hope transforms and gives strength.
Let us pray this Christmas for openness to these paths of hope in our lives. For many, it will be a celebration in uncertain times. But the star was not mistaken when it stopped precisely over this uncertain stable. So said the late Bishop of Aachen, Klaus Hemmerle. Here, the great future is born for us. Christ, the Savior, is here. This is what he is: divine!

Stefan Dördelmann, Cathedral Canon, Rector of Pilgrimage Dr. Bastian Rütten, Pastoral Consultant for Pilgrimage Management



IRELAND:
SHRINE IRELAND'S INTERNATIONAL EUCHARISTIC AND MARIAN SHRINE, KNOCK

With God everything will be fine

I recently read a newspaper article about the current state of the world. I made a note of what was in it because it echoed what we may all feel from time to time. The writer was reflecting on a conversation he had with a friend of his:
"No more than the rest of us, he (his friend) can make no more sense out of it but feels that this upside-down world, having lost it's bearings, is rushing towards something it might not be able to stop."
Another person said to me recently:
"I wish I could pull the duvet over my head, hibernate, and hope that sensible people were in charge of the world when I woke up!"
There are many reasons we could despair of humanity with all the wars, threats of war, famines and human made misery we continue to inflict on each other in many parts of the world as well as the violence we inflict upon this poor planet of ours. It's hard not to be apocalyptic about it all and reach for that duvet! The hibernation period could take a while.
Suffering runs the course of the familiar, it happens in the midst of everyday life and yet life continues on. Reflecting on how suffering happens, be it global or indeed personal, while ordinary life carries on the poet W. H. Auden wrote how the Old Masters always depicted this in their paintings:
"About suffering they were never wrong, the Old Masters: how well they understood it's human position; how it takes place while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along … they never forgot that even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course …" (Musee des Beaux Arts)
And Yet!
And yet in spite of everything that happens to make us despair of the world, there is hope and the possibility for good. Out of our celebration of the birth of the Christ Child at Christmas we draw hope, Why? Because God never abandons us to despair if we believe in Him. He became one of His own creatures, one of us, to show us our true destiny, our way home to Him. We are not alone, nor abandoned nor unloved. We are cherished in His

eyes even when we lose our way and perpetrate horrid acts such as war, violence and destruction upon each other.

God became one of us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth over 2,000 years ago. By doing so God, through His Son Jesus, transformed the world forever, He revolutionized our hearts, minds and souls to be better people. To be more charitable, more understanding, more generous and more loving to those around us and to the wider world. To echo St Athanasius – "He became what we are so that He might make us what He is." Christmas then offers us the hope of a better future, to be the people God wishes us to be and in doing so we can believe that things can be better, can change and we can be the agents of that change for the common good. Christian hope is not just about being optimistic, looking on the bright side, its basis is in the reality of the here and now with our gaze fixed on eternity. Hope in this sense is an act of faith and trust in a loving God who will help us to reflect His love and care to a broken world. On a concrete level our hope lies in our ability to increase our concern to improve things, to roll up our sleeves and forge ahead with the conviction that Jesus, who was born to us, the Prince of Peace, is at the centre of all we do.

While the past number of years have indeed challenged our faith in humanity in a time of turmoil, pain, war and disillusionment, we face these challenges as Christians, not by pulling a duvet over our heads and hoping for the best but, by virtue of our baptism, engaging in our participation in the life of the Church and as a result the life of the world. Into a world bound by sin and despair, the birth of the Christ Child is a protest against the jaded view that nothing will change or improve, it is

God's protest of letting things be and showing us, through faith, that all will be well.

Fr. Richard Gibbons
Rector Knock Shrine

ITALY:
SHRINE OF SANTA MARIA DEL FONTE, CARAVAGGIO

A Sign of the Lord's Nearness

The infancy Gospels of the Lord Jesus are filled with charac-ters who set out on a journey and who, in some way, can be called "Pilgrims of Hope." Mary sets out after the angelic announcement to visit her cousin Elizabeth: Mary hopes to be of help to her elderly cousin and to find confirmation of the words she received from the angel. When Mary arrives, she brings the joy of the encounter with her Son Jesus. Joseph and Mary set out toward Bethlehem to comply with the Roman census. There, in a most poor and precarious shelter, Mary gives birth to the One who is the reason for all hope.
The shepherds set out, moved by the angelic proclamation, to go see the Child wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, from which He offers peace and hope to people of every time and place.
The holy Magi will also set out, guided by the hope of being able to adore the newborn King and to offer Him the prophetic gifts they have brought with them. The journey of each of them mirrors the journey of life, open to the revela-tion of the mystery of God.
For just over a month I have been Rector of the Regional Shrine of Santa Maria del Fonte at Caravaggio—located in the province of Bergamo, though belonging to the Diocese of Cremona. In my brief experience, I have already met many people who have reached the Shrine as pilgrims of hope. Each of them carries behind them their own story of joy or suffering and comes before the Virgin Mary to entrust to her a prayer of thanksgiving or a plea for help.

The Shrine is a particular fragment of the world. Some come regularly because they have found a welcoming home there; some come to ask for a sign of God's Providence in a difficult moment of their lives; some intercede for a family member in grave difficulty; some entrust to Mary the joys and strug-gles of married and family life; some, in a moment of deep darkness, seek a little light through faith; some implore the grace of conversion for themselves or for a child or grand-child who has lost the meaning of Christian life; some come to receive the sacramental grace of Confession; some come in search of a space of silence, prayer and peace, to step away from a routine in which it often becomes a luxury to find time for oneself and for the Lord.
Yesterday, while reading the prayers left by pilgrims before the image of Our Lady, I came across one that moved me

deeply. A mother who recently lost her young child asks Our Lady: "Greet my little one for me and give him a kiss from me." The request hides immense sorrow, yet it also evokes great hope—the hope of eternal life in the mystery of God's love.

Those who serve the Shrine, whether lay or ordained, wish to be for every pilgrim a sign of the Lord's nearness, to speak words of hope, and to be a transparent expression of the Church's maternal care. In this sense, shrines today have a particularly significant mission as places and instruments of evangelization, even where the experience of faith seems to fade or the bond with the Church grows more fragile.

Certainly, a Marian shrine such as Caravaggio experiences the same difficulties and contradictions as many of our Christian communities—parishes, associations, paths, or movements. Yet here arrive people whom we might no longer meet elsewhere—brothers and sisters toward whom the Church must not only keep the door open but above all go out to encounter, ready to listen, to share, and to offer a possible proposal of the Gospel as a source of life and a light of hope.

Mary's example is eloquent. She was the first to notice the young spouses at their wedding feast who had run out of wine. She took the first step for them—toward Jesus and toward the servants of the feast—saying: "Do whatever he tells you."

From this place blessed by the Lord's benevolence, Mary, with a Mother's heart, whispers to each of us the same invitation: Trust my Son; do whatever He tells you!

Don Massimo Calvi
Rector

ITALY:
SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF SORROWS, CASTELPETROSO

Christmas: the hope that is born in silence

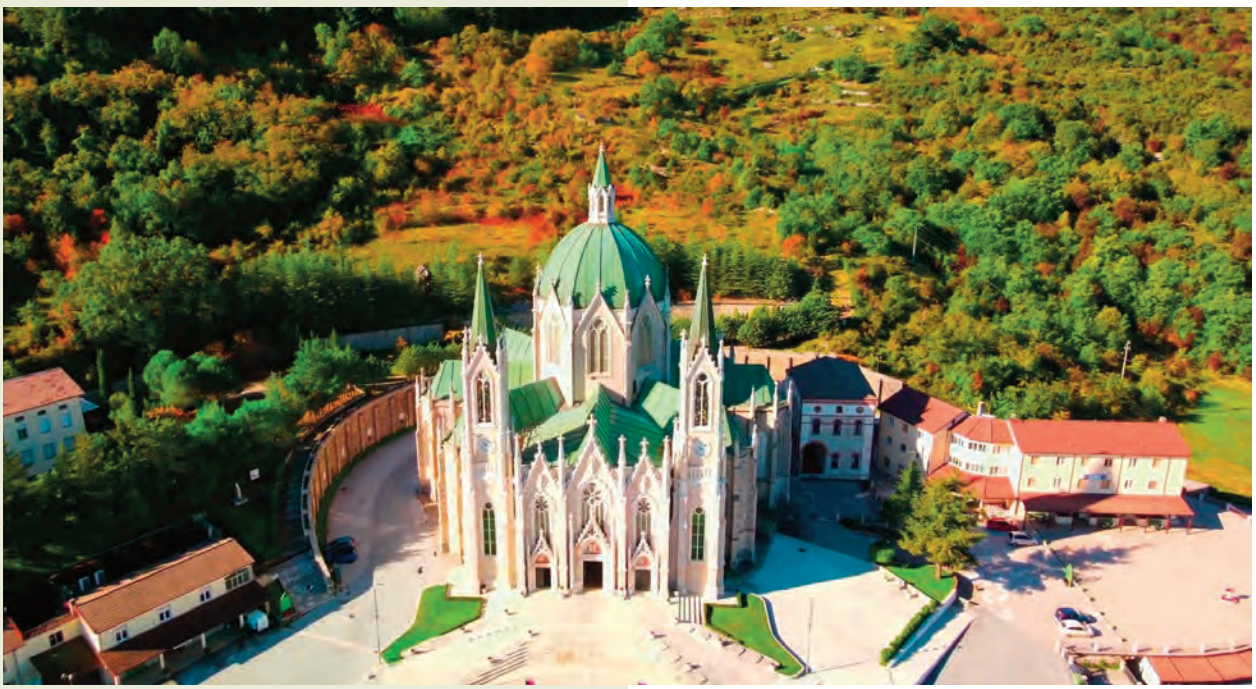
We are living in a time marked by deep unrest. Every day the news speaks of wars, divided families, lost young people, and growing poverty. The word peace seems worn out, almost a distant echo of something that no longer belongs to our time. And yet, precisely when the night seems darkest, Christmas returns to shine with a light that no darkness can extinguish.

Christmas is God's silent response to the cry of humanity. It is love made small, the Word made flesh, tenderness that takes on a face. In a world that rushes forward, God chooses to stop in a manger. In a time that glorifies strength, He appears as a helpless Child. And in that fragility His omnipotence is revealed: the power of saving love. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:5).

The mystery of Christmas is not a tale to be remembered, but a presence to be welcomed. God is not distant from human suffering; He enters its drama to redeem it from within. He does not erase pain, but transforms it into promise. Every night, even the darkest, can become the dawn of a new day. This is the source of Christian hope: the certainty that nothing is lost, that history is still inhabited by God.

This message finds deep resonance in the Basilica Shrine of Our Lady of Sorrows in Castelpetroso, in the heart of Molise, where Mary appeared to the peasant women Serafina and Bibiana, showing the dead Son in her arms. It is the most human and at the same time the most divine image of love that suffers and redeems. Mary, who in Bethlehem gave Life to the world, in Castelpetroso offers the world the Hope that is born from sorrow. The two grottoes—the one in Bethlehem and the one among the Molise mountains—tell a single story: God enters the wounded flesh of humanity to restore its dignity and future.

Every pilgrim who climbs to Castelpetroso carries with them a question, a burden, a wound. But at the feet of Our Lady of Sorrows they discover they are not alone: shared suffering becomes prayer, and faith becomes consolation. In that sacred place, silence speaks, beauty accompanies, and hope is reborn. Those who go there often return transformed, with a gentler gaze on life. As in Bethlehem, there too grace reveals itself in simplicity: in the faith of the people, in the slow steps of pilgrims, in the light that envelops the Basilica when evening falls on the mountains.



Christmas asks us to embrace this logic of God: the logic of humility, of service, of peace born in the heart. Not a peace imposed, but a peace built day by day by those who listen, forgive, and give of themselves. It is the peace that is born from a caress, from a smile, from a word of reconciliation. It is the peace that begins in families, in workplaces, in institutions where service becomes witness. Even the Governorate, in its mission to safeguard beauty and order, performs a silent but concrete work of peace: making harmonious what surrounds the life of faith means contributing to the world's hope.

Christmas is not only a memory, but an invitation to let ourselves be encountered by God, who continues to come. He does not tire of seeking humanity, of drawing near to its wounds, of awakening in hearts a desire for goodness. It is the voice that whispers: "Do not be afraid, I am with you." This is why Christmas remains, yesterday as today, the feast of hope. Even when all seems lost, even when peace appears distant, a light continues to shine. It is the light of Bethlehem that illuminates every heart ready to receive it. It is the same light that shines in Castelpetroso, where Our Lady of Sorrows invites us to look beyond our tears and to believe once more in love.

In a world that knows the struggle for peace, Christmas reminds us that hope is not a passing feeling, but a certainty born of faith. God still comes, every day, to tell us that we are not alone.

And if we welcome Him, we too can become, amid the darkness of our time, small lights of peace. For hope never dies as long as there is a heart willing to believe that God is still born in the silence of the world.

Don Fabio Di Tommaso
Rector and Episcopal Vicar

ITALY:
SHRINE OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN OF THE HOLY ROSARY, FONTANELLATO

The days of humble beginnings (cf. Zech 4:10)

The Shrine of the Blessed Virgin of the Holy Rosary in Fontanellato (Province and Diocese of Parma) is among the rare shrines that originated from ordinary pastoral activity rather than from an apparition accompanied by miracles.

In 1512 Veronica da Correggio, Countess of Fontanellato and regent for a year after the death of her husband, asked the Dominican friars of the nearby convent of Zibello to establish a convent about 300 meters from her residence's castle, for the spiritual care of the people. As stated in the founding documents, the friars were to celebrate Holy Masses, hear confessions, evangelize the people, and spiritually assist the sick in the area.

Another unusual fact is that the Shrine did not begin as a Marian one. The friars' dwelling stood next to an oratory dedicated to Saint Joseph, which gave its name to the convent. In 1514, two years after the foundation, the theologian Isidoro Isolani was present there; he began writing in Fontanellato his Summa de donis Sancti Ioseph, one of the first extensive treatises on Saint Joseph, later completed on 20 November 1521 in Pavia and published there.

These original traits did not substantially change in the subsequent history and still shape the spiritual atmosphere of the Shrine today: the predominance of ordinary pastoral ministry and the later presence of Mary discreetly accompanied by Saint Joseph, to whom the first of the side chapels is dedicated.

Growth amid countless difficulties, but with God's help

The first oratory of Saint Joseph soon proved too small, and in 1514 a small church was built. When this also became insufficient, a new church was constructed and completed in 1660 — the one standing today — financed, as an inscription on a wall reads, "Ex eleemosinis et pauperum pietate erga Deiparam / with the alms of the poor and their devotion to the Mother of God." A new convent for the friars was also built, completed around 1700.

It was not a peaceful development: in the 1500s, wars and invasions by the French and Milanese damaged the Shrine; in the 1600s a long war between Milan and the Duchy of Parma slowed work on the new church, and the danger was so great that the statue of Our Lady was taken to Parma and then returned to the Shrine in 1637. Not to mention the plague so vividly recalled by Manzoni. Then came the triple wave of suppressions—Enlightenment, Napoleonic, and later those of the Italian State—which repeatedly drove the friars away from the convent and Shrine.

All these blows, as they struck, seemed to foretell the Shrine's end. Yet God's providence always opened the way to a new beginning. Thus the memory of received graces and the Shrine's surviving presence despite events that threatened its extinction strengthen the faith that, through Mary's intercession, today and always God prepares "a future full of hope" (Jer 29:11).

The presence of Mary

Also owing to the movement stirred up by the victory of Lepanto (7 October 1571), which the Dominican Pope Saint Pius V attributed to Our Lady of the Rosary, the friars spread this method of prayer, and in 1615 had a statue carved of Our Lady of the Rosary. From then on it defined the Shrine's identity. The face was—not is—very beautiful, but the statue was always dressed in truly beautiful garments, as though to depict Our Lady in heaven offering her children the hope of one day being with her in an eternal and better future.

A first miraculous healing occurred in 1628. In our times, two notable healings should be remembered: that of the child Andrea Ferrari, later Archbishop of Milan and Cardinal (1850–1921); and the healing from epilepsy of the cleric Guido Maria Conforti, later Bishop of Parma and founder of the Xaverian Missionaries (1865–1931).

In 1650 the statue of Our Lady was placed in a monumental niche above the altar with the inscription "Maria clemens liberando pia largiendo / Mary, merciful in liberating and loving in bestowing graces." It is noteworthy that Mary is referred to as "liberator," obviously from illness and sin but also from the devil, as evidenced by an 18th-century painting showing the liberation of a possessed woman freed by a Dominican exorcist—a ministry that has again been present in the Shrine for some years.

Christmas in the Shrine

Every year it is a very ordinary Christmas, marked by Advent preparation with some catecheses and an intensification of the Sacrament of Penance, which is difficult to receive elsewhere due to the shortage of priests. For some years the Midnight Mass has been preceded by the Office of Readings, greatly edifying the faithful. And also for some years, the statuette of the Baby Jesus has been placed, with a beautiful arrangement, in the chapel of Saint Joseph—almost, in our present time, to recall the "humble beginnings" (Zech 4:10), when a small oratory dedicated to the holy patriarch welcomed the first friars in Fontanellato.

Fr. Riccardo Barile, OP
Prior and Rector

ITALY:
SANCTUARY OF OUR LADY OF ASH, PESCHIERA DEL GARDA

Let us not forget Mary's words at the wedding feast at Cana

Persevere in the faith, firmly grounded, stable, and not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven. (Col 1:23).
In light of this passage, a spontaneous question arises in a society as troubled as ours: what message of hope does Christmas offer today in a world without peace, in a society still searching for the best path—between international diplomacy and prayer? The Holy Year has given us a unique opportunity to retrace the path of salvation that comes to us through Jesus, reminding us that only through Him can we do all things ("He is that Holy Door through which the righteous enter," cf. Ps 117).
Hope is a reality present in every man and woman of all times; it has journeyed with us from the beginning, for we have never ceased to hope: in a world without borders, in new things, in a lasting peace, in rela-tionships among peoples and cultures free of hypocrisy, in religious freedom, and more. Hope is the very Gospel of God: it is God who questions the heart of humanity, seeking to offer the true alternative to ha-tred, war, revenge, and self-made justice. On December 28, 2025, in many particular Churches, the Jubilee Year will come to a close, and on January 6, 2026, in Rome, it will be definitively concluded with the clos-ing of the Holy Doors of the Basilicas and of the Prison (the Holy Door desired by Pope Francis). This Holy Year ends in the same liturgical season in which it began—the Christmas season: the time when the Redeemer, born of the Virgin Mary through the work of the Holy Spirit, came into the world to redeem it and to illuminate it with a light that knows no setting and that still seeks to enlighten the hearts and minds of men and women of goodwill.
John, in the prologue of his Gospel, affirms: "To all who received him, he gave the power to become children of God" (cf. Jn 1). The Holy Year has been, especially in the Marian Shrines but not only there, an occasion of true Hope, where many sought a time of reflection, allowing themselves to be reconciled in order to live this time of grace fully through the Eucharist, recognizing the gift of the Lord's Mercy. Many chose to visit a Sanctuary

before going to Rome as pilgrims of hope. Spread throughout the world, the Shrines have offered a real experience of communion with the Bishop of Rome.

Even though the Jubilee time concludes, grace continues and is strengthened wherever it has borne fruit, where it has shaken hearts, opened access to the Father's love, and, like the Virgin Mary, drawn near in obedience to God through service to the poor, the marginalized, and those living in fragility and hardship. Let us not forget Mary's words at the wedding at Cana: "Do whatever he tells you" (cf. Jn 2:1–11).

Today we must generate that same hope which Jesus announced to the peoples of His time—a living, active hope. We must seek this hope in our daily lives through prayer and by working in charity. He made His dwelling among us and never withdrew it, and in the poverty of the manger, He reveals to modern humanity that this event is still full of newness. His Church is that holy building, without doors, offering all a place of refreshment and shelter—just as we might imagine the Jubilee Year. He never turned away from those who sought help, nor did He ever turn His gaze aside.

Saint Joseph too, in his humility and silence, became an integral part of this universal message of salvation, one that focuses on the grace of the Incarnation of the Son of God, of whom he became the foster father: "Do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home" (Mt 1:20).

Can the Holy Family of Nazareth still be a model of life today—a style of holiness, or simply of humanity? I believe that this Christian model of life remains valid today, as testified by the many who have returned to God, also thanks to the Holy Year. For many Christians, this Jubilee has been a time of conversion, shaking off all that separated them from God's love and embracing His infinite goodness. The pilgrimage of so many to Rome during the Holy Year has moved even those who do not believe.

The Jubilee has been marked by two great lovers of the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and of Hope: Pope Francis, who began this event, and Pope Leo, who continued it. For the Church, they have been a driving force, emphasizing Christian values and taking the first steps on paths of hope and unity—first among peoples, then among Churches. May this journey not be in vain; may this hope always be marked by attentiveness toward a society yearning to rediscover Christian values, or at least to question them. All the Pontiffs, as Mary did, have said their "yes" in guiding the Church in a constantly changing world.

Today's challenges are above all those of technology, which seeks to replace the human mind with artificial intelligence. To Pope Francis and Pope Leo goes our deep gratitude, and with it our invitation to continue—with the help of the prayer of the entire Church—to uphold and promote the values of the Christian faith.

Christmas must remind us of simplicity and austerity, of the essential, so that we may recognize Christ as if He were present today—alive—in the nativity scene of our lives, in our hearts. The Christmas message has always been a message of great hope for all humanity, and it could not be otherwise. We must never extinguish the hope within us, nor become trapped in the habit of "it has always been done this way."

We must act with evangelical determination, daring (we must have courage) even where we think there is no longer hope or that all is lost: eternal life is our goal, where we will meet Christ—the true Hope.

We must build for today's children and youth, and for those of tomorrow, paths toward a welcoming and inclusive Church. If we were to imagine a gift for Jesus on His Christmas, what could it be? What should we place at the foot of the manger if not a plea for peace, for true humanity—capable of illuminating every heart?

To sum up, I would say that in the "sanctuary experience," the Jubilee has awakened a desire to know and deepen the meaning of faith in Christ Jesus, helping believers reread their existence in light of the grace offered by the Holy Year. The many conflicts in the world shake the prayerful journey of the faithful, but they do not stop it—for peace is not merely the cessation of arms, but the opportunity to understand the richness that comes from diversity.

Language, religion, nationality do not matter—what matters is knowing that we can walk in freedom. No obstacle should stand in the way of dialogue among cultures; knowledge must serve a balanced global development to overcome insecurity. Let weapons cease, yes—but above all, may the thirst for power and the illusion of earthly immortality cease.

May the Marian Shrines continue this "Jubilee," ensuring prayer, communion, and encounters between believers and nonbelievers alike, fostering a universal sense of love that Jesus has shown us to be possible.

Mary, Mother of Hope, help the Church to be the leading witness of this mission, so that the world may ever more deeply know Christ.

Fr. Adriano, OFM

ITALY:
MOTHER SANCTUARY OF GOOD COUNSEL, GENAZZANO

Hope at the Closing of the Jubilee

I would like to begin by saying that in the journey of the Christian—and therefore of the Church—there is always a sense of beginning, never of ending. It is always a matter of adding grace upon grace, blessing upon blessing - continuing the journey renewed, strengthened and illuminated by a light that is ever-living and warm—Hope.

Speaking from the Basilica-Sanctuary of Our Lady of Good Counsel, it is most fitting to say that the gift of Hope is a Person—she who, throughout her earthly life, was the very Seat and Sign of Hope. In Mary, the hope of seeing the Promise made to the Fathers fulfilled was a deep and constant desire, so strong that Saint Augustine could say that Mary conceived Christ in faith before conceiving Him in the flesh. Yes, it was this faith in the fulfillment of God's promises that kept the prayerful heart of the Blessed Virgin ever awake, pleasing the Trinity so deeply that She was chosen to be the Mother of the Redeemer.

I would also like to refer to the passage from the Prophet Isaiah announcing the coming of the Messiah—a text proposed several times by the liturgy during Advent and read as the first reading in the Mass for the Feast of Our Lady of Good Counsel. In this passage Isaiah proclaims: "For a child is born to us, a son is given to us… They name him Wonder Counselor" (Is 9:5–6).

The birth of a child is always a sign and herald of hope. New life brings to the heart of the family that welcomes a child a longing for renewal, for goodness, for beauty—in a single word, for hope—because that newborn is a blessing.

The very meaning of Isaiah's announcement rekindles in the chosen people the hope that the God of their fathers had not forgotten them and that He was calling them to an expectation which would lead to liberation and the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem. What message could be more illuminating and consoling for a people held captive in exile? It was enough to revive their trust in a God who had seemed to have forgotten His people.

For the Child given to us was present at the

moment of creation—as the Word through whom all things were made—and was also present in the plan of Redemption, offering Himself to the Father for the salvation of humanity. All this serves to illuminate the relationship between the Triune God and humanity with a light of love—and, after original sin, with a Hope of being reborn as new creatures through Christ, with Christ, in Christ.

This is the essence of Christmas: the birth of Hope for all humanity. In this divine plan, the Blessed Virgin Mary was the collaborator, the companion, the "Co-Redemptrix," because more than anyone else she hoped—up to the very end, even in the face of apparent failure—in the fulfillment of God's saving plan.

I would also like to highlight Mary's attitude at the foot of the Cross: "Stabat Mater"—she stood. Not an attitude of despair, though of great sorrow, but one of dignity born of the firm hope that God is faithful to His promises.

We know well that becoming the "Counselor" of the "Wonder Counselor" was a concrete and constant attitude in the life of the Blessed Virgin. Proof of this is found in the Gospel passage of the wedding at Cana. There, Mary—a woman—perceived a need, a dramatic situation that was falling upon the newlyweds and the entire community: the lack of wine. Had Mary believed this situation to be irreparable—without hope of resolution—she would not have gone to her Son to say, "They have no wine." Nor would she have advised the servants, "Do whatever He tells you." She was a Woman of Hope. She knew, she believed, she hoped that her Son would intervene for the good of the couple.

The title Mother of Good Counsel thus means lifting one's gaze beyond what is earthly, beyond human strength and possibility, and entrusting oneself to God the provident Father.

To give counsel, or to become Mother, brother or sister of the "Counsel of God," means to sow seeds of hope in a world where fear, distrust, indifference, and loss of confidence in oneself and in others too often take root. In our sanctuary, the gentle image of Mary and Jesus, joined in divine-human intimacy, communicates peace and serenity, inviting us to enter their communion and allow our hearts to be filled and enveloped, so that all that could trouble us may vanish and give way to hope—that even in difficulty, even on the cross, water may again become excellent wine, continuing to bring joy and strength as we climb the Holy Mountain, certain that we shall reach our goal, who is Jesus.

And she continues to say to us: "Do whatever He tells you."

Fr. Ludovico Maria Centra, OSA
Rector

ITALY: SANCTUARY OF OUR LADY OF THE GUARD, GENOA

We are not alone in the small and great challenges of life

It seems to me that three words can be associated with the virtue of Hope: future, goodness, and trust.

Future: hope speaks to us of an expectation for something yet to come. It is a gaze turned to look forward. No one hopes for something that has already happened, because once it is past, it remains only a memory.

Goodness: hope is linked to the desire for something good and positive to be fulfilled. In one way or another, we all seek happiness, and finding it is a natural aspiration. We realize that wishing harm upon someone means giving space to the worst part of ourselves and refusing to build a universal fraternity. Our shared human conscience tells us: "We do not wish evil upon anyone."

Trust: hope, in order not to become an illusion, needs certainty. Even in common language, hope is tied to the possible realization of something, but that is only a hypothesis, for we do not know what tomorrow will bring. Christian Hope, however, "does not deceive or disappoint, because it is founded on the certainty that nothing and no one can ever separate us from divine love" (Spes non confundit, 3). There are many kinds of "hopes" but only in God do we find a reliable and certain Hope, for His promises have been fulfilled. Every age has its "hopes," but for us Christians there is one hope that transcends time and history: this Hope is a person and has a name—Jesus Christ!

With the feast of Christmas, we "discover" that God fulfills what He says. He did not simply make announcements: the prophecies of the Old Testament became reality with the birth of Jesus. The feast of Holy Christmas is, par excellence, the feast of promises fulfilled!

We read in the Gospel of Matthew (1:22–24):

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God with us."

This is the great message of Hope at Christmas: not only does God exist, but He cares for us; not only has God come to earth, but He helps us. Humanity is not abandoned to itself, not condemned to grope in the darkness of the world. Christmas shows us a light that illuminates the path of our lives. In the journey of our human existence, "Jesus Christ is the light par excellence, the sun that has risen over all the darkness of history" (Benedict XVI, Spe salvi, 49). We are not alone in the small and great challenges of life, because the Lord is "Emmanuel," God with us.

This message resonates with particular intensity in our Sanctuary dedicated to Mary, Queen of the Guard. Indeed, "who more than Mary could be for us a star of hope—she who, with her 'yes,' opened the door of our world to God Himself; she who became the living Ark of the Covenant, in which God took flesh, became one of us, and pitched His tent among us (cf. Jn 1:14)?" (Spe salvi, 49).

The Sanctuary of Our Lady of the Guard (Ceranesi–Genoa), located atop Mount Figogna (about 800 meters high), is the place where, on August 29, 1490, the Virgin Mary appeared to a humble farmer, Benedetto Pareto, asking him to build a chapel in her honor—a place where people could come to pray. This request is deeply significant, because through prayer we too can say our "yes" to the Lord and welcome Him into our hearts and our lives.

In this Sanctuary, on the right nave, stands the particularly meaningful "Altar of Life", so named because its frontal panel depicts the Nativity of Jesus. The scene of the crib celebrates the gift of the Lord's coming, which gives new meaning to the lives of all of us. Over time, this altar has become the place where many grandparents and parents entrust the lives of their children to the Virgin Mary, leaving a birth ribbon as a sign of thanksgiving. It is also the altar where many people come to pray for the gift of a child. Beside the altar is a portrait of Saint Gianna Beretta Molla, who in 1962 freely sacrificed her life so that her fourth daughter could be born. Her presence here is especially meaningful, since on several occasions she came to this very Sanctuary

to pray to Mary, Queen of the Guard.
During the Christmas season, a permanent exhibition of over 200 Nativity scenes from around the world can be visited, along with a competition titled "My Nativity Scene." The goal is not only to keep alive an important tradition, but above all to preserve the profoundly religious meaning of Christmas. God comes among us because He has never ceased to trust us! We can hope for a world without wars, divisions or violence if the Lord becomes the center of our choices and our lives.
The prophet Isaiah (9:5–6) announced that a child has been born for us and that "his name shall be: Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace."
Why, then, do we still wish to rely only on ourselves?

Fr. Andrea Robotti
Rector

ITALY:
SANCTUARY OF THE EUCHARISTIC MIRACLE IN LANCIANO

For a Communion that Promotes Life

At Christmas we bring to a close the Jubilee Year 2025, dedicated to hope — a theme chosen by Pope Francis for a time especially in need of this virtue. In the letter proclaiming the Jubilee, he wrote that hope is founded on faith and nourished by charity. Faith leads me to believe in the fruitful, creative and merciful power of God, to trust in Him and to abandon myself to Him.

Charity—love—nourishes hope through concrete, daily choices that carry the fragrance of the Gospel. Péguy wrote that hope is the smallest of the three theological virtues, yet capable of pulling along the other two, which hold it by the hand.

In essence, to hope—from a Christian point of view—is not a random feeling, but a way of walking through life accompanied by the loving, faithful, and living presence of God. It is the certainty of having God-Love with me, at my side, always! This renews me and encourages me to live for the Gospel. Faith opens my eyes to recognize this presence and to bear witness to the Love received and given. Christmas is a celebration of hope, for it is the memorial of the love of God made flesh—a tangible, everlasting presence among us, here and everywhere, until the end of time.

Saint Francis had a particular love for Christmas, and he saw the Incarnation of the Word as closely connected with the Eucharistic celebration:

"Seeing bread and wine with our bodily eyes, we must see (with the eyes of the spirit) and firmly believe that this is His most holy Body and His living and true Blood. In this way the Lord is always present with His faithful, as He Himself says: 'Behold, I am with you until the end of the world'" (Admonition I).

The Eucharistic Miracle of Lanciano—the oldest among Eucharistic miracles—is a sign of God given to dissolve the doubt of faith of an anonymous 8th-century priest regarding the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist: the host turned into flesh and the wine into blood. It remains as a testimony for the faith of countless Christians who, with great devotion, come to this place to strengthen their trust in the providential presence of God in their own lives and in universal history. It is an "affective" sign, speaking to the hearts of the many pilgrims who arrive from all over the world.

Scientific analyses have confirmed that it is human flesh and human blood, both of the same blood type. The flesh is a piece of heart tissue—specifically, from the left ventricle; the blood is of type AB. These details help deepen the meaning of the real presence of God among us and nourish our hope, which is founded on Him.

In his encyclical letter Dilexit Nos on the Heart of Jesus, Pope Francis reminds us that the heart can be seen as the core of the human being—the most intimate and authentic center, the unifying element of the person, created to receive and to give love. In paragraph 26, he cites Cardinal Saint John Henry Newman, whose motto was Cor ad cor loquitur ("Heart speaks to heart"). For Newman, the place of deepest encounter with oneself and with the Lord is not reading or reflection, but prayerful dialogue—heart to heart—with the living and present Christ, especially in the Eucharist.

The Pope affirms that taking the heart seriously has social consequences:

"It is only by starting from the heart that our communities will succeed in uniting and reconciling differing minds and wills, so that the Spirit can guide us in unity as brothers and sisters. Reconciliation and peace are also born of the heart. The heart of Christ is "ecstasy", openness, gift and encounter. In that heart, we learn to relate to one another in wholesome and happy ways, and to build up in this world God's kingdom of love and justice." (n. 28).

Why is the piece of flesh from Lanciano part of the left ventricle? I believe it is because that part of the heart gathers the blood purified by the lungs and pumps it to all the organs, to nourish them and give them life. Is that not what God continuously and generously does for us—the members of His Body—and for all humanity through His love and grace? And are we Christians not called to the joy and responsibility of being His heralds and witnesses, so that the world may receive the fullness of life that God desires to give?

The blood is of type AB. We might have expected it to be O negative—that is, the universal donor. Instead, it is the universal recipient. This, I believe, offers a deeply meaningful symbol for our Christian life and mission: it reminds us of our duty of universal welcome, of the conviviality of differences, of the call to build a world that is peaceful and peacemaking—a world in which relationships are founded on fraternity rather than competition. A world where A and B no longer fight, but come together for a communion that promotes life.

May Christmas—with its celebrations, atmosphere, and wonder—help us renew our hope in the incarnate, living, and present God; may it encourage us to live the Gospel in our daily lives and to be builders of peace and fraternity, certain that the Lord is beside us—always and forever.

Fr. Matteo Ornelli, OFMConv.
Rector

ITALY:
PONTIFICAL SANCTUARY OF THE HOLY HOUSE OF LORETO

Christmas: The Revolution of the "Little Peace"

+ Fabio Dal Cin
Archbishop Prelate of Loreto and Pontifical Delegate

The cry of the prophet Isaiah – "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Is. 9:1) – resounds today with dramatic relevance. There is much sorrow in humanity, struck by violence, wars, and terrorism. We think of so many regions of the world — Ukraine, Africa, the Middle East, Gaza, that land sanctified by the presence of Jesus — where people are enduring immense suffering. Even where there is no bloodshed, we feel anxiety and worry about social uncertainties and global instability. To all this, each of us adds the personal and family darkness that burdens and tests us daily. Humanity is wounded and desperately seeks a way out of this labyrinth of pain.

Yet it is precisely in this dark scenario that the miracle of Christmas breaks forth: the birth of Jesus. It is not a light that imposes itself or blinds, but one that shines through the disarming tenderness of a Child. God — the Lord of the universe, the Prince of Peace — enters the world not with the might of an emperor, but with the vulnerability of a poor and marginalized newborn. This paradox shakes us: God's answer to chaos is unconditional love — a love that forgives, restores, and launches us into a life worth living.

To each of us, the Lord Jesus says: I love you. I know your sufferings, your dreams, your desires. I know your weaknesses and your sins — and for this very reason, I love you. I am here for you and for everyone, to bear all your burdens. I have come to bring you my peace, the peace the world cannot give, and to open a new path of peace: a passage from a closed world, oppressed by the darkness of enmity and conflict, to an open world, free to live in fraternity.

However, it would be a betrayal of Christmas to forget that all this takes the form of a defenseless Child. A Child without weapons, unable to manipulate public opinion for ideological gain. Therefore, His peace has nothing to do with imperial management — a peace imposed by force or through economic blackmail. The Child Jesus teaches us that one power cannot be overthrown or

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suppressed by another power; that a war cannot truly end with another war; that violence cannot be eliminated by more violence.

The Peace of Christ is a completely different strategy: to overcome evil with good. Anyone can respond to evil with evil — but only Jesus, through His death and resurrection, can break this destructive cycle that poisons us.

But how can we embody this hope? Is it enough to shout "peace!" or to feel indignation while watching the news? What can we do, concretely? Perhaps we must first ask ourselves whether we truly believe in the demanding message of Christmas — whether we genuinely believe that wars and violence can cease. Do we truly believe in the alternative of Bethlehem, where the miracle of peace will not be accomplished by the strong, but by those who embrace the way of God, who became small?

If the answer is yes, then we can all do our part — not by performing extraordinary, cinematic deeds, but rather by placing extraordinary love into the ordinary things we already do.

Christmas is the birth of little peace: a peace within everyone's reach, built daily with humility and the sweat of our brow. In families, in workplaces, in communities, this peace blossoms through the smallest gestures — yet gestures filled with the power of God: gentleness, forgiveness, an extra bit of attention, refraining from a hasty judgment, a "thank you," a smile, a greeting. As Pope Leo reminded us: "No sign of affection, even the smallest, will ever be forgotten, especially if it is shown to those who are suffering, lonely or in need…." (Dilexit Te, 4).

This little peace is like a seed planted that grows silently. And just as the Child of Bethlehem is destined to save the world, so too the small gesture of peace is destined to spread and inspire.

A little peace for a greater peace — this is the mission awaiting the pilgrims of hope: to build, together with God and among ourselves, with patience and free from ideology, the peace that our wounded world so desperately needs.

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ITALY:
SANCTUARY OF SANTA ROSALIA, PALERMO

Christmas at the Sanctuary of Monte Pellegrino

Entering the Holy Grotto—carved into the rock not by human hands, with millennia-old stalactites formed by rainwater laden with limestone filtering through the mountain—under a dome of boulders resting against each other since geological times, is certainly a unique emotion.

Passing first through a portal built into the simple and beautiful 17th-century Baroque façade, the pilgrim is surprised to still see the blue sky high above and the Sanctuary-Grotto before them.

Often described as "magical" by many visitors throughout the year, the Grotto takes on an even more captivating atmosphere at Christmas. One does not merely see a Nativity scene in front of them—one enters it as a protagonist, feeling like a character within a living Nativity.

Setting up the Nativity in the Sanctuary is easy: it is enough to place the nearly life-size statues of Saint Joseph and the Virgin Mary, the Shepherds and the Angels. The "stable" was already there.

Just beyond the gate that marks the boundary of the Grotto, the first attraction for children and parents is the Nativity arranged on the right, under the rock, with naturally flowing water forming small streams—especially when it rains outside—which feed the ancient well whose water is used to bless the faithful during ceremonies.

The various figures (shepherds, angels, little sheep) invite meditation for all the "pilgrims" who go to the Grotto of Bethlehem to encounter Jesus—pilgrims of hope, yesterday and today, in this Jubilee Year.

The next stop is the altar with the urn of Santa Rosalia, on the spot where her relics were found on July 15, 1624. The image of the "Santuzza" is shown lying down, resting on her right side, as if listening, breathing her last breath of love for her Lord, almost saying, "Here I am."

The golden garment covering her white marble statue symbolizes how this young woman from Palermo clothed herself in holiness after leaving everything behind—including the elaborate gowns she once wore at the receptions at the courts of kings and queens during the glorious Norman era of the Kingdom of Sicily (12th century).

Returning to the theme of Christmas, we recall that Rosalia Sinibaldi spent the last ten years of her life (she died in 1170) in this very Grotto on Monte Pellegrino. Here, in the dark and cold nights of December 25, by the light of a candle that illuminated and warmed her, she mystically held the Baby Jesus in her arms—as depicted in artistic paintings of later centuries—or the Child,

cradled by His Mother Mary, placed on her head, with her flowing blond hair (expected of someone of far Northern European descent), a crown of roses, as shown in the small white marble bas-relief in the Grotto.
Visiting the Grotto of Palermo's Sacred Mountain during Christmastime also brings to mind many days of the year when joyful mothers and fathers carry in their arms a baby—only a few months old—received as a grace after a prayer to Santa Rosalia. They had asked the Lord, even after five or ten years of marriage and fruitless waiting, for a pregnancy, for a child.
Usually, the babies brought to the Sanctuary for the Saint's feast day of September 4 or in the days that follow, are two months old simply because exactly twelve months earlier, during the previous year's feast, their parents had asked for the grace of a child. Sometimes, however, parents arrive holding babies only two or three days old, well wrapped in warm blankets—mothers glowing with joy and fathers looking tenderly and almost incredulously at that tiny face.

The mother has just left the maternity ward of a Palermo hospital; she knows this is a grace received through Santa Rosalia's intercession, and she wants to almost tell the little boy or girl in her arms that this Grotto on Monte Pellegrino is their home, their first home.
Yes—a Grotto, just like for Jesus.
And so, at the Sanctuary it is a celebration of life: "December 25th" is repeated many times during the year, just as numerous are the silver ex-votos shaped like swaddled infants or the large pink and blue ribbons hung near the statue of the Patron Saint of Palermo.
It is the God of Life who reveals Himself through the signs of the liturgy or through the miracles of human experience—a God who is and becomes near, gathering all of us, in awe, around a Child lying in a manger, inside the Grotto, to offer us hope and new life.
Greetings and Merry Christmas from up here, from the Grotto of Monte Pellegrino in Palermo.

Don Natale Fiorentino
Regent of the Don Orione Congregation

ITALY:
SANCTUARY OF SAINT ANTHONY, PADUA

God's gift hides in the "small" things of everyday life

A Christmas without hope — needless to say — would not even be Christmas. A Christmas not lived in hope would not "stand" in a Christian way. Hoping is the luminous attitude of those who, entrusting themselves to the precariousness of fragile signs, know how to anticipate a future fulfillment. The one who hopes is the one who dares to intuit the future beauty of a flourishing plant starting from the small — partial but fruitful — reality of a sprout. And it should be emphasized: it is about anticipating, not "pre-knowing." The one who hopes tastes the good flavor of God's promise for tomorrow, the one who grants credibility to the future on the basis of a gift already savored, at least in part, in advance. Hope requires precisely this sensory tone: it demands a sensitivity open to a grace that offers itself to be tasted, not only known.

Thus, the gift of hope appears as the expression of God bending down toward us, of His leaning in our favor, showing us with utmost discretion how present He is in our lives; revealing Himself not through the resounding apparatuses of sterile stages, but in the humus of everyday life. Yes, those who hope welcome God's gift that hides in the "small" things of each day.

That is why at Christmas one "must" hope! Because we celebrate the becoming present and alive — in our lives and in our history — of the Word of God; in the appearance of a small human creature, in the face of a child who needs tender care. It is the face of God asking to be recognized and welcomed in the tenderness of a life at its beginning. How many promises lie in the face of a child! How much good flavor there is in the fragility of a human creature who needs to be cared for!

As we near the end of the Jubilee journey, which the Church invited us to live as pilgrims of hope, we might turn back and reconsider the steps taken, recognizing the ways and moments in which the Lord of life has gladdened us with His friendly closeness. From the vantage point of the Basilica of Saint Anthony in Padua, such a grateful gaze can only follow the traces of the countless trajectories of the eyes of innumerable pilgrims who have looked upon life supported by this mysterious friend that is Anthony — by his intercession, his example, his powerful closeness.

Once again, it must be stressed that the Lord draws us into communion with Himself by first stirring it among us, His sons and daughters. Intimacy with the God of life is entered through the path of our relationships of solidarity and responsibility. The Child Jesus does this from His first cries: those who come to Him are not isolated "pilgrims," but groups of shepherds walking together, Magi who question together and let themselves be guided by the Star. Saint Anthony moves in this same direction. Being near the Ark that holds his mortal remains offers the chance to taste the Church's presence through the gathering of people who pray together, hope together, entrust themselves together. And often the "Saint of miracles" exercises his most beautiful "power" in this way: enabling relationships that had faded or were at risk to find paths of reconciliation; rekindling minds and resources to begin collaborations in works of solidarity; restoring momentum to people who, choosing to leave loneliness behind, awaken to the beauty of living together.

Many, indeed very many times throughout this year, people have entrusted themselves to Saint Anthony's intercession, asking for peace — peace in the world, peace for peoples torn by the lac-

erating, violent tragedy of conflicts that seem endless. Anthony brings us back to the concrete, personal everyday life: it is possible to hope for peace insofar as we ourselves welcome the invitation to weave, tirelessly and first of all, threads of dialogue and mutual care in our own lives. And the joy of returning to life through dialogue, through speaking and reconciling, is a promising sprout, full of hope, when one returns to one's own home. Generally, one does not leave the Basilica with a "gift package"; the closeness of Saint Anthony is expressed instead as an invitation to follow a path, to remain within that process of peace initiated by his blessing and his example.

A sign that often marks the promising quality of time spent in the Basilica of Saint Anthony is tears — also an expression of hope — shed by many pilgrims who feel touched in their souls. It is the living manifestation of compunction of heart crossed by consolation, thanks to Saint Anthony's nearness. It may seem a contradiction: does it make sense that those who hope should weep? Yet this is what happens: it is the emotion of those who feel approached by a benevolent presence that instills trust and sets them forth again from the boundless goodness of the Lord. It is the Jubilee of those who, recognizing themselves as sinners, do not give up but return to the ever-springing source of the Father's tenderness.

Father Antonio Ramina, OFMConv
Rector

ITALY: SANCTUARY OF SAINT ALFONSO MARIA DE' LIGUORI, PAGANI

Sharing Fragility Opens the Way to Hope

In his Message to the Diocese and to the City of the Agro Nocerino-Sarnese, Bishop Giuseppe Giudici emphasized that the Nativity scene, donated to the Pope by the diocesan community for St. Peter's Square, was "conceived and created having as its school and model St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori and his Christmas songs, beginning with the well-known Tu scendi dalle stelle." The memory of the extraordinary event of the birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary is thus projected into our daily lives, opening them to hope despite their countless contradictions.

For St. Alphonsus, the joy of Christmas is above all the wonder of God's self-abasement out of love for humanity. The Word becomes one of us and shares our fragility—except for sin—so that we might not remain imprisoned by it, but rather embrace it with trust. We are no longer alone; together with Him we can give it meaning and overcome it, building a future.

In his Meditations for the Christmas Novena, Alphonsus makes this explicit:

"The Eternal Word, from God, became man;
From great He became small;
From Lord He became servant;
From innocent He became guilty;
From strong He became weak;
From His He became ours;
From blessed He became afflicted;
From rich He became poor;
From sublime He became humble."

All of this is to help us overcome the many falsehoods that reduce God to a jealous idol of His own divine richness, driving us to suspicion and distance from Him. At Christmas it becomes clear that God does not give up on our refusals but continues to love us and seek our love. "By losing man," Alphonsus has God say in the first of the nine meditations, "I feel that I have lost everything, for my delight was to be with men; and now I have lost them, and these poor creatures are condemned to live forever far from me." And this is because "God loves man so much as if man were His God, and as if He could not be happy without man."

The joyful surprise of discovering ourselves unconditionally loved by God—in our fragility and despite our many refusals and closures—is what the annual celebration of Christmas seeks to renew within us. It opens us to hope, for in feeling so deeply loved by God, we in turn discover ourselves both capable of and in need of loving. This also extends to our relationships with others: we can free ourselves from fear and conflict, anticipate fraternity and build encounters—continuing, despite everything, to be artisans of peace.

The contemplation of Christmas led Alphonsus to his conviction about the indispensability of incarnation. He never tired of repeating that sharing in fragility is the path the Church and every baptized person must walk with trust, guided by the Spirit. In designing his missionary community, he identified as its "absolute hallmark" the call to "follow the example" of the Redeemer by incarnating oneself among the "abandoned," so that all might rediscover dignity and hope.

Yet this sharing must be marked by the hope of Christmas. For this reason, our gestures and words must make others experience what Christ says of Himself: "I did not come to condemn the world, but to save the world" (Jn 12:47), and "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10).

Evangelical sharing is not mere indulgent kindness that legitimizes everything—an attitude that inevitably breeds further conflict. It is a respectful listening that encourages discernment and helps new steps of liberation and growth to emerge. It is a merciful gaze that becomes a word of encouragement—just as Christ does in the Pharisee's house with the sinful woman: "Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you; go in peace!" (Lk 7:48–50).

Alphonsus attributed his own "conversion" to the pastoral gentleness of listening to the humble, which made him one of the leading figures in overcoming rigorism. He had above all understood that sin is, first and foremost, a kind of "infection" that makes the sinner increasingly fragile. The Gospel's proposal of goodness is a "medicine" that opens and sustains one on the path of healing.

In recent years, the synodal journey—developing the perspectives of Gaudium et Spes—has strongly invited mutual sharing and listening: it is the only path to respond constructively to our fragility and to discover within it the seeds of hope. This is also the mission entrusted to each person and each community by the Jubilee, as Pope Francis highlighted in the Bull of Indiction: "to pay attention to the much good that is present in the world, so as not to fall into the temptation of thinking ourselves overwhelmed by evil and violence. The signs of the times, which contain the longing of the human heart for God's saving presence, must be transformed into signs of hope" (Spes non confundit, no. 7). And this, above all, for a "disarmed and disarming peace," as Leo XIII never ceases to ask for.

Father Lorenzo Fortugno, CSSR
Superior of the Redemptorist Community of Pagani

BASILICA PONTIFICIA-S. ALFONSO

ITALY: PONTIFICAL SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF THE ROSARY, POMPEI

Christmas, a Time of Hope

+ Tommaso Caputo
Archbishop Prelate of Pompeii
Pontifical Delegate for the Shrine

The song of the angels who appeared to the shepherds on the Holy Night echoes in our hearts almost like a paradox: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favors rest" (Lk 2:14). The shepherds—held in low regard by civil society, accustomed to hard labor, spending their nights keeping watch over their flocks—know only cold and fatigue. Yet on the mantle of that dark sky, there are stars.

Turning to our own time, the lack of peace is surely the darkest corner of our era. The dozens of ongoing wars are the result of a humanity forgetful of the Lord of life. Conflict also appears in interpersonal relationships, in workplaces, in schools, and within families. Our perception of others is often far from the dimension of fraternity. A sign of this is the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor of this world. Boundless wealth stands in opposition to bottomless misery.

On October 23, Pope Leo XIV, addressing participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements, emphasized that "the poor are at the center of the Gospel" and that "marginalized communities should be involved in a collective and united effort aimed at reversing the dehumanizing trend of social injustices and promoting integral human development." These themes are also addressed in the recent Apostolic Exhortation on love for the poor, Dilexi te, dated October 4.

We ask ourselves whether, in the night, we too will be able to see the stars as the shepherds of Bethlehem did—whether the angels will invite us as well to go to the manger to encounter the Child, our Savior, Christ the Lord (cf. Lk 2:8–20). During the Christmas season, the ordinary Jubilee—marked by the late Pope Francis with the seal of hope—will come to an end. "Spes non confundit" (Rom 5:5), hope does not disappoint, has been the theme accompanying us throughout this year of special grace. In the name of that hope, the believer's answer to our question can only be yes: we will see the stars like the shepherds, and the angels will also bring to us the great announcement.

On October 19, Pope Leo proclaimed Bartolo Longo a Saint: Founder of the Shrine of Pompeii, of its associated works of charity, of the new city, and of the Congregation of the Dominican Sisters Daughters of the Holy Rosary of Pompeii. He was a true witness of hope: he hoped—spes contra spem, as St. Paul says (Rom 4:18)—especially when he arrived in the Valley of Pompeii in 1872. There he found only a few farmers plagued by malaria and troubled by the presence of bandits. That hope, which sustained the young lawyer, allowed him to look beyond the visible, beyond the horizon of the present.

Pompeii, once an abandoned land, has become a global center of faith. Even the Image of Our Lady of the Rosary was once a worn canvas damaged by time; it has become a marvelous painting venerated by millions of faithful. Bartolo Longo had been a sinner, a follower of erroneous ideas during his law studies in Naples. Yet some people—Professor Vincenzo Pepe, Saint Caterina Volpicelli, Saint Ludovico of Casoria, and his wife Marianna Farnararo—hoped for his conversion. He became an apostle of the Rosary, a Marian prayer with a Christological heart.

With the help of God's grace and great generosity, he fol-

lowed the path of holiness. He also devoted himself to saving the abandoned children and adolescents of his time, offering them hope of redemption. When some claimed, for example, that the sons and daughters of prisoners were destined, like their fathers, for lives of delinquency, he opposed them with the pedagogy of love. He worked to change the direction of their lives—and he succeeded.

To hope, to hope, to hope. It is the same hope alive today in the social works of the Shrine of Pompeii, which continue along the path traced by Saint Bartolo. The "new Pompeii," the Marian City, remains today a place of encounter and dialogue. A saint can also become a symbol for civil society, which must learn to rediscover a spirit of authentic fraternity. The good of others is essential for our own good, because the good life of the Gospel offers an entire constellation of educational lights upon which to "draw new maps of hope," as Pope Leo XIV teaches in his Apostolic Letter of October 27.

In a reflection published in the 1900 edition of Il Rosario e la Nuova Pompei, the periodical he founded in 1884, Bartolo Longo addressed the shepherds who, on the Holy Night, arrived first at the manger—because the humble have the privilege of seeing the Child, the world's only salvation, before others:

"O holy shepherds, who went to the grotto at the invitation of an angel, what noble examples you set for me! You all walk together toward the stable with eagerness and promptness. You do not even wait for daybreak; you set out in the night, you run with confidence, and without worry you leave your flock in the care of the One who calls you."

From the peripheries of the humble comes the example.

ITALY:
SANCTUARY OF SAINT PIO OF PIETRELCINA, SAN GIOVANNI ROTONDO

Hope in Padre Pio

"Pray, hope, and don't worry. Worry is useless. God is merciful and will hear your prayer." This is one of Padre Pio's most famous sayings—widely spread through holy cards and souvenirs—revealing his deep regard for this virtue.

From the moment fifteen-year-old Francesco Forgione entered the monastery, he began a steep and difficult journey that threatened not only his path to the priesthood but even his right to continue wearing the Capuchin habit. From an early age, a mysterious illness—resistant to every treatment—led doctors to recommend that he return home to breathe the air of his native village. The remedy eased his symptoms, but they returned as soon as Friar Pio of Pietrelcina re-entered the cloister. This condition hindered the normal course of his studies, yet he continued to hope. Thanks to the understanding of the Minister General of the Capuchin Order, Father Venanzio da Lisle-en-Rigault, he avoided being expelled from the monastery and, through "private lessons" with two priestly fellow townsmen, he successfully passed an exam before the Archiepiscopal Curia of Benevento, allowing him to be ordained a priest on August 10, 1910.

Hope did not abandon him during the First World War, when the mystic friar—despite his evident health problems (his entire "body" was "pathological," marked by "widespread bronchial catarrh, skeletal appearance, and poor nutrition")—had to wait until March 16, 1918, to be officially discharged from military service, after having been granted three leaves totaling twenty months of convalescence.

This virtue also sustained him when he was struck personally and deeply by the deadly "Spanish flu" pandemic that devastated the world from 1918 to 1920. The illness appeared in him on September 3, 1918, and through alternating periods of improvement and relapse, left him prostrate until mid-December. During that same time, he was informed that in Pietrelcina his little four-year-old nephew Pellegrino and his sister Felicita, the boy's young mother, had both died of the flu. Although funeral rites were not permitted during the peak of the contagion, the friar wished to join his grieving family "to mingle […] tears and […] sorrow," but was forced to give up this intention because he felt "very ill and unable to undertake such a long and distressing journey," due to his sickness and the stigmata wounds of the Crucifixion on his body. Nevertheless, he sought to console his parents and exhort them to hope through a letter, drawing strength from faith and the Word of God:

"God gave me my poor sister, and God has taken her away; blessed be His holy name. In these words and in this submission I find enough strength not to collapse under the weight of sorrow. I exhort you, too, to this resignation to the divine will, and you will find, as I have, relief from your pain."

He also faced with trust the investigations, statements, apostolic visits, and measures decided by the Holy Office, though he regretted having to limit his availability to so many souls in need of conversion or guidance on the path toward Christian perfection. Yet even in these trials, he was not disappointed. Each inquiry concluded with the full restoration of the stigmatized friar to his ministry.

Many times throughout his life's trials—especially in the hardest ones—Padre Pio drew nourishment for his hope from the Book of Job. He would say: "I will not grow weary, even in my weariness, of crying out with Job: though You slay me, yet will I hope in You."

In his teachings, too, he constantly urged others to calm their worries by trusting in divine mercy. He explained: "On earth we must always struggle between hope and fear, with the condition, however, that hope be always stronger, keeping before us the omnipotence of Him who comes to our aid."

To be strengthened in this theological virtue, he first turned to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin and advised his followers to do the same, assuring them from his own experience:

"At a single gesture of our Blessed Mother, despair—the evil of our century, the cancer of society—will flee; every disheartening scene within our soul will cease, and the decay that leads to ruin will be halted. [...] Only thus does the precipice itself become the springboard of our salvation; only thus does the darkest point of despair turn into the brightest ray of hope."

To invoke divine help, however, one must recognize one's own limits and the impossibility of resisting - by human strength alone - the insidious temptation to give up, to grow discouraged, or to sink into depression. "We must always humble ourselves before God," he said, "but not with that false humility that leads to discouragement, producing despondency and despair. We must have a humble opinion of ourselves."

Stefano Campanella
Editor-in-Chief, Tele Radio Padre Pio and Padre Pio TV

ITALY:
SANCTUARY OF SAINT LEOPOLD MANDIĆ, PADUA

Pilgrims of hope... on the journey

In the sanctuary of Saint Leopold, thousands of hearts have found light, reconciliation, and strength to begin anew: living signs of a Jubilee that continues in everyday life.

Peace and good! We all need "peace" and "goodness" in this era marked by conflicts, wars and selfishness. The first words that the Lord addresses to us at the beginning of the new year are words of blessing. Here they are:

"The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:22–27; First Reading, January 1, Solemnity of Mary, Most Holy Mother of God).

Ancient words and ever-new, resounding with hope at the beginning of our journey. They remind us that God is not distant but reaches down toward us, illuminates our lives, and accompanies us with the tenderness of a Father.

During the Christmas season, this blessing becomes flesh in the face of the Child of Bethlehem. In Him, the Lord "makes his face shine upon us": a human face—gentle and fragile—yet filled with all the strength of divine love. Contemplating the Nativity, we understand that the peace and grace we invoke are not abstract ideas but a living Presence entering history, dwelling in our daily lives, and transforming everything from within.

After this New Year's greeting, I would like to share a few reflections on the Jubilee of Hope.
As Pope Francis established in the Bull Spes non confundit, the Jubilee Year of Hope in our Diocese of Padua will conclude with a solemn Eucharistic celebration presided over by Bishop Claudio in the Cathedral Church—the mother of all diocesan churches—on Sunday, December 28, 2025, Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

It is beautiful that the conclusion of this year of grace should take place in the light of Christmas, before the Holy Family, a living icon of Christian hope: a small human community sustained by trust in God and guided even through the darkest nights.
The Jubilee hymn, Pilgrims of Hope, proclaims:
"Every tongue, people, and nation finds light in your Word. Fragile and scattered sons and daughters are welcomed in your beloved Son."
These words have become reality in the Sanctuary of Saint Leopold in Padua. Thousands of pilgrims—Italians, Croatians, Slovenians, Austrians, Poles, French, and many others—have visited the sanctuary, chosen among the Jubilee sites of the Diocese of Padua. All were united by a deep desire: to experience a moment of prayer beside the tomb of Saint Leopold and

to celebrate the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. In their stories, silences, and tears shed before the confessional, we have tangibly experienced that God's mercy knows no boundaries.

Especially on weekends during this Holy Year, the steady stream of pilgrims transformed our sanctuary into a crossroads of faith—a living Nativity scene where men and women of every language rediscovered hope. And like the shepherds before the Child, many departed "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen" (Luke 2:20). Many of them, through written prayers or confidences shared with the friars, testified that during their visit to the sanctuary they experienced a deep sense of grace and blessing, accompanied by a constant message of comfort and consolation. Others said they felt renewed and ready to resume their daily journey with enthusiasm, carrying with them the joy of their encounter with the Lord and the sure hope of His presence in their lives—thanks also to the intercession of Saint Leopold, a model of mercy and welcome.

Let us give thanks to God for the "great things" He continues to accomplish in those who entrust themselves to Him with humble hearts.

May the blessings received during the Jubilee blossom in the New Year as seeds of goodness, and may the light of Christmas remain lit in our homes and in our hearts. The Lord continues to visit us even today—in daily gestures, in the faces we meet, in the poverty of our humanity. It is there that hope is renewed, faith grows, and love becomes concrete.

Strengthened by this experience of grace, let us return to the rhythm of daily life, carrying in our hearts the certainty that God is faithful and never disappoints those who trust in Him. May every day of the new year be a small Christmas—an opportunity to welcome, with wonder and gratitude, the presence of the Lord who comes.

Fr. Marco Trivellato, OFMCap
Rector

Before Saint Leopold, trust and hope were reborn

A fragile virtue, hope stands between two dangerous extremes. If exaggerated, it risks turning into the presumption of saving oneself; if too weak, it can fall into despair of salvation. Between these two extremes, Father Leopold Mandić knew how to maintain balance. On one hand, recognizing himself as a sinner—indeed, a great sinner—he feared divine judgment after death (which he took very seriously: he asked for prayers, performed acts of penance, and went to confession frequently). On the other hand, he trusted in the infinite mercy of God—the same mercy he poured out abundantly upon his penitents. And so, he found peace.

Drawing from his own experience, he was able to guide his penitents toward resolving their struggles. Some came to the confessional far from contrite, even with a presumptuous attitude. Then it was necessary to make them aware of their moral disorder and their distance from God.
One day, a man slipped into the line outside the confessional. He didn't even want to wait—he had no time to lose. He only wanted to pretend to confess so that he could "pass" as an honest man and keep his job. They let him through; but when, after nearly half an hour, he emerged from Father Leopold's confessional weeping with emotion, he was a changed man.

In other cases, Father Leopold knew how to instill confidence in those who had lost it because of their sins. Whoever truly feels the weight of sin and accepts responsibility for it can risk focusing so much on their guilt that they despair of God's forgiveness. But Christian hope, as Pope John Paul I said, "is born of trust in three truths: God is almighty, God loves me immensely, and God is faithful to His promises. And it is He, the God of mercy, who kindles trust in me" (General Audience, September 20, 1978).

For this reason, Father Leopold knew how to free souls from doubts and discouragement and to restore peace. He possessed a certain art in this, such that penitents quickly became his friends.
A friar once testified: "I know of a penitent who had to confess very grave sins. Father Leopold said to him, 'Here we are, two sinners: may God have mercy on us!'—and in such a tone that the penitent immediately felt encouraged to confess sincerely and with contrition, and to place great trust in God."

In September 1963, at the main cemetery of Padua, the coffin of the holy confessor was removed to be transferred to the Capuchin church. In the tomb, through a narrow opening, many slips of paper had been inserted. One read:
"Father Leopold, I met you one day when my soul was burdened with the deepest sorrow. You spoke the sure word that helped me rediscover the peace of Jesus. Dear Father, chosen creature of the Lord, sent to earth to comfort the afflicted, watch over us still; speak to us again the word that consoles."

Restoring peace to one who has lost it is a most delicate act of love, for it touches the deepest part of the person. And to rediscover peace and hope after the darkness and disgust caused by sin is like seeing the sun again after the fury of the storm.

Fr. Giovanni Lazzara, OFMCap
Director of the magazine "Portavoce di San Leopoldo Mandić"

ITALY: SANCTUARY OF SAINT CATHERINE, SIENA

Chistmas of Hope and Peace in Saint Catherine of Siena

"May the Church be a faithful witness to this proclamation in every part of the world!" — thus wrote Pope Francis in the Bull Spes non confundit. Saint Catherine's message, besides being pro-foundly relevant, burns with the fire of thought and writing — in the rigor of the opening lines of her Letters as in the asceticism of her restraint. Her writing is dizzying, yet never abstract. One per-ceives the assertive strength of her written word, which unfolds in dialogue with the Eternal Father, radiant with the splendor of the living Light.

Vibrant in her fragile, wounded body — wounded by the Divine Crucified — Catherine is assimilated to Him through love. Her writing is like chrysography: scripted in gold, radiant and strong, with words of diamond strength. Saint Catherine drew her power from faith in the one and triune God. She was always attentive to

the teachings of what was preached and sought to read the signs of the times, striving to interpret the difficult history of her age in the light of faith, that is, the primacy of the human person made in the image of God, for justice, peace, service to the common good and the reform of Holy Church. A profound knower of social and ecclesial issues of her times, she still speaks to us of steadfast hope. In her mysticism, she contemplates the mysterium Nativitatis Domini sub specie paupertatis—the mystery of the Lord's Nativity under the form of poverty—and she beholds Jesus, who, though rich, became poor. Ecstatically she exclaims:

"And I beg you to find yourselves (...) in the manger with this

sweet and humble Lamb, where you will find Mary showing such reverence to that Child, a pilgrim in such great poverty, possessing the wealth of the Son of God; she has not even a decent cloth to wrap Him in, nor fire to warm that Fire, the Immaculate Lamb: but the animals themselves, breathing upon the body of the Child, warmed Him with their breath." (Letter 363)

Thus, Christmas still brings to the world her heartfelt message of hope and peace. The mystical Writer is ever timely and implores:

"Peace, peace, peace! That war must not be prolonged!" (Letter 196)

The fascination she exerts captivates all who draw near to her writings.

"I want you to begin now to conform yourselves to the Child Jesus. What greater sight could we behold than God humbled? The height of His Divinity descended to the lowliness of our humanity. Love made Him dwell in a stable among animals. What was the cause? Love. What love has God shown you through the Word, His Son." (Letter 47)

Fr. Alfredo Scarciglia, OP
Ecclesiastical Assistant of the International Association of the Caterinati

ITALY:
The Shrine of Our Lady of Tindari

Swept Away by a River of Grace

The approach of Holy Christmas ideally brings to completion the Church's journey in the Jubilee Year of Hope which, after seeing us Peregrinantes in Spem through the Holy Doors of the Eternal City and the many jubilee churches around the world, now leads us to Bethlehem. The etymology of its name defines it as the "house of bread" (in Hebrew בית לחם Beit Leḥem) or the "house of meat/flesh" (in Arabic بيت لحم Bayti Laḥmin, Bayt Laḥm): both meanings illuminate the Mystery that took place there and which the watchful shepherds were granted the grace to contemplate, following the indication given by the angels: "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" (Lk 2:12). In the house of flesh they adore the eternal Word of God who becomes flesh and makes his dwelling among us (Jn 1:14a–b); they contemplate Emmanuel, God-with-us, who reveals Himself in the humble sign of a child. From the rough manger—whose wood is clearly unsuitable to receive an infant—Jesus begins to proclaim the Gospel of Salvation, which will pass through the gift of His Life, offered as the bread of pilgrims to all who labor and are burdened, given on the wood of the Cross, even heavier and rougher than that of the manger, in

the supreme act of His Love for every human being, of every place and every time.

During this year, the Basilica-Sanctuary of Our Lady of Tindari, in the Diocese of Patti (Messina), has likewise seen a great number of pilgrims hastening to the feet of the Black Madonna, venerated here for about a thousand years. She is celebrated on September 8, the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which the Liturgy describes as "the joyful celebration of the birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary, hope and dawn of salvation for the whole world," from whom was born the Sun of Justice, Christ our God. The icon of the Virgin Mary of Tindari, who bears the Son of God on her lap and offers Him to the world as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, represents the essence of Mary's life: her divine Motherhood and her faithful discipleship in the school of the one Master. This medieval image, carved in cedar wood from Lebanon and displaying Eastern iconographic features, is adorned with the words of the Song of Songs: Nigra sum sed formosa, I am black yet beautiful (Song 1:5a), which for centuries have spoken of her presence on the hill of Tindari—precious and strong, tireless and maternal. Commenting on these words, St. Bernard sheds light on their meaning in a few lines: "Even if the toil and sorrow of long exile disfigure you, you are nevertheless adorned by heavenly beauty" (St. Bernard, Sermons on the Song of Songs, 27, 7, 14).

Those who have the grace to serve the Lord at the Sanctuary—especially in priestly ministry—never cease to experience the immeasurable greatness of God's presence, which reaches even the driest desert and makes it bloom again; which gives life and hope even to the hardest of hearts that open themselves to the healing power of divine mercy; which restores even the most disfigured life, wounded by trials or distance from God; and whoever finds Him again regains lost splendor and bears witness to the beauty of encountering Christ. Serving God in this blessed place means being literally swept away by a river of grace, before which it is hard to remain unmoved: one feels drawn each day toward the heights of the vocation to holiness, called to spend one's life ever more generously. Yet the condition that allows this to happen is the same that enabled God to work wonders in Mary's life: the humility of service, the simple availability of one who knows they can no longer dispose of themselves, having given their life entirely to Christ. And the more one is emptied of self and denies oneself—accepting to remain in one's place, like the Infant Jesus lying in the manger, without thinking of the splinters or cracks in the wood but rather of the Word that can be proclaimed from there—the more one can fulfill that will of God which is our joy and our peace, loved above all else by the Saints of every age and embodied in their lives.

In this time, sadly marked by the tragic drama of numerous conflicts throughout the world, we turn to the Virgin, the loftiest witness of Hope against all hope, lifting up our supplication:

Source of Holy Hope,
show yourself a Mother to all—
to those who groan and suffer because they have not yet found Christ,
to those who seek Him and to those who have lost the way,
to those who would like to give up following Him,
to those who have consecrated their lives to Him but have lost the enthusiasm of the gift,
to those afflicted by despair and discouragement amid the inhuman consequences of hatred among peoples and the tragedies of war.
Show yourself a Mother for all;
offer our prayer;
may Christ graciously receive it,
He who became your Son. Amen.

Don Filadelfio Alberto Iraci
Vice-Rector of the Basilica

LITHUANIA:
SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF THE GATES OF DAWN, VILNIUS

Christmas: Mercy Incarnate and the Shrine of Our Lady of the Gates of Dawn (Aušros Vartai)

+ Gintaras Grušas,
Archbishop of Vilnius

At Christmas, heaven bends toward earth and eternity enters time. In a world often overshadowed by violence, division, and fear, the birth of Christ proclaims again the simple and unchanging truth: God has not abandoned humanity. He comes to dwell among us—fragile, poor, yet radiant with love. This is the mystery of mercy incarnate, the foundation of Christian hope.

The Child of Bethlehem is not merely a symbol of innocence; He is the very face of God's mercy. In Him, the Creator takes on the vulnerability of His creation. His first cry pierces the night not as lament but as promise: "Peace on earth to those whom He loves." Hope is born in swaddling clothes.

Standing beside the manger is Mary, the Mother of Mercy, whose silent gaze gathers the world's suffering into her heart. Her "yes" made the incarnation possible; her fidelity allows mercy to take flesh. Every Christmas invites us to stand beside her, to let our faith—like hers—become a place where God can be born anew.

From my own city of Vilnius, the City of Mercy, rises a special echo of this mystery. There, at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Gates of Dawn (Aušros Vartai), under the title Mother of Mercy (Mater Misericordiae) has, for centuries, looked with compassion upon her children—Lithuanians, Poles, Belarusians, and pilgrims from every land—reminding all that God's mercy knows no bor-

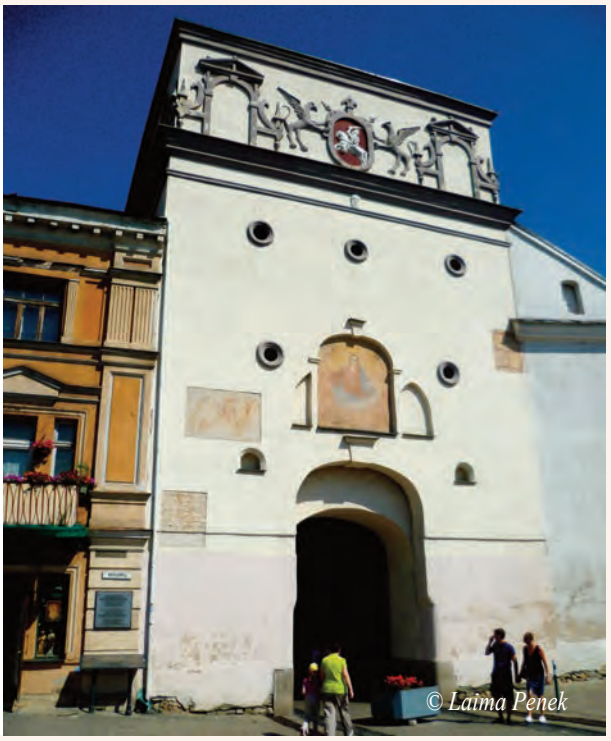
ders. Her image, with eyes full of tenderness, inspired Saint Faustina Kowalska and blessed the first public veneration of the Divine Mercy Image—Jesus whose Heart radiates love for every soul.

From Vilnius, this message of mercy has spread throughout the world. The chapel of Our Lady of the Gates of Dawn in St. Peter's Basilica stands as a bridge between the periphery and the heart of the Church, between the city where Mercy was first revealed and the center from which it is now proclaimed. It reminds us that Christmas is not confined to a season; it is a continuous invitation to allow God's mercy to shine through our lives.

As we approach the end of the Jubilee Year, this message becomes even more vital. The Jubilee has been a time to rediscover hope—to open our hearts to God's forgiveness and to rebuild a humanity reconciled in love. Yet our world still trembles under the weight of war, injustice, and indifference. Many hearts, tired of disappointment, search for meaning. To them, Christmas whispers: "Do not be afraid." God is still Emmanuel—God-with-us. His mercy is stronger than hatred, His light brighter than any night.

In the coming year, this message will find new resonance in Vilnius, where the Church will host the World Apostolic Congress on Mercy (WACOM VI) under the theme "Building the City of Mercy." The Congress will gather pilgrims from every continent to celebrate the living presence of Divine Mercy—Jesus, Mercy incarnate—who transforms hearts and societies. It will be a reminder that mercy is not an abstract virtue but a concrete mission: to heal wounds, forgive offenses, and sow peace where it seems impossible.

At the manger, mercy and hope embrace. The infinite God becomes a child so that humanity might never despair. In this humble birth we see the answer to our deepest longings. Each year,



Christmas renews the world's hope—not because the world becomes easier, but because God's love never ceases to draw near.

May Mary, the Mother of Mercy, who kept all things in her heart, teach us to recognize the light that shines in every darkness. May the gaze of her Son, born for us in Bethlehem and adored at the Gates of Dawn, kindle in our hearts the courage to believe that peace is possible. May this Christmas bring for us the blessing that in every home, every nation, every wounded corner of our world, the newborn Christ may be welcomed as the Hope that does not disappoint.

URUGUAY: SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF THE THIRTY-THREE, FLORIDA

Christmas, a Seed of Hope in the Heart of Uruguay

From this National Shrine of Our Lady of the Thirty-Three, Pa-troness of Uruguay, we lift our gaze to Heaven in this time of profound meaning, framed by the Jubilee Year 2025: Pilgrims of Hope.

In the Eastern Republic of Uruguay, due to our historic secular tradition, December 25 is officially designated as "Family Day." This designation, born from the 1919 secularization process, highlights the importance of family reunion and affection at this time. However, for the Catholic community and for many Uruguayans, these dates remain above all the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Celebration of the Nativity in Uruguay: Between Tradition and Faith

Despite the official designation, the essence of Christmas beats strongly in our homes and in the heart of our Church.

Christmas Eve and Family Day: The celebration centers on the family dinner of December 24. Families gather to share the drink mate, a story; to enjoy a good meal which, although adapted to the warmth of the Southern Hemisphere summer, often includes traditional roast meats, minced dishes, sweet bread, and turrones. At midnight, a toast is made, gifts are exchanged, and fireworks are set off.

December 25 is a national holiday, dedicated to rest and continued family gathering. Practicing Catholics attend the Christmas Eucharist. For Catholics, December 25 is a holy day of obligation.

Visible Signs of Faith:

The Catholic Church is responsible for keeping alive and visible the celebration of Jesus' birth. Nativity scenes are set up in churches and homes, and the Archdiocese of Montevideo promotes campaigns such as "Christmas with Jesus," inviting the faithful to set up small balcony cribs and to participate in the liturgical celebrations of the feast. Midnight Mass and the Masses of Christmas Day bring together the faithful, reaffirming the transcendent meaning of the celebration.

Christmas as a Sign of Hope in the Jubilee Year

The 2025 Jubilee proclaimed by the Holy Father, under the motto "Pilgrims of Hope," calls us to reflect on faith in a blessed future. Christmas fits into this perspective with singular eloquence.

The Birth of Hope:

Is there a more powerful sign of hope than the birth of a child? The mystery of the Nativity is God's irruption into human history, a proof of His unchanging fidelity. In the Child-God, we are shown that hope does not disappoint (Spes non confundit), but becomes flesh in our reality. Christmas is the perpetual reminder that God made Himself vulnerable for love, opening the doors to a new life.

Mary, Star of the Dawn of Hope:

As Patroness of Uruguay, Our Lady of the

Thirty-Three is our guide on this pilgrimage. She, who bore Hope in her womb, teaches us patience and faith in God's plan. In this Shrine, contemplating her image, we see reflected the courage of the Thirty-Three Orientales who invoked her, and who today inspire us to be courageous pilgrims amid the challenges of Uruguayan society. Her "yes" at the Annunciation is the first act of a hope that culminates in Bethlehem.

The Family, Domestic Sanctuary:

The celebration of "Family Day" in Uruguay, despite its secular origin, becomes a providential call for the Church to Christianize the concept. It is the opportunity to make every home a domestic sanctuary where charity, forgiveness, and faith stand at the center of the encounter. Celebrating Christmas is recalling that the Holy Family of Nazareth is the model of a community of love and the seed of every social hope.

And despite secularization, in the vast majority of Uruguayan families, Christmas lights shine on their trees—sign of the longing for a greater light, ultimately a nostalgia for the light that comes to us only from God.

May Our Lady of the Thirty-Three accompany us so that we may be beacons of light, believers in the Love that is born in Bethlehem.

Merry Christmas to all!

Presbyter Dr. César Buitrago López
Rector

POLAND:
JASNA GÓRA SHRINE, CZĘSTOCHOWA

Let Us Regain Hope with Mary

+ Łukasz Mirosław Buzun, OSPPE
Auxiliary Bishop of Kalisz

When we look at the history of the Shrine of Jasna Góra, we notice first of all its essential characteristic — that it is a place where we come with the hope of changing our lives for the better. Some come with the hope of overcoming difficulties, sins, and vices of the past; others with the hope of regaining health, of conversion, of finding light in the "tunnel of life." Young people come with the hope of love, married couples with the hope of having children. There are many testimonies that the prayers offered here by so many have found their happy fulfillment. There are also graces that have remained in the hearts of those who received them, preserved like ex-votos in the treasury of Jasna Góra.
In all these petitions, placed in Mary's hands, lies the longing for a beautiful life — one filled with good relationships, light, warmth, health and joy. Yet we know that our earthly journey has many stages — some shorter, some longer. At times, we find ourselves in an oasis of happiness and peace; in another moment, we are wandering in the desert of the world, in difficult times when life overwhelms and almost crushes us.
Amid all this lies the truth about the "last things" — a truth that reminds us we are pilgrims who have pitched a tent here that will one day be folded up, for this world is not the place of final happiness and fulfillment. The older we grow, the more this truth impresses itself upon us — it is an existential certainty. That is why we need hope — a hope that does not disappoint — and this hope is given to us by God, our Father.

In Mary's life, as in ours, there is no lasting hope without God. It is God who gives meaning and greatness to every event of her life. For this reason, those events are so important and significant in the history of the Church, in God's plan of salvation — from the Nativity to the Flight into Egypt, from the Finding in the Temple to the Cross. It is not Mary herself, nor theologians, nor others who give those events their value, but God's plan realized through them.
Through her example and intercession, Mary's total surrender and entrustment to God allow us to unite ourselves to His great plan for humanity. In this way, our lives recover their splendor and their future, remaining in the current of Marian faith and trust. As the prophet Isaiah says:
"They that hope in the LORD will renew their strength, they will soar on eagles' wings; they will run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint." (Is 40:31).

God designed Mary's life in such a way that, although He raised her to great dignity and made her pure and beautiful, He made her life resemble ours. She experienced moments so full of joy that her feminine heart could not contain them — moments that burst forth in her song — but also moments of sorrow, hardship, and pain. She rejoiced when Jesus was born, when the shepherds and Magi came with their gifts; when she lived with Him in Nazareth; when she saw Him perform miracles, and when people blessed Him for His words and His goodness.

Yet Mary teaches us to give ourselves to God above all in difficult times. Life on earth is changeable. There are easy moments, even years of peace, but there are also situations that seem humanly insurmountable. Recently, I spoke with a woman who poured out her pain and suffering after being abandoned by her husband, who went to live with another woman, leaving her in financial difficulty. She also shared that her adult children had scattered across Poland and the world. So many hardships! On top of that came health problems and the death of a loved one. These and other trials are often hidden beneath the surface, carefully covered up.
Still, we cannot idealize our lives — as much as we would like to — because there are also moments of apathy, depression, disappointment, inner conflict, anger, and even hatred. A whole spectrum of suffering!
Mary teaches us to entrust all these difficult moments to

God — when we feel we cannot go on, when conflicts arise within us, when division and discord appear — so that we are not drawn into the dark side, into negativity, into poison. Many have already discovered in her presence wisdom, love, and care for each one of us.

Let us look to Mary, model and icon of a woman full of joy. Mary's joy embraces her whole being, reaching to the depths of her soul. There is a great need for every woman — mother, widow, wife, daughter, grandmother — to have joy and enthusiasm in her heart, for we know well what a family without joy looks like. Of course, not everything depends on one person, but that is no excuse. It is the woman who gathers the emotional life of the family, providing its spiritual and moral strength. She listens, supports, shapes feelings — and if she does not do this with authentic inner joy, nothing good will come of it.

But where, amid so many concerns and burdens, can joy appear — like a ray of light entering through a window into the temple of humanity, slowly illuminating the space, dispelling the darkness, and revealing the forms within? Joy is possible only when there is purity of heart, when there is an interior space that has been redeemed, purified, ordered, confessed before God.

Mary leads us to trust — despite everything. Someone may say: "All right, but the burdens on our shoulders are so heavy that words roll off the surface, and the difficulties remain." Yet, as much as possible, we must trust! We can always have — and do have — at least a small seed of trust within us. It will grow slowly. It will not become a great flame immediately, because we do not have as much faith as Mary. But when we cooperate with God's grace, avoiding complaining and bitterness — those poisons that take root in us so easily, isolating us from others and feeding resentment — the light of trust will expand within us, bringing its saving presence.

We need the capacity to see the small, confused things within us that prevent us from opening ourselves to grace. We should ask ourselves more often: How can I love? How can I open my heart? How can I bring the beauty of the Gospel? We must examine, day by day, what impoverishes love in us, what distorts or diminishes it. At the same time, together with Mary, we must invite Christ into every part of our lives — when we have fallen, when we are exhausted, when we are sad, or when we are rejoicing. The Lord should be present not only on feast days but also in the most ordinary and darkest moments of our lives. He wants to open our hearts. Without Him, everything becomes cold and distant.

Mary, full of hope and trust, tells us today that the Lord cares for us (cf. Ps 40:18). He watches over us during our earthly life as the apple of His eye. He loves us more than any earthly mother loves her child, for as He Himself promised:

I will spread prosperity over her like a river, like an overflowing torrent, the wealth of nations.
You shall nurse, carried in her arms, cradled upon her knees;
As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you. (Is 66:12, 13)

PORTUGAL: SANCTUARY OF OUR LADY OF THE ROSARY, FATIMA

Do not remain indifferent to the suffering of others

The preparations for Christmas fill the streets of our cities; festive signs brighten cold days and make a quiet joy blossom, a joy that grows as the holidays approach. The time of devout and joyful expectation of the Lord's coming—Advent—is preparing hearts for the joyful birth. But the nearness of Christmas and its preparations does not entirely dispel the shadows of a society stained with shades of uncertainty, anguish, and anxiety. The wars that continue to tear the world apart do not cease, nor do the tensions and polarization that threaten the future of so many peoples and nations magically disappear. The oppression and exploitation of human beings by other human beings are not stories of the past; they mark our present. Yet the festive signs of Christmas strengthen in us the hope and trust in tomorrow, because Christmas proclaims that God never remains indifferent to the sufferings and tragedies of humanity and of each of His children.

The celebration of Christmas allows us to experience the immense tenderness with which God loves us. In our nativity scenes, we contemplate God who draws near, who comes to

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meet us, who shows us His boundless love. In the manger, we contemplate the One who is our Hope, Jesus Christ. The hope that comes from Him is not sterile, and accepting Jesus into our hearts necessarily has consequences. At the opening of the Jubilee Year, Pope Francis reminded us that from the welcome given to the Child-God arises the challenge to "transform the world" and to bring "hope where it is lost."

In a world marked by the tragedies of war and so many forms of violence, Christmas—the celebration of the birth of the Prince of Peace—brings us peace. This is what the Angels sing and what we also sing on that "holy night": "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of goodwill."

Christmas is a feast of peace, harmony, and fraternity, because God becomes our brother in Jesus Christ. Celebrating the birth of Jesus, the "Prince of Peace," implies concrete attention to others—solidarity, sharing, selfless help for those most in need. To welcome the peace that Jesus brings us is to reflect God's love transparently. Christmas proclaims that God never remains indifferent to the sufferings and tragedies of humanity and of each of His children. We therefore cannot forget those who, on that night, are living the tragedy of war in Ukraine and in so many other places around the world and cannot celebrate Christmas in peace. We cannot forget those who are alone, those who are exploited in any way, those who lack dignified living conditions, those who are falling into despair due to the economic crisis into which they have been plunged. Celebrating Christmas challenges us not to be indifferent to the suffering of others and to go swiftly to meet those who need our help.

The contemporaries of Jesus' birth longed for a political messiah, a warrior; they desired someone sent by God who would take up arms and defeat their enemies. But instead of sending an emissary, God Himself comes. And He does not come as a powerful warrior, but He assumes our fragility. He chooses to be born as a newborn, completely dependent on the care of others. Like the contemporaries of Jesus, faced with the tragedy of war and violence, we often long for the manifestation of the Almighty, forgetting that at Christmas He reveals Himself as the "all-fragile One," and that it is in this fragility and poverty that our hope for peace resides.

Christmas reveals to us the face of God, whom we can find in every human face and whom we are challenged to recognize in migrants, refugees and displaced people, in the poor.

Christmas shows us Emmanuel, God-with-us, who heals our loneliness.

The logic of love is nearness: the one who loves seeks to be close to the beloved. It is because He loves us with boundless love that God comes to us to fill our hope with meaning.

Father Carlos Manuel Pedrosa Cabecinhas
Rector

SLOVAKIA: ST. ELIZABETH CATHEDRAL, KOŠICE

The Hope of Christmas Time

At the threshold of the year 2025, as the Church draws to a close the Jubilee Year whose theme is "Pilgrims of Hope,", our hearts once again turn toward Bethlehem — to the place where God became man, to show us that He is "God with us" — Emmanuel. Christmas, the feast of the coming of Jesus Christ into our world, is not merely a remembrance of a distant event in history; it remains a living source of hope for a world burdened by restlessness, uncertainty, and an aching desire for peace. The mystery of Christmas is God's response to human anxiety — a quiet yet powerful assurance that even in the deepest darkness, there shines a light that the darkness cannot overcome.

God does not come to this world in power, but in humility as a small, defenseless child. He does not choose a palace, but a simple, poor stable. In this way, He reveals that true strength lies in love, a love unafraid of vulnerability. The Child in the manger is the sign that hope is born precisely where we least expect it: in fragility, in silence, in the courage to believe even when everything around us shouts the opposite. That message resounds today more urgently than ever: our world, which so often loses its direction, needs once again to rediscover a light that does not come from the screens of our devices, but from the heart of God.

The Holy Year 2025 has taught us to see our lives as a pilgrimage. Each of us is a pilgrim journeying toward God — a person on the way, walking in trust even when the horizon ahead is still hidden. A pilgrim of hope is not someone who runs away from difficulties, but one who transforms them through faith and perseverance. The Church, too, walks in this way — not as a triumphant institution, but as a family that supports one another, bearing on its body the wounds of the world while bringing healing where there is pain.

In Košice, this pilgrim dimension takes on a special meaning, rooted in the medieval Gothic cathedral, the Cathedral of St. Elizabeth, not only an architectural treasure, but also the spiritual heart of eastern Slovakia. The Cathedral of St. Elizabeth

was built as a pilgrimage shrine on the site of a Eucharistic miracle. According to tradition, during holy mass in the original parish church, a priest accidentally spilled the consecrated Blood of Christ onto the corporal, and it miraculously formed the image of Christ's face. Word of the miracle spread quickly, and people from near and far began to travel to Košice to venerate the true Blood of Christ, bringing their prayers and seeking healing, consolation, and a new beginning. Pope Boniface IX officially recognized this event, granting a papal bull that endowed the Cathedral of St. Elizabeth with special pilgrimage indulgences in 1402.

Although the relic of Christ's Blood has been lost since the Reformation, pilgrims still come to this sacred place, finding beneath its soaring vaults the power of prayer — a strength radiating from the very stones that for centuries have listened to human sorrows, petitions, praises, and thanksgiving to God. Here, everyone becomes a pilgrim of hope: the elderly and the young, the sick, the faithful, and the searching alike. Dedicated to St. Elizabeth, the woman of mercy and service, the cathedral speaks of a hope born of concrete acts of love. Just as our patroness found Christ among the poor and suffering, so too are we called to find God in the faces of those who need our closeness, forgiveness, and peace.

A vivid testimony to the living tradition of pilgrimage to the Cathedral of St. Elizabeth was the Jubilee Year 2025 itself, when thousands of believers gathered there, especially on the 22nd of each month, for the Evening of Mercy, celebrating holy mass with Jubilee preachers.

At Christmas, as the candles and lights of the cathedral are lit and the hymn "Silent Night" fills the air, it becomes more than a cherished tradition. It is the prayer of an entire city seeking light in the darkness. Every flame symbolizes a soul refusing to surrender to despair. In those moments, history meets the present: the same light that once illumined Bethlehem shines now in the eyes of the faithful.

The hope of Christmas is not meant to be an escape from reality, but a call to transform that reality by building peace that flows from faith, patience, and the kindness of the heart. The Christmas message teaches us that even the smallest acts of love have eternal significance: one word of forgiveness, one smile, one prayer may be the beginning of a miracle. This is how the Kingdom of God is born quietly, yet unmistakably.

As we close the Jubilee Year, we are invited to renew our hearts, so that we never cease to be pilgrims of hope. To walk with Christ means to carry light even through darkness, and to believe even when the outcome is still unseen. It means rising again and again, forgiving, loving, praying, and living with the deep conviction that God walks with us.

May the song of the angels from that holy night in Bethlehem resound also in our hearts: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will." May that peace fill Košice, Slovakia, Italy, and the Vatican — may it fill the entire world, torn by restlessness and conflict. For wherever Christ is born, so too is hope — a hope that is quiet and humble, yet stronger than all the darkness of the world.

ThLic. Allan Tomáš
dean-pastor

SPAIN:
SHRINE OF ST. JAMES, COMPOSTELA

Reasons for Hope

To celebrate Christmas, nativity scenes are prepared well in advance in churches and homes. There is usually a competition to choose the best nativity scene. With some idea of the customs, people and animals then existing in the Holy Land, houses, palaces and huts are arranged, reflecting the type of life and activities of the time, like shepherds in the fields, merchants in the plazas, guests at an inn. Moreover, it is traditional for nativity scenes to be decorated with bright lights; in town bells are rung and Christmas carols are heard, evoking the joy of the coming of the Son of God to save mankind. Of course, in some places in the West, there is no shortage of individuals and political groups who take advantage of the Christian holiday of Christmas to demonstrate their power and appeal, seeking out tourists who bring economic benefit. This is embodied in the city's attractive illumination and outdoor decor, even before the end of November. Those lights, without much relation to the supposed setting of Jesus' birth, remain throughout the Christmas season, without the slightest allusion to the Christmas liturgy.

The birth of a "shoot from the tree of Jesse" leads to the ap-

pearance of the "son of David," who was to perpetuate the true Kingdom of the prophet-king. This is a reason for well-founded hope for us all. It coincides with the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, when Ahab wanted to sign an agreement with Assyria to confront the Syro-Ephraimite coalition. At that moment, the prophet tried to persuade the king not to comply with the pagans and to trust that God was with them, supported by the fact that his wife, still a virgin, would give birth to a child whose name "Emmanuel" (God with us) would show that the Lord was on the side of Judah.

Liturgically, everything begins with Advent, which fills us with hope as we see the approaching commemoration of the "coming" of the Savior. During these nearly four weeks, hope is further fostered in a climate of peace; and the third Sunday is called "Gaudete" (=Rejoice), because "the Lord himself comes and will save us." Of this same tone are the "O Antiphons," which surround the singing of the Magnificat during the seven days preceding Christmas: "O Wisdom," "O Adonai" (=Lord), "O Renewer," "O Key" (of the House of David), "O Sun," "O King," "O Emmanuel" (=God with us).

Regarding the reality of what happened in the first century of the Christian era, the baby Jesus, born on an unusual Christmas, was born poor, far from the home of Joseph and Mary, with no room for him in the inn; and, moreover, without being echoed by anyone in the upper echelons of society. Joseph and Mary did not have a bed, linens, or other accessories normally required for the birth of a child. On that occasion, the shepherds, a marginalized group of people who were not dependent on the temple and the synagogue, came to visit. An angel proclaimed peace to men of good will.

The birth of the Child of God was more appropriate for marginalized, forgotten environments, and unsuited to educated and wealthy people. Jesus will demonstrate this throughout his public life, for, while relating to everyone, he will especially welcome the marginalized. He shows himself close to the sinful woman who was thrown at his feet, drenched in her tears.

He will also extol the parable of the Good Samaritan, who rescued a beaten Jew, whom two Jewish clergy had neglected earlier as they passed by. At another point, he praises the Samaritan afflicted with leprosy, for returning to thank God after his healing. In one of his parables, Jesus considers the tax collector justified before God, not the Pharisee, concluding that God will humble whoever exalts himself; and God will exalt whoever humbles himself.

At Christmas, Christian families are inclined to practice charity, being more generous with the poor, or giving to Caritas. On the other hand, families traditionally reunite and if there are tensions between members, they try to put them aside, forgive and renew their closeness and understanding.

Going a little further, seeking the profound meaning of the birth of the Son of God, we see that it consists in the fact that, since human beings are sinners, God's mercy brought about the Son, always faithful to the Father's will, giving his life so that humanity can achieve a life of peace, a life without end. This is the reason for our hope when Christmas arrives.

Monsignor José Fernández Lago
Canon Lector of the Cathedral of Santiago

UNITED KINGDOM: THE CATHOLIC NATIONAL SHRINE AND BASILICA OF OUR LADY AT WALSINGHAM

The Joy and Hope of the Incarnation

Christmas is a blessed occasion to contemplate the immensity and graciousness of God's love for us and the hope and joy which this love brings into our lives. In the East of England, here at our Catholic National Shrine and Basilica of Our Lady, in Walsingham, we have an ancient Marian Shrine of the Incarnation – founded in 1061, destroyed by Henry VIII in 1538, and officially restored for Catholics in 1934. So, for us in Walsingham, we celebrate the joy of the Incarnation every day, but this joy culminates, of course, in the solemn celebration of Christmas. In this mystery, we celebrate how, through Our Lady's 'yes,' her fiat, the Word was made flesh [cf. Jn 1:14-18] and entered into our world with a hope that transcends all understanding [cf. Phil 4:7]. Yes, Jesus Christ himself, and no other, is the Name of the hope that fills our world with light.

Yes, Our Blessed Lord was born into our raw and wounded world; as one of us, one like us in all things, but sin. He leaves the heights of Heaven to descend among us and become like us, walking among us as friend, brother, teacher, Redeemer, our God made visible. But we can ask ourselves: Why exactly did He do that?

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First, He did it in order to save us by reconciling us with God [Cf. CCC #457]. As we know, from the time of original sin to this very day, humanity finds itself journeying amidst shadows and lights, with sin being, most regrettably, a part of our human condition. Original sin, our personal sins, and structural sin – all of this requires a Saviour to redeem us, to save us. And so, the Father of mercies, out of his immense and unsurpassed love for each of us, gave up His very own Son,

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the Beloved, the Begotten from eternity, to be our Saviour.

Second, He did it to show us God's love and that we come to know and experience that love [Cf. CCC #458]. Being all powerful and all knowing, all just and all merciful, rather than abandoning humanity to its own demise, He reached out to us out of His immense love. Yes, God, who is Love, ultimately, never gives up on us!

Third, He came down from heaven to be our model of holiness, that is, to teach us the art of living [Cf. CCC #459]. Thus, we are each called to holiness, and He is our teacher, and role model in this regard; He taught us by word and example how to live lives pleasing to God.

And finally, "the Word became flesh" to make us 'partakers of the divine nature' [Cf. CCC #460]. In fact, Our Lord Jesus did not intend to lead us back to the earthly paradise that Adam and Eve lost due to their disobedience. No, His ultimate desire is to lead us back to His own homeland in Heaven.

This Christmas time, the Jubilee Year can still ring true in our hearts, inspiring us to be pilgrims of hope well into 2026. Hopefully, the Holy Year has been for us "a moment of genuine, personal encounter with the Lord Jesus, the "door" [cf. Jn 10:7-9] of our salvation, whom the Church is charged to proclaim always, everywhere and to all as "our hope" [1 Tim 1:1]." [Francis, Spes non Confundit, 1].

At Christmas, all of us are beckoned to come face-to-face with the Incarnate love of God, a love that is dynamic and life changing. In our homes, families, schools, and in parishes across Rome, throughout Italy and in many other countries, beautiful Nativity scenes are set up for the festive season, and thus, we are invited to come and kneel there in adoration of the Christ child in the manger. Here, we gaze into the face of Love Incarnate.

My hope and prayer for all the pilgrims that have come to Walsingham throughout the Jubilee Year, and, indeed, for those who have travelled to the Eternal City of Rome, and for all those of us who live and work in these places, is that we have each embraced the personal call to be pilgrims of hope. This we can do, as well, in the days ahead as we gather for our Christmas meals and exchange our gifts; as we participate in our Christmas Masses, as we reach out to family and friends, neighbours, and those who are struggling. We can ponder, too, the gift that we can be - and are called to be - for others; a gift of love and reconciliation; of peace and hope, and of joy to all those around us.

Rev. Dr. Robert Billing
Rector

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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, WASHINGTON, D.C.

The birth of Jesus gives us hope in the midst of despair

As Christmas Day arrives, the faithful in churches throughout the world will raise their voices in jubilant praise proclaiming the birth of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Yet, as we sing joyous Christmas Carols, we are painfully aware that the world situation is certainly not jubilant. We live in a world in crisis, a world caught up in the violence and cruelty of war, poverty, injustice, struggles, sickness and death. These situations are not unique to our time. The world and people are not much different in 2025 than they were when Our Lord was born. We have advanced in many ways, we live and dress differently, public announcements are made through mass media and the internet rather than through angels, and children, for the most part, are born in hospitals, not stables. Despite these advancements, we continue to struggle with moments of darkness; life still has its problems and difficulties, personally and globally.

Just as Mary and Joseph were unable to find a place to give birth to their son, many people today still cannot find room "in the inn" (Lk 2:7). The borders of many nations are closed to immigrants, and too many children have no place to lay their head. People throughout the world, especially those in war-torn countries and drought-stricken lands, continue to hope and pray for peace, for justice, and for food enough to live.

Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem, the city of our Lord's birth, are expected to be muted for the third consecutive year. The Israel-Hamas Ceasefire is already showing signs of collapse, and there appears to be no end in sight to the war between Ukraine and Russia.

Mysteriously, it is during these times of turmoil that the wonder and miracle of the Incarnation becomes clear. In 1943, the noted theologian and German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote to his fiancée from prison, "just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us, whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives" (God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas).

Each year, the celebration of Christmas elevates us from whatever circumstances befall us. The annual commemoration of the birth of Jesus gives us hope in the midst of despair, brings us light in the midst of darkness and proclaims "good news of great joy" for all people, just as the angel proclaimed to the shepherds that first Christmas night (cf. Lk 2:10).

The recently proclaimed Doctor of the Church, Saint John Henry Newman, taught his congregation on Christmas Day, "the glory of God at first alarmed the shepherds, so he added the good tidings, to work in them a more wholesome and happy temper. Then they rejoiced." (Waiting for Christ, Mediations for Advent and Christmas, 110)

The shepherds were outcasts of society. These were people whose lives were basically without hope. Shepherds were not allowed to testify in court, they were not allowed to vote, they were given very little respect, if any at all, and in a very class-oriented society, shepherds were considered the lowest class.

Shepherds are one of the oldest occupations mentioned in Scripture. The first "herder of flocks" (Gen 4:2) was Abel, the second son of Adam and Eve. In the social order, shepherds were not at the top, they were closer to the bottom, even though they were vital to the economy – their sheep and goats supplied food, clothing and sacrificial offerings. In Scripture, the shepherds represent the humble, the lowly. Their inclusion in the nativity story reflects the mercy of God to those most in need. At the same time, the shepherds are regarded as the first evangelists, as it is they who not only are the first to hear the Good News of the birth of Jesus from the angels, they are the first to go forth and make known "the message that had been told them about this child" (Lk 2:17).

Perhaps this is the reason why God chose shepherds as the first visitors to his Son, because more than anyone else, the shepherds needed this visit, they needed to be lifted up, they needed new meaning in their life, they needed to rejoice, they needed hope and they needed the "peace given "to those on whom God's favor rests."

Christmas reminds us that God sent Jesus to raise us up and to give hope to a fallen world. By taking on our flesh, God in Jesus, transfigures our weakness, heals our wounds, brings light to the darkness of life and "peace to those on whom His favor rests" (Lk 2:14).

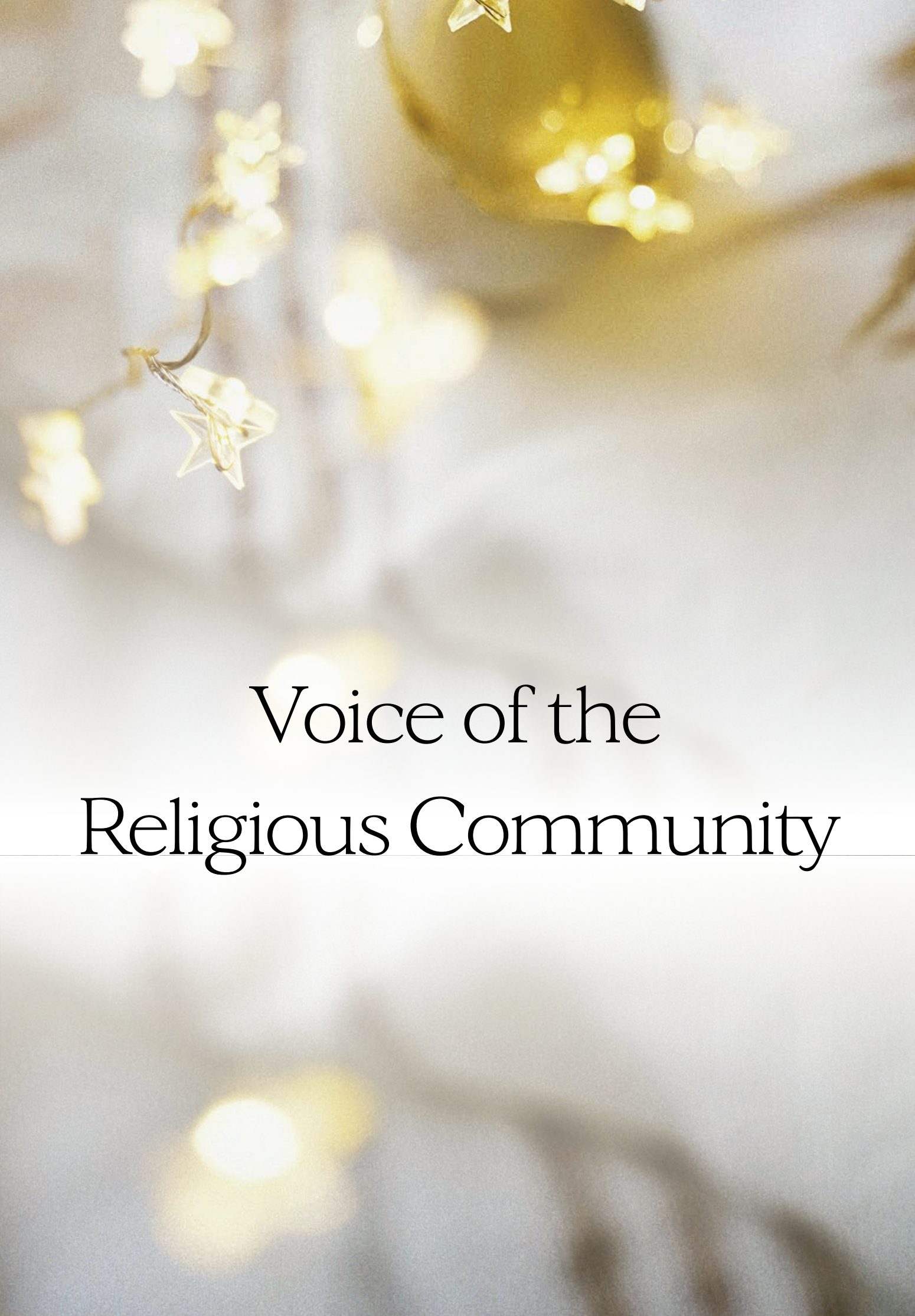
As he proclaimed the Ordinary Jubilee Year of 2025, the late Pope Francis desired that the Jubilee Year "be a moment of genuine, personal encounter with the Lord Jesus" who is our hope and the One who helps us "rise above our trials and difficulties and inspires us to keep pressing forward" (Spes Non Confundit, 1, 25) Pope Leo XIV continues this thought when he states, "This is true hope: knowing that, even in the darkness of trial, God's love sustains us" (General Audience Address, August 27, 2025). The love of God sustains us in Jesus. With the birth of Jesus, God enters into humanity with all that it entails. With the birth of Jesus, we are given all that we need "to rise above our trials and difficulties" and keep pressing forward.

To press for forward requires determination and hope, the hope that only the birth of Jesus can bring. Left to our own devices, hope will quickly fade away, because we easily give up when we do not see immediate results. "In the heart of each person, hope dwells as the desire and expectation of good things to come, despite our not knowing what the future may bring" (SNC, 1). As we live in a world with great challenges, we must keep pressing forward in the firm hope that God will make all things work unto good in his time, not ours.

The fourth century Bishop of Antioch, Saint John Chrysostom provides practical guidance for pressing forward when he once preached, "I urge you, my friends, to have confidence. Let the world be in upheaval. I hold to his promise and read his message; that is my protecting wall and garrison. What message? Know that I am with you always until the end of the world!" (Ante exsilium, nn 1-3: PG 52, 427-430).

As we celebrate Christmas 2025 in a world of upheaval, turmoil and hunger, let us stand firm in the belief that the birth of Emmanuel, "God with us," is with us always, providing "the hope that does not disappoint" and the strength needed to persevere through the challenges of our present time. As we sing the well-known carol, O Holy Night, the Savior's birth brings "a thrill of hope," to which "the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn".

Monsignor Walter Robert Rossi
Rector



Voice of the Religious Community

AUSTRALIA:
CARMELITE MONASTERY, GOONELLABAH

Helping others find Jesus

No greater message of hope could be offered to the world than that found in the mystery of Christmas, the mystery of the In-carnation of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. "In the be-ginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1)

Immediately after the sin of our first parents in the Garden of Eden, God's promise gave hope to fallen humanity. The promise spoken by God after the sin of Adam and Eve foretells that the seed of the woman will crush the serpent's head, signifying the eventual victory of good over evil and a redeemer who will come to defeat Satan and reconcile humanity to God.

Throughout the centuries this hope remained buried in the hearts of men and women who sought peace and relief from their burdens. It found particular emphasis in God's Chosen Peo-ple as the ages unfolded. Through God's merciful intervention and revelation to the patriarchs and prophets, an expectancy was born and nourished in their hearts. With ever greater clarity, the expectation of a Messiah caused a deep and strong longing among the people. Their longing for peace and joy shaped their concept of the Messiah. He would be one who would deliver them from their enemies and grant them untold prosperity and fulfilment in a world of lasting peace and joy. The One Who was to come would indeed fulfil these longings, but in a way that would surpass their greatest dreams!

From all eternity God had willed the Incarnation. Through it He would reveal the Mystery of His Triune Being and would open the floodgates to a nuptial union between God and mankind. The peace and joy that humanity longed for amid so much toil and strife would be fulfilled in a life of unending union with God, begun on earth and lived perfectly in heaven, forever.

In his Romances, St John of the Cross expresses God's eternal plan in poetic fashion, expressing beautifully the love of God for mankind and illuminating our reasons for hope:

1. Now that the time had come
When it would be good
To ransom the bride
Serving under the hard yoke

2. Of that law
Which Moses had given her,
The Father, with tender love,
Spoke in this way:

3. Now you see, Son, that Your bride
Was made in Your image,
And so far as she is like You
She will suit you well;
4. Yet she is different, in her flesh,
Which Your simple being does not have.
In perfect love
This law holds:

5. That the lover become

Like the one he loves;
For the greater their likeness
The greater their delight.

6. Surely Your bride's delight
Would greatly increase
Were she to see You like her,
In her own flesh.

7. My will is Yours,
The Son replied,
And My glory is
That Your will be Mine.

8. This is fitting, Father,
What You, the Most High, say;
For in this way
Your goodness will be the more seen,

9. Your great power will be seen
And Your justice and wisdom.
I will go and tell the world,
Spreading the word
Of Your beauty and sweetness
And of Your sovereignty.

10. I will go seek My bride
And take upon Myself
Her weariness and labours
In which she suffers so;

11. And that she may have life
I will die for her,
And, lifting her out of that deep,
I will restore her to You.

Romance 7. The Incarnation.

How could mankind have dared to hope for such love? How could anyone have dreamt of being so loved by God, infinitely loved? It was beyond anyone's wildest dreams that a Divine Person should take on human flesh and die for us, that we might be restored to true life. Yet this is what Jesus did! In this, He is our HOPE!

Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection gave us access to the full Revelation of God. In Baptism we receive the Theological virtue of Hope. For those of us who have had the privilege of participating in the Jubilee Year of Hope, the Church has provided multiple opportunities to receive Jubilee indulgences and graces. As the Jubilee Year ends, we face the future with renewed hope.

However, in a world that is often without peace and in which many are deprived of basic necessities and dignity, hope seems unreal and many are tempted to despair. They are seeking happiness in the wrong way and in the wrong places, unaware of God's infinite personal love for them.

By the way we live our Carmelite life, we long to help others find Jesus and enter into a personal relationship with Him. Only then will they begin to hope. Only then will they find peace and joy, discovering that God always brings good out of everything, no matter how painful a situation might be. By trying to live faithfully as Discalced Carmelite Nuns, guided by the teaching of St Teresa of Jesus and the guidelines of the Church, we hope that in the heart of our Mother the Church we can be heralds of HOPE.

May the peace, joy and hope experienced by Mary and Joseph at Christmas be yours forever.

Sr Maria of the Immaculate Heart, OCD

AUSTRIA: CARMEL OF SAINT JOSEPH IN GRAZ

NADA – The Nothingness of Carmel and the Hope of Christmas

In our community of Discalced Carmelite nuns in Graz, in beautiful Austria, there lives a sister whose religious name is Nada (in Spanish, "Nothing"). After finding faith in God around the age of 20, she wanted to be a NOTHING, expecting EVERYTHING from God — just as she had learned from the writings of Saint John of the Cross and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux.
Only after more than 50 years in the Order, when we had the privilege of meeting our Croatian brothers and sisters, did our sister "Nothing" discover that her name means "Hope" in Croatian…
Nothing = Nada = Hope: an insignificant coincidence, not worth a second thought?
Or does this point to a mysterious reality that we often fail to see — or at times do not even want to believe?
It is fascinating how the mystery of Christmas and the spirituality of Carmel share several points in common, following precisely this path:

1. NADA in smallness
"You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." God comes into the world as a small and helpless child, yet He is the Wonder Counselor, the God Hero, the Prince of Peace.
Smallness is essential to Carmelite life. A great teacher in this regard was Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. She teaches us the Little Way, the path of spiritual childhood, which consists in trusting God with boldness:
"I understand so well that only love can make us pleasing to the God of love... Jesus is happy to show me the only path that leads to this divine furnace; that path is the abandonment of a child who falls asleep without fear in the arms of its Father."

2. NADA in Silence
"While gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, your all-powerful Word leaped down from heaven, from the royal throne."
The Carmelite monastery is conceived as a place where silence is lived. John of the Cross and Thérèse of Lisieux, among many others, testify to this:
"The eternal Father spoke one Word, and this Word was His Son; and He speaks it eternally in everlasting silence. And in silence the soul will hear this Word."
"O blessed silence, which gives my soul such peace."

3. NADA in the Dark Night
"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shone," as we hear in the reading for Christmas.
According to John of the Cross, a new light shines in the soul precisely through the "dark night," for in it the soul is transformed into a flame of love for God:
O Night that was my guide!
O Night more lovely than the dawn!
O Night that joined
The Beloved with the lover,
And the lover transformed in the Beloved!"

4. NADA in poverty
The Incarnation takes place in a stable, in absolute poverty, "because there was no room for them in the inn."
Thus, when Teresa of Ávila founded the monasteries of the Discalced Carmelites, she placed great emphasis on poverty — both exterior and in-

terior. The latter was something the little Saint Thérèse deeply cherished: "...what pleases the dear Lord in my little soul is to see that I love my littleness and my poverty, my blind hope in His mercy... this is my only treasure."

5. NADA in Simplicity
"When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another: 'Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.'"
In a simplicity comparable to that of the shepherds, the little Saint Thérèse lived and grew in intimacy with God:
"Simple souls do not need complicated means... I simply tell God what I want to say to Him, without using beautiful phrases, and He always understands me."

6. NADA in Mary
"Behold, the young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call him Emmanuel."
God in us: this is, so to speak, the "elixir of life" in Carmel:
"Let us draw near to the most pure Virgin, so that she may lead us to the love of Him whom she welcomed so deeply within herself."

7. NADA in faith
"But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart."
What was Mary pondering?
The unfathomable event of the Incarnation.
That even today the unthinkable can become possible if we expect everything from God is testified by little Saint Thérèse when she speaks of Christmas 1886:
"On that blessed night, which was radiant with the delights of God Himself, Jesus — who became a child out of love for me — deigned to free me from the bonds of imperfection... He transformed me so completely that I no longer recognized myself."
Perhaps we have already experienced one or more of these seven "Nothings" in our lives.
Perhaps we have already witnessed God's intervention precisely where everything seemed lost, useless, and hopeless — as if there were nothing — where we were weak and apparently powerless, and thus expected everything from Him.
Perhaps, this coming Christmas, God wishes to grant humanity once again the experience that a new hope — indeed, the fullness of life and peace — can blossom from nothing.
"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests!"

The Discalced Carmelite Nuns of Graz

AUSTRIA: WILTEN ABBEY, INNSBRUCK

The Crib – A Crucial Point of Hope
A glimpse into the spirituality of the Premonstratensian Order On the Way to the Manger

Darkness suddenly surrounds Norbert of Xanten when, in 1115, a bolt of ightning throws him from his horse. Regaining consciousness, he hears within himself the words: "Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." (Ps 34:15) This simple verse from the Psalms changes his life forever. Norbert begins to seek the true meaning of his existence and resolves to follow the Gospel and the life of the Apostles wholeheartedly. He exchanges his fine garments for a robe of undyed white wool and asks for ordination as deacon and priest. When his call to radical discipleship meets little response among his brothers at St. Victor's, Norbert sets out as a wandering preacher.
Gradually he detaches himself from all possessions and embraces a life of simplicity. His authentic way of living soon inspires others to join him. A vision of the Cross leads the growing community to build a monastery in a secluded valley west of Laon – Prémontré (Latin praemonstratum, meaning "foreshown").

At the Manger
On Christmas Day 1121, St. Norbert and his first companions make their vows – marking the birth of the Order (nativitas Christi – nativitas ordinis). This moment has shaped the entire history of the Premonstratensians: discipleship begins at the manger – without riches or signs of worldly power but kneeling before God who enters the world as a helpless child, teaching that it is the small and humble things that truly change the world. It is a moment of hope in a broken world: where humanity stands defenseless and open, there God meets us. As St. Augustine said, "The desire of God is the human being" (homo desiderium Dei). Yet this encounter also challenges us: having distanced ourselves from true humanity, we are called to become human again – just as God becamehuman for us.

From the Manger into the World
The Norbertine way of life soon flourished. Within decades, dozens of monasteries for men and women were founded across Western Europe. Though many have disappeared over time, the Order remains present throughout the world today – the largest community of canons regular.

Following St. Augustine and St. Norbert, we strive to be "of one heart and one mind on the way to God," having "Christ alone as our guide." Community, contemplation, and pastoral service form a living balance. In serving others, we share what is daily given to us through the liturgy and our common life. No task is foreign to us – we are ready for every good work.

Back to the Manger
The Order's birth at the manger is deeply woven into our identity. Each Christmas Day, we renew our vows there as a community. It is therefore fitting that one of our brothers, Dom Chrysosto-mus Mösl (1863–1942), founded the Tyrolean Crib Association in 1909. It connects nativity-scene devotees across borders, help-ing each to find their personal path to the manger. Thousands have created their own cribs, engaging deeply with the mystery of the Incarnation. Each small scene, formed with love and devotion, becomes a silent proclamation of faith.

At the Manger
The nativity scenes that have been created are, in many ways, messengers of the Gospel and of the Incarnation of God. In some, Christ's poverty is emphasized; others highlight the splen-did depiction of the Magi from the East, who lay their treasures at the feet of the Child. Some seek to reproduce as realistically as possible the setting of the Near East at the time of Jesus' birth, while others deliberately transpose the events of long ago into our own age and surroundings. Some dwell on the image of the shepherds, showing flocks and herds spread across the hills around Bethlehem; others stress the divine dimension of this mystery through hosts of angels who, in visible joy, proclaim the message of that holy night. Each crib thus becomes a personal meditation on the Gospel, bearing within it a glimpse of the hope revealed in that moment. Some go even further, linking the mystery of the Nativity with the mystery of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection – thus placing before our eyes the entire work of redemption.

Back into the World
Each year, when we come to the manger, we seek not only to encounter God but also to rediscover what it means to be human. Perhaps, step by step, we can let go of what is unnec-essary and offer our lives openly to God. And as we return to our daily lives, we may begin to sense God's longing for us – the God who became small and humble to dwell among us and to be near to all humankind.

Dom Leopold Baumberger, OPraem
Abbot

CANADA : SAINTE-MARIE DES DEUX-MONTAGNES ABBEY, SAINTE-MARIE-SUR-LE-LAC

The Church... and the nuns are right to always hope! Christmas at Sainte-Marie des Deux-Montagnes Abbey in the Jubilee Year 2025

In the heart of the Church, my Mother, I will be love...

The Governorate's magazine is entitled "From the heart of the State (the Vatican) - The Governorate tells its story." Why, then, from faraway Canada, are the Benedictine nuns of Sainte-Marie des Deux-Montagnes invited to tell about their Christmas and their Jubilee Year? – Because we are hidden in the heart of the Church, present in the heart of the Vatican State: as pilgrims of hope, without leaving the cloister, we lived the Jubilee, participating remotely in the Roman celebrations. At Christmas, we watch the Masses celebrated by Pope Leo on a large screen, delayed due to the time difference. And what a blessing: we feel at home, with our family, at St. Peter's in Rome! Grand and solemn, the papal celebrations are the same as those, much simpler, at Sainte- Marie's Abbey. We do not have as many acolytes, masters of ceremonies, cantors, or splendor... but the Solemn Proclamation of the Birth of Christ, the Kalenda, is the same, the Gregorian chant is the same, the readings and prayers in Latin are the same. In Bethleem Iudae, nascitur ex Maria Virgine, factus homo...

Aperite portas!

Open wide the doors, lift up your lintels, and He will enter, the King of Glory, we sing at the Offertory of the Christmas Vigil. These doors, the Holy Doors were opened in Rome last year; at Sainte-Marie, for Christmas, the Novitiate wanted to echo these grand openings, in a small, modest and joyful way: they decorated the door of the Novitiate room with photos of the opening of each Holy Door. For after years of desert, in the midst of de-Christianization, beyond all hope, our Novitiate is flourishing again with two postulants and more than a dozen aspirants, almost all of whom are immigrants or daughters of immigrants. Nothing is impossible for God, the angel Gabriel told Mary... Enixa is puerpera... The young mother gave birth to the one Gabriel had announced.

Spes non confundit

Hope does not disappoint. In this jubilee year, God's gift has exceeded all our expectations: the whole Church, and intensely all the nuns, have lived Pope Francis' Easter, rejoiced at the election of Pope Leo, watched, listened to, and read his speeches. Dilexi te, I love you, Jesus says to each one of us; he says it with special affection to the poorest, to the victims of war.

Ipse invocabit me: Pater meus es tu! He will call upon me: You are my Father!

The Abbey of Sainte-Marie des Deux-Montagnes, together with Saint-Pierre de Solesmes and the monasteries of the Congregation of Solesmes, is also celebrating the 150th anniversary of the death of Dom Prosper Guéranger (1805-1875), servant of God and of the Church, restorer of Benedictine life in France, our second father after Saint Benedict. Here is what he wrote in his Liturgical Year for Christmas night, which we reread every year in the refectory:

"There are three places in the world that our thoughts must turn to at this hour. Bethlehem is the first of these three places, and in Bethlehem, it is the cave of the Nativity that calls us. (...) However, for twelve centuries, the Manger has found refuge at the center of Catholicism, in Rome, in the splendid and radiant church of Saint Mary Major. (...) The third of the sanctuaries where the mystery of the birth of the divine Son of Mary must be fulfilled is within us, it is our heart. O heart of the Christian, living Bethlehem, prepare yourself, and rejoice!"

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Gloria in excelsis Deo!

Gloria! sings the celebrant at

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midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. As in churches around the world, the nuns continue: et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis. And the bells will ring out, for all the bells are set in motion during the Gloria on Christmas night. Yet the joy of Christmas coexists with the painful Passion of so many victims who bear the cross of unspeakable suffering caused by wars and natural disasters. Pax hominibus... The peace that Jesus brings at Christmas is not given as the world gives it. Are we going to despair in the face of "the globalization of powerlessness"? What message of hope does Christmas offer in a world often without peace? When we live happily, fulfilled, can we respond on behalf of those who suffer? Let us hear from a young missionary in South Sudan, Father Federico Gandolfi, O.F.M.: "The population is at the end of its tether, people do not have enough to eat, they do not have enough to live on, nor healthcare, but these Christmas celebrations will be an explosion of joy, because they know that the Lord is with them," according to Vatican News on December 23, 2024. We have read similar testimonies of faith, hope, and even Christian joy in news reports from Ukraine, Myanmar, and the Catholic parish in Gaza.

Urbi et orbi...

Although we are not physically present in the heart of Rome, we have there true sisters. A group of Benedictine nuns of Santa Escolastica, from Buenos Aires, live in the Vatican monastery, Mater Ecclesiae. We recognized them, silent and praying, standing close to Pope Francis' coffin during his funeral. Their Abbess, Mother Cristina Moroni, wrote to our Abbess, Mother Isabelle Thouin, that after the funeral, a Cardinal approached them to ask permission to visit their small monastery. Who was he? – Cardinal Prevost... They immediately thought that Pope Francis had sent him... without anticipating that he might be elected to succeed him.

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Together with them, in communion with the Holy Father and the universal Church, we ask the Lord to communicate to all the little flame of joy, faith, and hope, and to console broken hearts. Is not the secret that of St. Carlo Acutis: To be always united with Jesus?

Sœur Bernadette Marie Roy, OSB

CANADA: AUGUSTINIAN MONASTERY OF THE MERCY OF JESUS, MONTRÉAL

Hope: Being in a State of Vigilance

"The traveler who toils along the road
endures his labor because he hopes to arrive.
Take away that hope, and you destroy his fervor."
(St. Augustine, Sermon 158, 8)

For the Augustinian Sisters of the Mercy of Jesus of the Canadian Federation, the year 2025 was marked by the hope that guides our pilgrim journey. The Augustinian Monastery, located in Old Québec (Canada), preserves in its historic church the reliquary of Blessed Marie-Catherine of St. Augustine. Nearby stand the Basilica-Cathedral of Québec, which houses the tomb of

Bishop François de Laval, adjacent to the Ursuline Monastery where Saint Marie of the Incarnation rests; and just a few minutes away, the Jesuit Church, whose first members arrived in the country in 1625.

This cluster of holy places, gathered in such a small space, has drawn a great flow of pilgrims from every corner of the world—people coming to recollect themselves and keep alive the flame of hope during this Holy Year. We have witnessed this prayerful wave spreading toward us, naturally reaching the depths of our own hospitality, and inspiring us as well on our pilgrim journey with our brothers and sisters in humanity.

Moreover, for us Augustinians, it was also the year of our Chapter Assembly, whose chosen theme was "Walking Together in Hope, Rooted in Christ."

First of all, it should be noted that the official formula of our religious consecration begins with these words:

"Holy Trinity, in the presence of the Church of heaven and earth, and founding my hope upon your faithfulness, I commit myself to follow Christ in the community of Sisters..."

We are well aware of the depth of this hope which—if not deeply rooted in the spiritual Rock of God's Word, nourished by the bonds of fraternal communion, and contemplated under the gaze of God's faithfulness—risks becoming thin and clouding the hearts of us who are pilgrims. The challenges are many and our hope is constantly tested; but our God is the God of Promise and His faithfulness will never fail us.

Secondly, being of Augustinian inspiration, our spirituality is profoundly shaped by the life and writings of St. Augustine, whose fundamental orientation was marked by an unceasing search for truth—a visceral longing for true happiness. It is therefore not surprising that at the very beginning of his Confessions, he wrote the famous words:

"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you,"

whose final goal is nothing less than "the eternal Jerusalem toward which the pilgrim people journey, from their departure until their return." (Conf. IX, 23, 37)

Finally, we cannot but recall the spiritual figure of Blessed Marie-Catherine of St. Augustine. In her life, hope was far more than a word; it was the breath of her soul, sustaining her closeness with God and keeping her profoundly united to her Creator:

"God is my strength, my support, my hope, and the soul of my desires."

And again, weakened by plague during the long sea voyage that took her from Normandy to Canada in 1648, at the age of sixteen, she said:

"My good Jesus, I have always hoped in you; I hope still, and I shall die in peace, trusting that for all eternity I will never be sep-

arated from your holy will."

It is no wonder that she cared for the sick without distinction of race, culture, or religion and that her greatest desire was that all might die in peace after receiving the comfort of Holy Mother Church. Her inventive charity longed that no one be excluded from eternal blessedness; she who had given her whole life for the salvation of souls in the young Church of New France. Her biographer, Father Paul Ragueneau, S.J., recounts her words: "...and I believe that my prayer has been heard." Such a desire required bold faith and an unflawed hope—one that would bring health to the soul for eternity.

Inspired by these great figures of holiness, the Augustinian Sisters of the Mercy of Jesus are called to give a human face to the tender mercy of God, of which Jesus, the Father's envoy, is the perfect icon. Thus, the mission of the Augustinians—expressed in the "care of bodies and souls," both corporal and spiritual—bears within it the flower of hope, deeply rooted in a faith and expressed through attitudes and gestures that carry a longing for healing and liberation of both body and soul.

This Holy Year 2025, which followed for us the 350th anniversary of the founding of the Diocese of Québec in 2024—the year when the Holy Door of the Basilica-Cathedral was opened—has given us the opportunity to revisit our hope and anchor it anew in faith in the Resurrection of Christ.

Indeed, as Pope Leo XIV said in his catechesis of October 1, 2025:

"The Resurrection is not the erasure of the past, but its transfiguration into a hope of mercy."

I can bear witness that these times of grace—these Holy Years offered by Holy Mother Church—are constant invitations to let myself be clothed and filled with this hope of mercy. How can it come to life? By realizing that my gaze, my listening, my silence, my gestures, my prayer, my greetings are all opportunities to express my hope to the one I meet in the daily course of my life—in thought, word, and deed.

Then I shall care for the other, in the person of Jesus, with attitudes transformed into those of that same Jesus whose hope never faltered, even under the weight of the cross—the cross identified with crucified humanity.

May this wood of the cross, hewn in and from a hope of mercy, lead us pilgrims toward the dwelling of perfect Love.

Sr. Carmelle Bisson, AMJ
Augustinian Sisters of the Mercy of Jesus

CHILE: MONASTERY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, LOS ANDES

With Teresita, pilgrims of hope!
The relevance of her message in a time of war

"Oh, if this day you only know what makes for peace - but now it is hidden from your eyes" (Lk 19:42).
Seventy-five kilometers from the nation's capital (Santiago, Chile) lies its "spiritual capital": the Shrine of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Saint Teresa of the Andes, in Auco, where the remains of the first Chilean Saint—and the first Discalced Carmelite nun in the Americas to be canonized—rest.
In this place of grace and silence, nature itself seems to speak of the infinite through the majesty of the Andes Mountains and their highest peak, Aconcagua, at whose feet other mountains nestle, embracing the fertile valley of the same name. Here a variety of fruit trees are cultivated, each forming a harmonious network that completes the wonderful landscape inviting all to praise.
But the vanishing point of the entire canvas painted by the Divine Hand is the living presence of the one who, in this life, suffered "an unquenchable hunger and thirst for souls to know God," and who now, from the "source of joy," is able to let those springs of living water—promised to her by her Lord—flow from the side of her temple.
We, as the community of Discalced Carmelites to which the Saint belonged, are witnesses of this—witnesses before the thousands of pilgrims who, day after day, lay their prayers at her feet, prayers that then become thanksgiving for faith in the One who is almighty and who is moved by the unceasing cry of His little ones who entrust themselves to their generous Friend.
For Saint Teresa has been—and continues to be—mysteriously and generously a "Pilgrim of Hope" among her people.
She, who at the age of four invited a priest to climb the mountain range because she believed Heaven was there, continues even today to invite us to raise our gaze toward "the infinite horizons of God."
We reflected upon this on October 25, when we once again witnessed the power of grace during the 35th Pilgrimage to the Shrine of Auco, whose motto was "With Teresita, pilgrims of hope!" More than 60,000 young people from all over the country participated, walking 27 kilometers on foot from Chacabuco to her Shrine, passing through ten stations. They prepared their hearts for their arrival at the sanctuary, where Jesus awaited them in the Blessed Sacrament in the Tent of Adoration, at the Cross of Commitment (where they left their footprints, promising the Lord to "be bearers of hope"), at the Pastoral Listening program, and in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, so they could receive the plenary indulgence granted during this Jubilee for young people, since our shrine is a Jubilee Temple.
The celebration concluded with Holy Mass presided over by Bishop Alberto Lorenzelli, Auxiliary Bishop of Santiago, who urged those present to "let the weariness of your feet become passion in your hearts. Be pilgrims of hope among your friends, in your schools, and in your families."
In this Jubilee Year—which is about to end—in which, as Pope Francis has invited us, "in addition to reaching out to the hope that God's grace offers us, we are also called to rediscover it in the signs of the times the Lord gives us," the question naturally arises: what does it mean to be pilgrims of hope in a world torn apart by war? Or perhaps the fundamental question is: what is the goal of our theological Hope?
1. Peace as a Gift: "The Kiss of Peace" (Ps 85)
The account of Juanita's First Communion is profoundly moving. One could say that on this "cloudless day" she received the first great impulse on her journey toward Union with God. She hears Jesus's voice for the first time, confesses that from that day forward the earth no longer holds any charm for her, and feels the desire to die, because she has met "face-to-face" for the first time the "Prince of Peace," who touches her "with a delightful peace." This is God, who always takes the initiative, with the full gratuity of the One who "loves to the end"!
2. Peace as a Challenge: "Seek peace and pursue it" (Ps 34)
But to keep the banner of peace raised high, Juanita had to wage constant battle against herself. During her 1917 spiritual retreat, she reevaluated her life with surprising clarity:
"Oh, how great I feel when I see my origin—a God Himself!—and my end: an Infinite God! But there is a point between origin and end, and that is life. What must I do, then, as long as I

live?…"
She answered herself:
"From this moment on, I want to be a Saint… I've understood that what separates me most from God is my pride. From today onward, I want and resolve to be humble. Without humility, the other virtues are hypocrisy. Without it, the graces received from God become harm and ruin. Humility brings us likeness to Christ, peace of soul, holiness, and intimate union with God."
3. Peace as Seed: "Sown in peace" (James 3)
Many testimonies portray Juanita as a sower of peace among her people. She seems to offer her "recipe" to a friend who has just finished school:
"You are going onto a new battlefield. Train yourself to fight. Let your motto be: 'God always in sight and "self" always in sacrifice.'… Family life, to be a life of unity, must be continual sacrifice. Consider yourself the least of all and try to serve even the servants… Be very affectionate toward your younger siblings. Do not reprimand them without just cause. Play with them and teach them to pray, to read, to write, etc., and earn their respect by giving good example. Never let them see you disobey or in a bad mood. As for what you should be toward your father and mother, I will only tell you: be an angel of comfort…"
4. Peace as Fruit: "For there shall be a seed of peace: the vine shall yield its fruit" (Zech 8)
Juanita, seeker of God's will, finally discovers her vocation: the Lord wants her to be a Carmelite. Discovering her "Dovecote" in the Andes, she feels confirmed, and the seal of that confirmation is peace:
"No, I had been there only a second, and my soul was already permeated with an unalterable peace. After struggling with so many doubts, I had found my secure harbor, my refuge, my heaven on earth. At last, I knew with certainty the will of God, and a heavenly peace flooded my soul. How good God is! There is nothing like abandoning oneself to Him."
5. Peace as Dwelling: "Peace be within your walls and security within your towers" (Ps 122)
At Carmel, Teresa felt immersed in God, dwelling in His peace:

"My prayer becomes ever more simple. As soon as I begin to pray, I feel my whole soul immersed in God, and I find a peace, a quiet so great that I cannot describe it. Then my soul perceives that divine silence, and the deeper the stillness and recollection, the more God reveals Himself to me… I feel my soul burning with the love of God, as if He were communicating His blazing fire to me."
6. Peace as Mission: "I will extend peace to her like a river" (Is 66)
From the source of peace in the Heart of her God, Teresa writes to share her joy, especially with her father, Don Miguel, who lacked peace. She writes to him:
"No one loves you as Jesus does, for He gave His life to give you heaven. How I wish you would let Him make Himself known to you, my dear father, so that your life may flow peacefully and happily, even if sorrows surround you. Ah, Father, your Carmelite shows you the fountain of peace and joy here on earth, which is found only in that crucified God."
"I am so happy because I live close to that fountain."
In Juanita, the prophecy of Jesus comes to life:
"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture says, rivers of living water will flow from within him" (Jn 7).
She drank from the pierced side of Jesus, and today many, through her writings and her life, sense that behind the mystery of her life there lies the "Fountain ever flowing," and they draw near, thirsty to reach those "infinite horizons" they perceive within.
7. Peace as Beatitude: "They shall be called children of God" (Mt 5)
The Love of God transformed Teresa of the Andes—"a slave to herself" into a "Daughter of God." She perceives this transformation and, marveling at her peace, tells us:
"I no longer live except for God. All the smallness of worldly life has vanished. Now I see only what is great, eternal, and infinite. There, everything was restlessness, turmoil, and emptiness for my soul; here, everything is peace, tranquility, and complete satisfaction in my God. How clearly I experience that He is the only Good capable of fulfilling us, the only ideal capable of completely winning our hearts. I find everything in Him. I rejoice deeply in seeing Him so beautiful, in feeling always united to Him, for God is immense and is everywhere. No one can separate me from Him. His divine essence is my life."

The Discalced Carmelites

FRANCE:
TRAPPIST ABBEY OF NOTRE-DAME D'ACEY

Christmas — yes, it is Christ-mas!

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Lc 2, 14)

The first message of hope is that Christmas has been celebrated for over 1600 years: what perseverance our Earth shows in celebrating the birth of a child belonging to a people under the rule of an Empire of which he was not even a citizen. Yes, even a being born of a colonized people deserves our joy! And with Christmas comes the Christmas Truce — God's Peace, His Peace, which He gives us so that we may nurture it. This truce deserves to last more than fifteen days!

The second message of hope is that a refugee forced to be registered, without even the care due to a woman expecting a child, does not leave us indifferent. All the displaced, the refugees of war, of climate, or of poverty... will find hope in One who understands them and takes them into account, because He shares their condition. If He understands them, loves them, and helps them, why shouldn't we do the same? Trust generates peace!

The third message of hope is that, although He was born in inhuman conditions, in a place meant for livestock, He is nonetheless the most beautiful among the children of men: every hope, therefore, is justified for every child on Earth, His brother in humanity — and thus for every life that brings its unique note to the symphony of the world. To hope in others is to hope in ourselves. (Cf. Dilexit te 19)

The fourth message of hope is that He was born and became accessible to the marginalized — to shepherds and Magi alike. No one is a stranger to Him, for He made Himself like us in all things... starting from the lowest place, so that no one need look down upon Him. He became all things to all people so that everyone might say with Him: Our Father.

The fifth message of hope is that shortly after His birth, He became a migrant — in Egypt, of all places. A migrant, a political refugee, He was welcomed far from home, for at home He was threatened. Thus, every human being can hope to find a land of asylum in His memory. That land, too, becomes Holy Land. Every war, then, becomes a kind of denial of the One who is Peace itself.

The sixth message of hope to contemplate is that He returns to His homeland when conditions become favorable again. With Him, every displaced person begins to hope to rediscover the place called "my home," where one feels most at ease, most easily integrated

among one's own. Every land can become a refuge where Peace is cultivated — like a good gardener in this Garden which God has entrusted to us, our Common Home.
The seventh message of hope is that, by becoming small, He becomes fragile, dependent… and every dependent person can feel less alone, for He has lived the same experience. The most beautiful thing is that this dependence was not only for the time needed to grow in stature and wisdom, but for all the time until His return — giving Himself as Word, Body and Blood, usable, even abusable, so that we might learn to care for one another in our weakness.
Then comes the Wonder of Wonders: the eighth message of hope is that He loves us enough — together with the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit — not to be content with being born only once in History, but in every heart that in Faith opens itself to receive Him anew with the help of Our Lady. Yes, His Incarnation is present today: Jesus Christ desires to dwell in every human being whom He has loved into existence, that He might divinize them. God became man so that man might be divinized!
And He knocks at the door, ready to share supper with us.
So welcome, Lord, to the Land of Hope,
to our hearts — right there, where I long to become Holy Land,
holy with Your holiness,
blessed with Your presence until Your Return!
Thus Isaiah proclaims:
Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat;
The calf and the young lion shall browse together,
with a little child to guide them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
together their young shall lie down;
the lion shall eat hay like the ox. The baby shall play by the viper's den,
and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair. They shall not harm or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the LORD, as water covers the sea.
(Isaia, 11. 6-9a)

His dominion is vast
and forever peaceful,
Upon David's throne, and over his kingdom,
which he confirms and sustains
By judgment and justice,
both now and forever.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this!
(Isaia, 9.6)

Father Raphaël García-Pelayo, OCSO
Superior ad nutum

FRANCE:
MONASTERY OF THE CARMEL OF COMPIÈGNE, JONQUIÈRES

The Charism of Carmel and the Witness of the Carmelite Martyrs of Compiègne

On December 18, 2024, just days before the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, Pope Francis published the decree of canonization of the sixteen Carmelite nuns of Compiègne, martyrs for peace. What great joy—this news had been long awaited! The Jubilee of Hope opened for our community in an extraordinary way. Three celebrations marked this canonization: on May 8, 2025, in our city of Compiègne, where their convent once stood; on July 19 at our monastery, in memory of their martyrdom on July 17, 1794; and on September 13 in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris, the place of their execution and burial.

Already in April 2024, Pope Francis had encouraged the Carmelite Order to walk toward hope through its own charism: "The contemplative vocation does not lead us to preserve ashes, but to keep alive a fire that burns ever anew and can bring warmth to the Church and to the world. [...] Live fully the tension between separation from the world and immersion in the world. Certainly, you are not to take refuge in intimate spiritual consolation or in prayer detached from reality. On the contrary, your journey is one in which you must let yourselves be touched by the love of Christ until you are united with Him. And this love must permeate your whole existence and be expressed in every gesture and every daily action. The dynamic of contemplation is always a dynamic of love. It is always a ladder that lifts us toward God—not to separate us from the earth, but to make us live more deeply, as witnesses of the love we have received."

"The hope of the Gospel [...] means surrendering ourselves to God, learning to read the signs He gives us in order to discern the future. And may this total immersion in the Lord's presence always give you the joy of fraternity and mutual love."

The canonization of our sisters has been one more step toward evangelical hope: through them, through their witness, we are called to be witnesses before the world of the love with which the Lord fills us.

Christmas 1792 or 1793 (the text is undated). Our Carmelite nuns had been expelled from their convent; they found refuge in friendly homes in Compiègne and would meet to participate in the Eucharist, to share times of prayer or recreation together. Each day, they renewed their act of consecration to God, that "this divine peace, which His dear Son came to bring to the world, might be restored to the Church and to the State." For this reason, they would later be called the "Virgins of Peace." Ten days after their death, the mass executions came to an end. Christmas was approaching, always a major feast in Carmel. Devotion to the Infant Jesus is ancient. The mystery of the Nativity, in the poverty of the crib, is united with the extreme solitude of the ascent to the scaffold. As Christmas drew near, when the guillotine already loomed as a threat, Mother Teresa of St. Augustine composed a poem "To Be Sung at the Crib." Although the text of their communal vow of consecration has been lost, the spirit of that vow is beautifully reflected in this hymn:

Heavenly Child, it is You I desire,
No other object satisfies my heart!
Then it is done—I am under Your rule,
I feel the ardor of Your love!
Heal this guilty, sinful heart,
May it be wounded by sorrow and by love!
Heavenly wounds, so greatly to be desired!
Pierce this heart—may it suffer night and day!

Divine Love, with all that I am
I come to lay myself before Your cradle.
My soul abandons itself to Your severity
And blinds my reason forever...
I want nothing—Your Heart is my all,
Here I sacrifice my visions and desires.
It is within Your Heart that I wish to be enclosed;
I accept the martyrdom of Your love...
Ah! upon death I found my hopes,
For I die with longing to die.
Hasten, O Lord, hasten my deliverance!
Break these chains, fulfill my desires!
Strike as You will, sacrifice Your victim—
Your divine blows will be sacred to me!
My happiness is to breathe my last beneath Your hand;
May Your rigors be sweet to my heart!
Divine Shepherd, I place under Your care
That dear flock entrusted to me!
Gentle Child, beside Your bed
I leave both mother and children!
Mother of love, august sovereign,
Have mercy—in Your bosom, oh, receive us!

To Your aid, our mighty Queen,
Your dear children have every right to hope.
Everything must be founded on Christ; nothing has value apart from Him.

By shedding her blood, the Mother Prioress, together with her entire community, bore witness to Him who came into the world to reveal to us the glory of the Father. Confronted with the horror of civil war and a furious assault upon the Church of Christ, she immersed herself in the source of all love—to love fully, and to bear witness to that infinite love before humankind.

Their hope—and ours—is founded upon faith in this Son of God who is given to us as light in a world of darkness. We are called to kindle other small lights to illumine the shadows, through peace and daily fraternity. For us Carmelites, in solitude and silence, within the fraternal community of a family formed as a small "college of Christ," it means carrying the world in our evangelical prayer.

Sr. Line-Marie, OCD

FRANCE:
CARMELITE MONASTERY OF DIJON, FLAVIGNEROT

A Prayer that "Overflows" into the World

From the opening of the Bull of Indiction for the Jubilee of 2025, Pope Francis set us on the road to Rome: "I think of all the pil-grims of hope who will come to Rome to experience the Holy Year… May it be for everyone a moment of personal encounter with the Lord Jesus, the 'door' of salvation. He is our hope." In our Carmelite monastery of Dijon–Flavignerot, where Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity lived a little more than a century ago, we did not leave our hill for the Eternal City, but our prayers often reached those pilgrims of hope. Almost symbolizing this close-ness, a liturgical magazine offered us a photograph of a huge crowd of young pilgrims, all wearing "APOSTLES OF HOPE" T-shirts, joyfully walking toward Saint Peter's behind the sign of Christ! Is it not also our vocation, in our own way, to be Apostles of Hope?
As Christmas approaches, I reread the poems Elizabeth wrote each year to sing during recreation with her sisters. Contemplating the Child in the manger, she discovers in Him the source and foundation of all hope. In a world turned toward material wealth and dominated by the arrogance of the powerful, hope is born because God has heard the cry of the poor… Christmas is the Father's Heart revealed in the extraordinary gift of His Son:
Contemplating the great anguish
of the children He has loved too much,
the Father, in a holy rapture,
gives them His adored Word.

He is the eternal and true light,

He who reigns in the bosom of the Father,
and comes to tell us all about Himself. (Poem 75)
Today, as yesterday, the world is in flames—and certainly more than yesterday, due to the extraordinary speed of communication. Everyone can learn of catastrophes, wars, threats, and anxieties affecting men and women who may be very far away, yet who are our brothers and sisters. Where can we find hope for

PEACE? High-level negotiations are needed, of course, but what will inspire them? Peace is born only of love and truth… It is here that Christmas night, in its naked simplicity, becomes a radiant hope for the eyes of faith. In Carmel, we never cease to contemplate this Mystery that transcends us, yet calls us to fill our prayer and our lives with it.

Elizabeth shows us the way. Captivated by the infinite and unconditional love of the Father, who gave His Son from the manger of Bethlehem to the cross of Calvary, she was not unaware of the sufferings and political crises of her time. She could even perceive them as an immediate threat, since many religious around her were expelled from their convents by a violently anticlerical government… But she placed all her trust in the "God of all Love" who dwells in this suffering world and remains also in her heart. She knew pain, difficulties, and an extremely painful illness. The secret of her joy did not lie primarily in exceptional courage, but in a relationship of love. Receiving communion from her Lord, she longed to collaborate in His work of salvation and peace. She sings of this in another poem composed for Christmas:

Behold the Son of His tenderness,
whom God gives us on this great day.
… 'House of God,' I keep within me the prayer
of Jesus Christ, the divine worshipper.
He carries me to souls and to the Father,
for this is His twofold movement.
To be Savior with my Master—
this is still my mission (Poem 88)

The same mission dwells in today's pilgrims of hope. Reading or watching the news, we have every reason to tremble, but if evil seems stronger than we are, God is stronger than evil. "How great God is, and how loved we are!" Elizabeth exclaimed. In the extreme weakness of the newborn of Bethlehem and in the abandonment of the Crucified, she learned to contemplate a God "overflowing with love," our only Hope.

The particular mission of the Carmelite is prayer. This prayer finds its strength and fruitfulness only in communion with Christ's own prayer. The day after Christmas, Elizabeth wrote to a canon friend: Since the Divine Child dwells in my soul, I have all His prayers, and I love to send them to those for whom my heart remains always deeply grateful… (Letter 190)

Thus this prayer can, in turn, "overflow" into the world: Since Our Lord dwells in our souls, His prayer is ours, and I would like constantly to communicate with it, holding myself like a little vessel at the Fountain, at the Fountain of Life, so as to be able to communicate it to souls, letting its streams of infinite charity overflow. (Letter 191)

The Discalced Carmelite Nuns of Dijon–Flavignerot

FRANCE: CARMEL MONASTERY, LISIEUX

Hope – Christmas

Oracle on Dumah: They call to me from Seir, "Watchman, how much longer the night?"
The watchman replies, "Morning has come, and again night. If you will ask, ask; come back again." (Isaiah 21:11–12)

It is a prayer of waiting and of hope. The prophet is a watchman. He too does not know when dawn will come, yet he remains faithful to his post and waits. He waits, he believes. He does not know. With his faith he can say: Morning is coming, but it is still night. If you wish, ask, seek, ask, return and ask again. He cannot give answers he does not have, but he does not refuse to listen. The prophet is the man or woman of the nocturnal dialogue. He is the companion of questions that have not yet found an answer. He can only say: it is still night, but dawn will come. Prophetic hope does not deny the night, nor does it deny the dawn. Its fidelity lies in remaining between night and dawn.
Through baptism, we become prophets. What must the believer bear witness to and prophesy? In the Gospel of John 1:5 we read: "The light shines in the darkness." The light has come into the world, but not everyone perceived it when Jesus came, nor do all perceive it today—especially when we look at the state of the world. As we prepare for the feast of Christmas, our cities and homes are adorned with the traditional decorations, full of lights. What is our hope? What light are we thinking of?
Edith Stein, Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, wrote in 1940: "In the dark days of December, the gentle light of the Advent candles shines—a light full of mystery in a mysterious darkness—which awakens within us the consoling thought that the divine light has never ceased to shine in the darkness of the fallen world. He has remained faithful to His creation despite all the unfaithfulness of His creatures. And even if the darkness would not let itself be penetrated by the heavenly light, there have always been places where it was welcomed and could shine. As the proverb says: one does not drive out darkness with a stick, but with a small light."
For those who believe in Jesus Christ, at Christmas the light is Jesus, who came into the world as a child. We place our hope in the One who has just been born. Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face speaks of the foundational experience of her whole life: "It was on December 25, 1886, that I received the grace to leave my childhood behind—in a word, the grace of my complete conversion. We were returning from Midnight Mass, where I had had the happiness of receiving the Strong and Powerful God… Thérèse was no longer the same; Jesus had changed her heart! On that night of light began the third period of my life—the most beautiful of all, the richest in heavenly graces… In an instant Jesus accomplished the work I had been unable to do in ten years, content with my good will."
Thérèse experienced the "mysterious exchange": God became man

to save us. Saint John of the Cross evokes this mystery in his Romances:

"Now the time had come for the liberation of the Bride, who under a harsh yoke served… the time had come for Him to be born… Men were singing hymns, angels their melodies… But there was God, in the manger, weeping and groaning… And the Mother beheld in God the tears of man, and in man the joy of God." Thus, the grace of Christmas for Thérèse was light—the strength of the Mighty God within her—that gave her complete conversion. But she did not remain closed in on herself. She immediately said:

"I felt charity enter my heart, the need to forget myself to please others" (Manuscript A 45v°). We see her hope for others. Soon after, she prayed fervently for the salvation of the grave criminal Pranzini, whom she called "my first child."

When we see the Christmas lights symbolizing Jesus, the Light who has come, like Thérèse we hope—for ourselves and for everyone—and believe that even a small thing we do can kindle a small light. For we have, as she did, the certainty that God became small to save us. We hope that every small act, under the action of the "Mighty God," may resonate throughout the whole world and make it better.

Returning to Edith Stein:

"Throughout the centuries there have always been human hearts that let themselves be touched by the radiant light of God. Hidden from the eyes of the world, it enlightened and enkindled them… Human beings may serve God without knowing it, or even against their own will."

When we see the "Christmas lights," do we think of all the lights shining in people's hearts and actions? When we see young people fighting for ecological causes, protesting so that world leaders and humanity as a whole might awaken to the catastrophe of global warming, or when we see organizations supporting migrants—do we see in them a light of hope, the light of Christmas that seeks to renew the earth, a sign of hope?

Our Holy Mother Teresa of Avila, at the beginning of The Way of Perfection (1.2), explains the reason for the foundation of the reformed Carmel:

"Having learned of the harm caused in France by those Lutherans… I was greatly saddened, and, as if I could do something about it, I wept before the Lord and begged Him to remedy such a great evil… I then resolved to do the little that depended on me and was within my power—that is, to follow the evangelical counsels as perfectly as possible and to encourage the few nuns in this monastery to do the same, trusting in the great goodness of God."

Before a "world in flames," she had the faith and hope to bring remedy by faithfully living the Gospel counsels. During the Christmas Mass we read from Isaiah 9:1:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who lived in the land of doom a light has shone.

By making prayer the center of our lives, we hope that the world may be illumined by the light of Christmas—by God who came among us. We are like the watchman in Isaiah's vision: it is still night, the world is in darkness, but through our prayers we bear witness that dawn will come.

Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).

By faith, we are certain that the light shines even when all we see is darkness.

A Carmelite of Lisieux

FRANCE: MONASTERY OF THE POOR CLARES, LOURDES

2025 Year of Hope

Christmas Night — the birth of Hope.
"The night was halfway spent when the Almighty Word leapt down from Heaven"...
In this deep night, everything speaks of light, because "a Child is born, a Son is given to us."
The night of this world is deep even today—perhaps deeper than ever. We have lost our childhood, we have lost the Father, we have lost joy.
And yet something still holds us firm—something, or rather, SOME-ONE: the Father Himself.
He has not lost us. Even if man no longer hopes in Him, God continues to hope in man—and this is the source of our true Hope.
Every year, at least for one day, in the heart of the night, everything is reborn—or can be reborn.
For one day we all feel like children again. For one day, everything seems possible once more.
In the Monastery, the time of Advent is felt in a special way.
"Love that awaits us
at the end of history;
Your Kingdom sprouts in the shadow of the Cross.
Already its light shines through our lives;
Jesus, Lord, hasten the time. Come!
Bring Your Work to completion."
With our gaze fixed on this END, in humble and trusting prayer, hope is born—the theological virtue of hope, the certainty of a Love that awaits us:
A Father, more of a Father than any father, whose desire—His only impatience—is to make Himself known, so that humanity may share in His happiness, together with the Son and the Holy Spirit, for all eternity.
It is enough—or it would be enough—for man to let himself be guided, to be led like a flock by the Shepherd. Then He will lead us to rest, upon the tender grass of His pastures.
It is not easy for a man or woman, even for one consecrated, to allow themself to be led.
We all cling so tightly to our own will that this conversion can only be the work of Grace.
We who have been called to the contemplative life must feel responsible for this "conversion" of humanity—for this "impossible" passage from "not as I will" to "as You will."
And yet, converting our own hearts is our only sure and effective

way of interceding for our brothers and sisters.
Easy to say, but harder to live. We are faced with a challenge.
Prayer alone is not enough if we remain stiff-necked and slow of heart.
Theoretically, we know that every act reverberates to the ends of the universe, thus, if even one of us accepts to "lose our life," our will, our cumbersome "self," for Jesus, for others, for the Church, we surely hastens the coming of the Kingdom—the coming of the Lord of Heaven and Earth.

So let us arise! The hour has struck. It is midnight—the Angels are awakening us.
Let us hurry to Bethlehem; let us go to see this wonder that has been announced to us.
A great joy awaits us: a Child to contemplate, to "clothe ourselves with," over the worn garment of our sins.
"Behold, I make all things new."

The Poor Clares of Lourdes

FRANCE:
BENEDICTINE ABBEY OF SAINT MARY OF MAUMONT, JUIGNAC

In the Midst of Silence:
Christmas

"Christmas"—where does the unheard-of sweetness of this small word come from?
From the union between God, He, and humankind, joined in a we incapable of rejecting anyone, a we that unites all the "I's" of the past, present, and future—an affirmation of the fulfillment of all our human hopes: the unity of the world in the simple presence of God among us.
In the night vigil that the Church invites us to on Christmas Eve, this prayer that cradles in its serene kindness all those who ignore Him, we will do nothing more than repeat this message with surprising melodies that will make me speak Latin—but so that you, if you wish, may find those songs again and listen to them.
Puer natus est nobis
A child is born for us.
This is the entrance chant of the Mass of the Day. A quotation from the prophet Isaiah, these four words already announce a reality—simple as a child, yet impossible to decipher without the eyes of faith! For how can we say that a child can be born "for" something or someone? Birth is complete in itself, and a child exists only for their own being.
Jesus alone can say without lying: "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world—to bear witness to the truth."
The birth of a child, it must be said, is more wondrous in its vital force and complexity than the mass of all the galaxies! Christmas begins with the celebration of what unites us all—each of us born one day, and capable in turn of giving life. We can discover, even in this first instant, the innocence of every person! And that is no small thing. Hope for all takes root there, in that first innocence known only to God, and mysteriously also in the cry of our mother in childbirth.
But this Child, like every child, is the only one born for us.
Some will say: "What does it matter to us?"
And yet it remains true—
the gift is within our reach.
Could God truly be this—a gift given to us to unite us? "If you knew the gift of God," Jesus will say to the Samaritan woman. If only you knew that God is given to us—that He is the Christmas gift!
Christus natus est nobis
Christ is born for us.
Thus begins the invitatory of the Christmas vigils: "Christ is born for us, come, let us adore Him." But who is Christ?
It is in the proclamation of the Resurrection that the Church is born. It will sing:
"Christ is risen for us, alleluia!"
Then it will unfold its message, saying that He has ascended into heaven to open paradise for us, and that He has given us His Spirit, who continues Christ's work in the world.
Yet the Church's unconquerable joy comes from the love of its Master and Lord, who so loved the world that He reached down to all of us in the abyss of sin and death to save us and restore us to life.
Joy is impossible if it forgets the price of tears. This is the Paschal mystery.
Only later did the Church celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, opening our eyes to the stable of Bethlehem, with its shepherds and sheep, or to the Magi bringing gifts. The depth of the message lies in the Child Himself—in whom we measure both greatness and humility.

The Word of God became infans, unable to speak.
He who is the origin of the world and the galaxies became a child to save us. It takes a night to begin to grasp this!
How can He give us something to hope for?
Today, words have ceased to sound true—how can one not feel the desire for silence when they strain to be understood by raising their tone? The risk of speaking becomes too great; meaning is no longer one, it gets lost in a flood of words—or in a silence that grows menacing, mute, when it should bring gentleness and peace.
Then it is good to keep silent, listening to the breath of the Child, entering His silence.
To become children again, speechless before the Mystery, filled with wonder like the angels, innocent and joyful.
So why not let resound in our celebrations the songs of those Christ-

mases still humming in our memories? He will pass among us, bringing the freshness of hope.
Filius datus est nobis
The Son is given to us!
Returning to the Introit of the Mass of the Day, we find there another message that takes us further—placing our hope in the very heavens. I recognize that the proposed translation is an interpretation—but it does not matter! The prayer never ceases to give it voice.
A new source for a new hope: at Christmas we discover the very secret of God. "No one has ever seen God; but the One who is in the bosom of the Father, He, the only-begotten Son, has made Him known."
We know what a child is—but do we truly know what a father is? I do not think we really do. We must discover it in its divine dimension, which speaks of self-giving carried to the infinity of the gift. What a dream, what a hope! No father on earth could ever reach it. Jesus revealed it, and found in His Father the strength to live and to give Himself to us, even to the infinity of the gift.
He gave us His words about their intimacy; they come to our lips in the Our Father.
Daring for us to say it—overflowing with the joy of being able to say We, in the name of all, for all, and in all.
To savor the words? Yes—those simple words that taste of bread, of humble daily life, of hope where the impossible can happen.

Merry Christmas to you!
Sr. Dominique, OSB

GREECE:
CARMEL MONASTERY, ATHENS

An Oasis of Peace

Christmas is a message of hope for humanity — if people allow themselves to be transformed by this message and live it out in their daily work. Christmas, the feast of hope: the light shines forth, and we contemplate the Child-God in the humility of the manger. He awaits us, He accompanies us. Our small Carmelite community seeks to be an oasis of peace for all those who en-trust themselves to our prayer. Hope is much more than mere hope; it is like a spring that flows within us, revealing the presence of God who has come to dwell among us and lead us to Himself — if we so desire.

If we recognize within and among us the presence of the Lord, if we listen to Him as He tells us and repeats to us that we have value in His eyes, that we are loved by Him — with all our greatness and our weaknesses — how could we not be reborn to hope? We can bear witness to hope only if we take the time to listen to the source of our hope, and if we allow the Word of God to illuminate who we are, what we live — personally and together. Our life of silence and recollection helps us to remain in this deep listening. Hope exists — and we must bear witness to it, showing to all who labor under heavy burdens, to all who

wonder what purpose their life may serve, that everything they do with love and for love is far from meaningless.

On Christmas night at Carmel, after the Midnight Mass — when we welcome the Child-God in the chapel and into our hearts — everything is filled with light and joy. We gather fraternally for a small Carmelite vigil or share together what lies closest to our hearts. In the following days, silence is no longer kept so strictly, and we can communicate more freely.

The sister cook can then prepare delicious festive dishes and traditional Greek Christmas sweets.

Hope sees what is not yet, and what will be. It loves what is not yet, and what will be — in the future of time and of eternity. On the uphill path — sandy, rough and steep — along that ascent, dragged, hanging from the arms of her two great sisters, Faith and Charity, who do not hold her hand, little sister Hope advances. And in the midst of her two elder sisters, she seems to let herself be carried along — like a small child who does not yet have the strength to walk.

Sr. Marie-Pierre and the Discalced Carmelite community

INDIA:
ANANDA MATHA ASHRAM TRAPPIST MONASTERY OF WAYANAD, KERALA

Light shines in the darkness

A message of hope for Christmas from Wayanad

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, a light has shone upon them." (Isaiah 9:2) As the Jubilee Year of Grace comes to its conclusion, once again we draw near the mystery of Christmas. Throughout this Jubilee, we have been invited to rediscover that hope does not disappoint, as Saint Paul says, because God's love and mercy are truly present in the heart of every creature. Yet one might object that despite this time of grace, the world continues to crumble under the weight of war, fear and division. What message of hope does Christmas offer to a world so often deprived of peace?

Prince of Peace

Christmas proclaims that God does not abandon the world to darkness. The fragile Child of Bethlehem — "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) — is the living sign that the Lord enters fully into our human realm, sharing our poverty, our suffering, and our longing for peace. He delivers us from self-centeredness that separates us from Him and from one another by showing us the way of love and communion.

Here lies the foundation of our hope: God is with us — Emmanuel — at the very heart of our fragility, and this, "until the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20).

At Christmas, the Prince of Peace manifests himself in the form of a child — small, poor and vulnerable. His presence teaches us that peace is born where humility replaces pride, where forgiveness prevails over resentment, and where love silences fear. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). Christmas is not just a celebration of remembrance: it is an ongoing invitation to let Christ be born again in us. As the blessed Guerric of Igny, a Cistercian Father, reminds us: "Let Christ be formed in you." Thus, the mystery of Christmas becomes a living reality every time we allow the light of Christ illuminate our inner darkness.

A living hope

According to Saint Benedict, the monastic way calls us to live the Gospel in humility and simplicity, seeking God in all things and, above all, never despairing of God's mercy. It teaches us that the most discreet gestures — a prayer, a smile, a kind word or an attentive welcome — can become signs of God's presence. This is how hope takes shape, not only within us, but also around us.

In our Cistercian monastery in Wayanad, in the heart of the green hills of Kerala, we experience God's presence in the midst of diversity at every walk of our life. Our life is enriched by Hindu and Muslim neighbours. Before dawn, when we gather to sing the psalms and listen to the Word, our voices mingle with those of the muezzin calling to prayer and the chants from the Hindu temple that echo in tea plantations. This silent dialogue of prayers reminds us that, despite our differences, we are all brothers and sisters in search of God.

The Fraternity of Christmas

At Christmas, this communion takes on a concrete form. Every year, hundreds of neighbours come to share our joy of Christmas. We welcome them with gratitude and invite them for a joyful meal, a sign of unity and peace. Their songs and dances fill our monastery with a simple and luminous frater-nity. They remind us that the Child of Bethlehem has come for all peoples, without distinction. When the time comes for their own celebrations, they in turn come to us, bringing

their traditional festal meals. These fraternal exchanges, however humble they may be, are for us true sacraments of peace: a way of silently proclaiming "Peace to men of good will".

The Jubilee of the Heart Continues

Even though the Jubilee Year is coming to an end, its grace continues to spread wherever mercy and kindness reign. Every heart that forgives, every hand that shares, every table where bread is broken together becomes a new Bethlehem — a place where God is reborn in everyday life.

Here in Wayanad, the hope of Christmas is lived out in simplicity: through the prayer that rises from our hearts and from our chapel, in the silence that listens to the Word, in the peace that is shared through the simplest of gestures, in the fraternity that connects and seeks peace. Yes, the light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not stopped it (John 1:5). May this light, gentle but invincible, shine in every heart at this Christmas — Peace to our land, to our community, to our Muslim and Hindu brothers and sisters, and to our wounded world.

May the spirit of Saint Benedict keep us steadfast in hope, and may the Child of Bethlehem, Prince of Peace, teach us all to live in the gentle strength of his love.

The Trappist Nuns

ENGLAND:
BENEDICTINE BUCKFAST ABBEY, BUCKFASTLEIGH

A Welcome at the Manger

There are a number of things that mark Advent – that hectic period before December 25th. These activities actually connive to make one exhausted on the day itself. Adults with children will know what I mean. The gifts to buy and wrap, the food and drink to help one celebrate in one form or another, and the decorations to put up. This last undertaking is certain to betray the level of one's tastefulness to family and friends alike.

Andrew was given the task – no he was instructed by his wife, Julia, to put up the family Christmas decorations. Julia was far too busy with the allocation of various presents, but she would, of course pass charitable judgement over the finished exercise. Nevertheless, putting up decorations is one of those merry customs which sounds simply glorious and gloriously simple when you are planning it beforehand, but which is nowhere near so funny while you damage plaster and paintwork and nearly cause a domestic blackout by hanging too many garlands on a single light fitting.

In Andrew's opinion one of the most sensible parts of the Christmas decoration ritual is the total exclusion of the children for whom the labour is supposedly undergone. In theory it is a great joy to hear their peals of laughter as the holly stubbornly will not remain over one of the pictures and fall into one's face. To stop them tipping the drawing pins onto the floor or treading on yet another bauble the secret is to get them interested in something else. The something else this year was the creation of the family nativity scene. Alex is ten, the twins Annie and David are seven and Kate is six. Alex saw an opportunity to, how shall one put it, 'organise' his younger siblings, thus he enthusiastically marched them off to execute a quickly formed idea that had entered his young mind.

Concentrating as he was on completing his task of jollifying the sitting room he was never the less aware of a good deal of activity in the hall. Andrew came down the ladder to be greeted by an unusual scene. Perched on a box was the Holy Family as one would expect, but around them were all sorts of characters with very different appearances – some small, some large, some neat and tidy - others bedraggled and damaged, there were some soldiers and spacemen, and with them an assortment of animals – teddy bears and monkeys, lions with sheep and cows. All of these figures had one thing in common, they faced the Holy Family – Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus were very much the centre of attention.

Alex confidently explained that the original idea had come from the cardboard pop-up crib their grandmother had given them in which everyone seemed to have a place and even Santa Claus was present. The children had been well taught by their mother that the baby Jesus made Christmas much more than presents. They knew, in an uncomplicated way, that Jesus made things change. Bedtime prayers too, had made them aware, in the simplest of ways, that our times had their troubles, and so all the figures in this crib looked towards the Holy Family and the Holy Child. It has to be said that Andrew and Julia were proud of their children. In a way they knew at that moment that their adult faith in Jesus as the hope of the world had been passed to Alex, Annie, David and Kate.

Father Donovan, the Parish Priest, when he was introduced to the children's nativity scene thought their idea was spot on. He recalled the words of Jesus in the gospel: "From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise". Father D went on to say: 'It's good that even the damaged dolls, teddies and animals all face Jesus, for they are more like all of us. We, in our imperfections find a place in the presence of the Saviour. No more is the idea of God far away from us – so to speak – now He is one like us, now He is seen made of the stuff of creation – atoms and molecules – like everything else. The idea of God is made flesh, and the divine is present in Jesus, so also can the divine be in each of us. We become by the power of the Holy Spirit what Jesus is by nature.

When the children had all gone to bed, Andrew and Julia reflected on what the children had done and on what Father Donovan had said. The troubles of our lives, of our families and friends, of our different countries, the plight of so many suffering and forced to endure violence and intimidation so as to accept a short-cut to what others think is good, all these things can only be made better by the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is not sprinkled over us like fairy dust, it doesn't work through the waving of a magic wand or the saying of many words, it has to work inside us, like a fountain of living water streaming over a desert land. It changes who we are so that the world is changed by many little changes. Will this be easy? certainly not! What we do may seem like a drop in the ocean but the ocean is made of many drops. What we do now will bear fruit in life eternal, for God became flesh so that we might be made God.

Rt Reverend David Charlesworth, OSB
Abbot of Buckfast Abbey

ENGLAND:
BENEDICTINE ABBEY OF STANBROOK, WASS, YORK

Christmas of Hope

'Without hope you have nothing.' So says Graham Lee, a Grand National winning jockey after a later fall from a horse in which he was paralyzed from the neck down. The Jubilee Year of Hope is ending. The celebration passes but hope itself, a theological virtue, does not end; along with faith and charity, it is at the heart of Christian living. In the novitiate we learnt that the theological virtues, faith, hope and love, are God-given gifts. We cannot earn them, work for them or create them for ourselves (though we can dispose ourselves to receive them); they are entirely gift from God – and we need them. As virtues, drawing on the Latin origin of the word, they empower, give energy, strength, courage, so we can truly to live as Christians. Hope enables us to live in these troubled times.

Unusually for one who lives in a monastery, in recent months I have met several new-born babies. These little creatures on the brink of life generate wonderful hope (literally, hope full of wonder); we cannot but be

filled with hope and joy at the miracle of their existence and at the prospect of their future.

At Christmas we celebrate the wondrous birth of God's incarnate Son, an infant like all new-borns, weak and vulnerable, but already the world's hope. 'Glory to God in the highest and peace to all of good will,' proclaim the angels at his birth. This not an empty song, but a hymn of truth. Joy and hope are revived in us. We know where the child comes from, we know his future resurrection, ascension and sending of the Spirit, and so we know in faith our future too. 'Let us hold fast to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful' (Heb. 10.13). The surety of this hope is there for us all to see in the Child of Bethlehem – and our witness to this in faith is what we as Christians offer the Church and the world. Against all appearances and human odds, this is powerful – and effective.

May you all have a blessed Christmas full of joy at the birth of the Child. As always, you will be remembered in our prayer over this Holy Season.

Sr. Anna Brennan, OSB
Abbess

UNITED KINGDOM: TYBURN CONVENT (BENEDICTINES), LONDON

Christmas Hope in a Broken World

Let us take our minds back 430 years, imagine that you are in Reformation England. To be a Catholic meant that you were disloyal to the throne, and to be a Catholic priest was high treason against Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth I, a crime punishable by death. Christmas Midnight Mass was outlawed, so the faithful met in secret to celebrate the Lord's birth. In this distressing setting, a cold and hungry priest trudges through the snow. He has been hounded by priest hunters and moves secretly from one house to another anxious to celebrate the sacraments with his suffering flock. As he passes clandestinely through the countryside, all of a sudden, he stops dead in his tracks and beholds a sight he will never forget.

The Burning Babe
As I in hoary winter's night stood shivering in the snow,
Surpris'd I was with sudden heat which made my heart to glow;
And lifting up a fearful eye to view what fire was near,
A pretty Babe all burning bright did in the air appear;
Who, scorched with excessive heat, such floods of tears did shed
As though his floods should quench his flames which with his tears were fed.
"Alas!" quoth he, "but newly born, in fiery heats I fry,
Yet none approach to warm their hearts or feel my fire but I!
My faultless breast the furnace is, the fuel wounding thorns,
Love is the fire, and sighs the smoke, the ashes shame and scorns;
The fuel Justice layeth on, and Mercy blows the coals,
The metal in this furnace wrought are men's defiled souls,

For which, as now on fire I am to work them to their good,
So will I melt into a bath to wash them in my blood."
With this he vanish'd out of sight and swiftly shrunk away,
And straight I called unto mind that it was Christmas day.

This famous English Poem which sings of Christmas hope, was written by the Jesuit, St Robert Southwell, a Tyburn Martyr. We will never know if St Robert actually saw the vision which he so eloquently carved into verse, but what we do know is that he penned these words while imprisoned in the Tower of London. He had been tortured no less than 13 times by the notorious Topcliffe and stubbornly refused to divulge any information which would harm his fellow recusant Catholics.

It is startling that such beautiful words of hope came from a soul steeped in the deepest suffering. Even more remarkable is that St Robert Southwell's hope was not in escape from the dungeons of the Tower, his hope was not in the possibility of a life lived on earth in tranquil security, his hope was not even in the possibility of practising his faith without fear of persecution. The martyr poet's hope was in the Redemption, in the Paschal mystery, the washing away of the sins of humankind in the blood of the Crucified Christ and the power of the Burning Babe to work the greatest good in the greatest evil. To think that the Almighty God would descend to our troubled world as a little babe to make a bath of His own blood so that all could be worked for our own good and true peace – who could not have hope?

In the midst of his intense suffering, St Robert had the hope that he could bring this Hope to others and that made his suffering so much easier. It meant that his suffering was not in vain. When St Robert Southwell received his death sentence, he was filled with intense joy. On 21 February 1595, he was hung, drawn and quartered at Tyburn for the High Treason of being a Catholic priest. His blood, together with the blood of over 100 other martyrs, watered the very soil where our monastery now stands. Their lives are witnesses to hope, "…we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thess 5:8-9).

Recently, our neighbours, who live nearby, visited Rome, and this too was a great sign of hope especially for Christian Unity. On 23 October, for the first time since the English Reformation, an English monarch not only met but prayed with the Holy Father. The visit of King Charles and Queen Camilla to the Eternal City must have made our Tyburn Martyrs in heaven beam with joy. We recall these apt words of another Tyburn Martyr, St Edmund Campion, "I… recommend your case and mine to Almighty God, the Searcher of Hearts, who send us his grace, and see us at accord before the day of payment, to the end we may at last be friends in heaven, when all injuries shall be forgotten."

Christmas hope is that hope which we find beyond this broken world. It is the hope in that Burning Babe who brings us the true peace, that hope in a God who is not only with us but who became one of us, that God who not only became one of us but who died for us, that God whom we adore each day and night in the Eucharist. Christmas hope is that hope in the Christ-Child who loves us and came to save us.

Mother Marilla Aw, OSB
Superior General

IRELAND:
MONASTERY OF ST CATHERINE OF SIENA, THE TWENTIES, DROGHEDA

Our prayer that all people may experience the love, peace, hope

Christmas greetings from the Nuns of the Order of Preachers living in the Monastery of St. Catherine of Siena, Drogheda, Co. Louth, Ireland. We are the only community of Dominican Nuns in Ireland and the only English-speaking community of Dominican nuns in Europe (apart from the community in Fatima, Portugal which is mostly English-speaking). St. Dominic founded the Order for preaching and for the salvation of souls. As Nuns of the Order, we are called not only to seek the face of God in the silence and solitude of the cloister, but also to join our prayer and our whole lives to the mission of the Order. Despite our hidden life, or indeed because of it, we speak a powerful word to our modern world. Pope John Paul II expressed it beautifully when he said:

"We need lives which silently proclaim the Primacy of God. We need people who treat the Lord as Lord, who devote all their energies to adoring Him, who immerse themselves in His mystery and who do this of their own free will, with no thought of human reward, but solely to affirm that he is the Absolute."

Cardinal Timothy Radcliffe when he was Master of the Order said in a letter to the nuns:

"You are missionaries just as much as your brothers, not by going anywhere but by living your lives from God and for God. You are a preached word in your being."

That is what we wish to do. We have been gifted with the realisation that God loves us, each and every one of us in the whole world. This is what Christmas is all about. Jesus is Love Incarnate. God loved the world so much that he sent his Son.... This is the word of hope which will bring peace to our troubled world. By our way of life, we want to tell the world that God alone can satisfy, that He alone is our peace. We want to intercede for the salvation of all people so that they will know the joy of being loved and love in return.

It is normal for us human beings to hope for good things, things that will bring us peace, make us happy and bring us fulfilment. But if our hope is for this world only, we are doomed to be disappointed. Nothing that this world has to offer is ever going to fully satisfy us. That is one of life's lessons.

If we reflect on this experience and ask ourselves what does the fact that every human being longs for good say about us, we will hopefully come to the realisation that into the very fabric of our being, there is an engraved desire for happiness. This is

what we are made for. And so, we enter the realm of our creation. Who created us and why were we created? What kind of a Creator programmes his creation to desire good? and only good? (Even when we are misguided and desire something unwholesome and death-dealing we humans desire it because we think it will be good for us!) I think we must conclude that the Creator sees goodness and happiness as our final end. The human person is someone God creates because of God's goodness and love. God's love is so great that it cannot contain itself, as it were. God created us so that we could experience His love. We are, then, born to participate in the life of God who is Love. If that is the case, it stands to reason that the only thing that can give us full and lasting happiness is God's life, full union with

God. Whether we realise it or not, while we are living on this earth, we are pilgrims, aliens from our true homeland - Heaven. God wants us to share in His Divine Life. We are made for the beatific vision, union with God and with others in the Kingdom of Heaven. As Christians we are privileged to know this. Faith in Jesus opens the door to theological hope of which human hope is only a pale reflection. Theological hope is Easter Hope, a hope we have because Jesus the Son of God was born on the first Christmas night. He lived, died and rose again so that those who believe in Him may not die but may have the Eternal life for which we were created.

Theological hope has only one object; salvation for oneself, for those dear to us and for the whole world. As Contemplative Nuns our task is to keep the reality of Heaven before the eyes of the world. As we celebrate the solemn liturgies of Advent and Christmas our earnest prayer is that all people everywhere may experience the love, peace, hope and joy which our Saviour's coming among us brings – a foretaste of what awaits us when we reach our true home in heaven.

Sr. M Breda, OP
Prioress

ICELAND: CARMEL MONASTERY, HAFNARFJORDUR

A love ready to become fragile and vulnerable

Let us try to imagine what our lives would be like if the Night of Nativity had never been…
People tormented by suffering, by fear of the future and of one another, would not have heard the good news of salvation. They would not have received the new law of love. Their relationship with God, if it existed at all, would be based on the belief that His favour must be earned. They would not know that God is so close that He could even become one of them. And then, death would not have become a gateway to new life, suffering would not have gained its salvific dimension, and there would be no hope that every pain would be recompensed, every tear wiped away, every longing satisfied.
Can we imagine our world, even in its secularised state, so often devoid of peace, without the Night of Nativity? Would we still be alive today, had Jesus not come?
And yet, Jesus came. He descended into the very heart of our pain and fear, and it was there that He lit the light of hope.
From the very beginning, God has cared for humanity, entering into its history, always desiring to support and to save. The culmination of these interventions was the Incarnation of the Son of God – the fulfilment of an eternal plan of love, and an invitation for us to share in the very life of God.
What does the newborn God wish to tell us today? Let us turn to the pages of the Gospel.
He did not come in power, which would have easily bent the rulers of this world, but He came as a vulnerable Child, in utter poverty. He was born in hiding and grew up in hiding.
Is this how we would have imagined the coming of a king? Is this how we would have imagined the beginning of a kingdom that will never end?
And yet, He is not only the King of kings, but God Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth!
Here we have His first message: the truly transforming power comes not from the might of authority but – paradoxically – the power of love, a love ready to become fragile and vulnerable, because this power does not come from us, but from God, and He is no limits in His creative action.
What a hope this brings to all who painfully feel the littleness of their own abilities, to whom their lives seem fruitless or even unnecessary, since our most ordinary actions – daily toil, suffering, prayer – when placed in God's hands, can become a mighty force!
Is this not the very example that Jesus Himself gives?
He did not begin proclaiming the Gospel with public ministry, but from the very moment of the Incarnation. He continued to proclaim it throughout as many as thirty years of His ordinary life of hard work, recognised by almost no one. By choosing this path, He showed that every act of love, no matter how small or hidden, has the power to transform hearts and, in turn, the world.
By becoming human, God revealed Himself as the God of universal love. He comes to everyone. He does not turn away from a person, even when that person turns away from Him, or even tries to remove Him completely from life. God always leaves the hope of return open – we can never go so far from Him that His open arms cannot still draw us back.
At the same time, God chose to share the fate of all who are persecuted and unwanted. Therefore, we will never experience

a rejection so profound that He is not already there, waiting for us with the light of hope, which reminds us that we are always loved.
We usually associate hope with the future. Yet Jesus comes as Emmanuel – "God with us." He came to dwell among us – literally, "to pitch His tent among us." He did not come only at one point in history, to live on earth for a time. The Greek word ἐσκήνωσεν makes this clear: He dwelt and continues to dwell among us.
In this, God reveals His fervent desire to be present in our lives and to take part in them. He comes unceasingly – here and now – in the realities of our everyday life, lighting that same flame of hope.
Hope, therefore, is fulfilled in the present. In the grotto of Bethlehem, God assures us that we are never left to face the challenges of life alone. He says, "Do not be afraid – I am with you."
We read in the Gospel that "Herod was lying in wait for the Child, to kill Him." God responds with an intervention, but He does not destroy the cruel ruler; instead, He points to another way of rescue.
Jesus, born in the middle of the night and fleeing to Egypt by night, tells us that even in the deepest darkness we can experience, He is present and watching over us.
One might ask, why does God act in this way? Why does He not remove dangers, or even tragic events, when the angels' Christmas message proclaimed peace to all people?
The message of peace does not promise that war and pain will disappear from the earth. Rather, it is an invitation for peace to be born within us. Here is where the renewal of the world begins. Just as God embraced everyone, so He gives us the power to embrace one another – in our hearts and in our relationships.
Reflecting on the biblical scenes of Christmas, we discover in each a profound and ever-relevant message of hope.
A human, wherever he may live, has always needed, still needs, and will always need God. Of his own accord, he is unable to find the answers to all the questions that concern him. They can be found only in God.
We hunger for happiness and seek it in the goods of this world. Yet none of them can satisfy that one desire implanted in the depths of our hearts – the desire for love. God comes to earth to fulfil this desire in abundance. It is up to us whether we choose to draw from this wellspring and accept the support He offers us in Himself.
Who would not wish to have a friend – loving, faithful, wise, and always near? All that God desires is to be such a friend to us, and we were made for this relationship. To experience it fully, it must be nurtured by both sides.
How timely still is the moving cry of Pope John Paul II to invite Jesus into every sphere of life. Then the hope He brings will become a reality for each of us:
"Do not be afraid! Open, I say open wide the doors for Christ! To His saving power open the boundaries of states, economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilisation and development!
Do not be afraid! Christ knows 'what is in man'. He alone knows it!
So often today, man does not know what is in him, in the depths of his mind and heart. So often he is uncertain about the meaning of his life on this earth. He is assailed by doubt, a doubt which turns into despair.
Allow Christ, therefore – I beg you, I implore you with humility and trust – allow Christ to speak to man!
He alone has words of life, yes, of eternal life!" (St. Peter's Square, 22 October 1978)
If anyone would like to support the Carmelite nuns in Iceland in the small extension of their monastery, please visit the website: www.karmel.is

Discalced Carmelites

ISRAEL: MONASTERY OF MOUNT CARMEL, HAIFA

Christmas on Mount Carmel

To the rhythm of the liturgy

"When the days begin to grow shorter…", then, like a light in the darkness, the first candle of Advent is lit. The silent preparation for Christmas begins, following the rhythm of the liturgy that invites us to relive the mysteries of the Lord by traversing the great messianic prophecies. The words of the Book of Con-solation resonate deeply within us: "Comfort, comfort my peo-ple" נחמו, נחמו עמי (Is 40:1). The Child of Bethlehem embodies the consolation of Israel; in Him the glory of the Lord will be re-vealed and all people will see the salvation of God (cf. Is 40:5; Lk 3:4–6).

Being in the Holy Land, we feel a profound longing for peace —the longing of the centuries, the longing of our Jewish brothers with whom we share the same land. Advent and Christmas are the most joyful liturgical seasons in Carmelite life. While nature wraps itself in the cold, hearts grow warm before the mystery that enfolds us, and a sense of joyful expectation grows within us.

As if preparing for a long journey, each nun is invited to find a spiritual way to reach Bethlehem. Each draws lots to discover how she will walk toward Bethlehem; there is also a common virtue to work on. For example, in this Holy Year it is poverty, following the proposal of Pope Leo XIV in his first Apostolic Ex-hortation Dilexi te; and silence, born from the love for the One we await—our Messiah King—always with Mary, the Queen of this holy mountain.

To help maintain an atmosphere of recollection, during this time we reduce visits, calls, and contact with the outside world, so we may pray more and prepare ourselves for the One who comes, carrying with us the humanity entrusted to our hands.

During Advent, each nun has a personal retreat day to accompany the Virgin in Expectation. The day before, the entire community processes to her cell carrying a small statue of the pregnant Virgin. It is a moment deeply awaited, allowing us to make a station of prayer—also a very intimate moment, because it is the only day of the year when we enter one another's cells. Our Holy Mother Teresa wanted the cell to remain the intimate space of each nun.

The Nativity Scenes

They are a very concrete way of proclaiming the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, here in the land where He became flesh. As an international community, 19 sisters from twelve nations—Brazil, Chile, South Korea, Croatia, Egypt, Honduras, Israel, Italy, Madagascar, Mali, Peru, and El Salvador—the nativity scenes become a space for cultural expression. Nine days before Christmas, the monastery turns into a great Nativity scene. Little Baby Jesus figures can be found everywhere; every corner is adorned to make room for the mystery we celebrate. During this time of expectation, we also prepare a small gift for our benefactors, something handmade to thank them for their support and, above all, for the gift of friendship—without forgetting the poor.

The Kalenda

At dawn on the 24th, during the vigil, the Kalenda is solemnly sung—a poetic text from the Roman Martyrology, typical of monastic liturgies on this day. It is the proclamation of the birth

of Jesus Christ. Hearing the chronological list of the stages of salvation history always moves us, especially here in this Land. At the moment when the Savior's birth is announced, we all kneel, our foreheads touching the ground, a sign of humility and deep adoration before the Mystery of the Word made flesh.

The Holy Night

It begins in deep silence. The sisters, wearing their white mantles and holding their lit candles, take part in the Procession of Light that winds through the entire monastery and accompanies the newborn Child in the arms of the prioress. Everything is illuminated by countless candles marking the Child's path—a path of light.

We visit the common spaces and the sisters' cells, where the Mother presents the Child to each one for a gesture of adoration. Hymns, readings, and meditations from the Church Fathers and our saints inspire this moment. Then we gather before the Nativity scene in the choir, where the Child is placed, and the chanting of the Office of Readings begins, followed by the solemn Christmas Mass. An immense joy fills us—that night, one does not sleep, as our mother St. Teresa used to say!

After Mass we go to the parlor to exchange Christmas greetings, including with our Carmelite fathers who accompany us as chaplains. Then, in the refectory, we greet one another in all the languages of the community and share a cup of hot chocolate. *The Christmas Season*

A time of festive recreation, adoration, hymns in every language, and homage to our King, until January 6th, when the Magi arrive bringing a small gift for each sister—at that moment, we all become like children!

Thus Christmas unfolds on Mount Carmel: contemplating, rejoicing, and interceding for all.

Sr. Veronica of Jesus, OCD

HOLY LAND: MONASTERY OF SAINT CLARE, NAZARETH

A gift from God capable of transforming life

We are at the end of a Jubilee Year marked by hope, despite a world in turmoil. Armed conflicts, climate change, economic and social crises, and even the trials faced by the Church seem to darken the horizon of humanity. Many are asking: where are we going? Where can we find light, peace, and meaning in this context of fragility, uncertainty and even chaos?

Contemplating the drama of humanity, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, in a famous interview given to Der Spiegel in 1966 and published posthumously in 1976, declared: "Only a god can still save us." In saying this, he expressed his diagnosis of the spiritual and existential crisis of the modern era, marked by nihilism and the dominance of technology. But the situation has worsened since then. It is precisely in light of this atmosphere that Pope Francis felt it necessary and urgent to rekindle the flame of hope.

By inviting us to the Jubilee, he wanted to ensure that humanity does not succumb to discouragement but enters decisively into an era with a future. He reminds us that Christian hope is not mere waiting or naïve optimism, but an inner strength—a gift from God capable of transforming our lives and our vision of the world.

As we approach Christmas—the feast of the birth of Emmanuel, God among us, the celebration of light's victory over the darkness of the world—we are invited to rediscover the message of hope that this event brings, even in the heart of a broken and peace-less world. How can today's Christmas nourish our hope and help each of us, in our own way, to become bearers of light and peace?

Pope Francis' call for a Jubilee

In his Bull of Indiction for the Jubilee, Pope Francis highlights the urgent need to rekindle hope in a world marked by fear, doubt, and pessimism. His appeal, Do not be afraid of hope!, is an invitation not to give in to discouragement but to trust in God's faithfulness.

For the Pope, Christian hope is a force that enables us to act, to rebuild, to forgive, and to build peace. It is not naïveté but a lucid trust in the divine promise—one that sustains believers in times of trial and encourages them to bear witness to the joy of Christ's light. He calls for a culture of hope.

The importance of hope in Christian life

If the Jubilee invites us to return to hope, it is undoubtedly because humanity has misunderstood its object, its meaning, its logic—which must now be re-evaluated—and the nature of what can truly fulfill it. If the Jubilee calls us back to hope, it may be because humanity has forgotten that God is its nature, God its source, and God its object and goal. Thus, cut off from true hope, we have deprived ourselves of support in the trials of the present time and find it difficult to move forward with confidence toward eternal life—our source. Christmas is drawing near. How can it bring hope into this global situation?

Christmas, source of hope: a renewed call to welcome Christ, our hope

Christmas renews the call to welcome Christ, our hope, into the heart of our lives, often immersed in uncertainty and darkness. Already in the 8th century B.C., Isaiah spoke of a people walking in darkness because of wars, deportations, and inhuman living conditions. Today, without painting too dark a picture, we find ourselves in a similar situation... Can we still hope?

Certainly, because there are signs of life, indicators of the future, sources of hope: in Gaza, solidarity and mutual aid abound in times of difficulty; in the Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon and in Ukraine; among the resilient peoples of the African continent—and not to mention the small gestures of fraternity and support around us for the most vulnerable and for those living in loneliness. This is the hope of Christmas—every time a rebirth is taking place.

Christmas reminds us that only faith, nourished by prayer, the Word and the sacraments enlightens our waiting for the new day. To welcome Jesus means allowing his light to transform our doubts and fears, choosing to walk toward the true hope he offers to each of us. Christmas is the great feast of joy and hope; it is the feast that invites us to welcome God into our lives and roll up our sleeves to make our world a better place.

Together, let us walk toward the light and celebrate the most beautiful gift of Christmas: hope—the promise of a better future for all.

Sister Monica, OSC
Abbess

ITALY:
MONASTERY OF THE SERVANTS OF SAINT MARY, ARCO OF TRENTO

God loves humanity today and always

"And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2, 13-14)

It is strange how such an extraordinary message, such a spectacular event that suddenly fills the heavens, was seen only by simple shepherds keeping watch in the night, camped outdoors under the stars, while the rest of the population went on sleeping in their homes or busy reasoning about interests more or less important and essential to their own lives.

Is it possible that such an event could go unnoticed even by those who dedicate themselves to studying the phenomena of nature or even the Holy Scriptures? If we think of the progress of human knowledge today—in every field, from technology to theology—we are all the more amazed by the message of Christmas which, despite all interpretations, manipulations, and commercializations, has become the most universal and widely known celebration in the world. Perhaps because it centers on a Child—the most comprehensible and evident expression of hope.

"What, then, will this child be?" (Lk 1:66): the question everyone asked at the birth of John the Baptist echoes at every birth of a child, rekindling hope even in the most disillusioned and weary heart. This is why the death of children—especially when caused by war, hunger, or injustice—strikes us more deeply than any other crime: because it kills hope, the only true human resource for beginning again, for seeking, for striving toward a better world, without war, but in harmony and peace.

…And yet, once again, we prepare to celebrate Christmas! Today, the skies—crossed by drones, missiles, and other sophisticated human devices—seem to drown out the song of those who love and celebrate life, even that of the angels, as if preventing them from descending to earth to bring good news. And yet, a child—or someone defenseless like him—wandering among the ruins of a destroyed town, or a migrant sleeping beneath a bridge, or a woman stripped of her dignity, or any unknown person who prays to God—these are the ones to whom the angel of the Lord draws near, wrapping them in that light whose splendor the nations and kings will walk by (cf. Lk 2:9; Is 60:3).

To them is addressed first the most unthinkable and overwhelming announcement; to them we must all turn if we wish to glimpse in the heavens a ray of that light which, even in the darkest night of suffering, mysteriously floods the world. Only by drawing near to them can we hope to walk the path that leads to discovering the "sign" that the news of great joy for all the world is true: that God loves humanity—today and always—even if humanity were to destroy the entire earth.

In the monastery where we live—now few in number, and almost all elderly—we would like to capture the echo of the joy that fills the heart of anyone who perceives the angelic message in the silence of their heart, a silence that not even the deafening noise of bombs can drown out. But we would also like the echo of those who have lost hope, those who try to build peace relying solely on human resources, to reach the heart of God. Before the image on the altar of our small church—depicting the Virgin Mary adoring the Child, with the Latin inscription "QUEM GENUIT ADORAVIT" ("She adored Him whom she bore")—we pray for this.

Sr. Anna M. Di Domenico, OSM

ITALY:
BENEDICTINE MONASTERY OF SAINT ANDREW APOSTLE, ARPINO

CHRISTMAS, THE GIFT OF A NEW BEGINNING WOVEN WITH HOPE

"Today in Bethlehem a Savior has been born for you, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:11)

We are on our way to Bethlehem; only a few days now separate us from Holy Christmas. The beautiful liturgy of Advent, with its antiphons filled with a sense of eager expectation and wonder, guides us and daily increases within us the awe and joy for the ineffable Mystery of a God who becomes a Child. Each year, the angelic proclamation resounds "new": "Today in Bethlehem a Savior has been born for you, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:11). New, because it is inexhaustible; new, because we hear it from the depths of our lives, woven with the threads of personal and social events never before experienced; and new above all because the birth of the Word of God in the flesh is the gift of a new beginning. The mystery of the coming of the Word of God, who becomes a person and comes to dwell among us, is renewed in our hearts.

In this wondrous adventure of God clothing Himself in our fragile human nature, we discover the beauty and gratuitousness of God's infinite love. Jesus "did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness" (Phil 2:6–7); He chose poverty, assuming our human nature, subject to all its frailties. These words are a source of great hope for all of us. They help us understand that the true beauty of Christmas does not lie in the glittering lights that invite us to consumerism, but in humbly gazing with the eyes of the heart and the spirit of faith upon the mystery of salvation—then bearing witness to it before the whole world, so that each of us may feel loved, desired, and saved by that Holy Child laid in the manger of Bethlehem.

Through this wondrous coming into the world, our hearts, too, become a cradle for Jesus. Thus, our lives change; history changes; humanity itself is renewed. In a time such as ours, marked by so much tragedy and constant concern over the winds of war blowing in many parts of the world, by poverty, injustice, oppression, and violence, let us allow ourselves to be touched by this extraordinary event—personally, socially, and religiously—as Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini exhorted in his Christmas homily of 1993: "Personally, by living life with simplicity, reducing our desires; socially, by seeking justice in our relationships with others and caring for their well-being; religiously, by giving praise and glory to God and serving Him in the spirit of the Beatitudes."

We also approach the closing of the Jubilee Year of Hope proclaimed by Pope Francis, which will begin with the opening of the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica on December 24, 2024. How can we continue to be pilgrims of hope amid so much hu-

man cruelty? Invoked by the silent cry of so many abandoned souls, Jesus is born. He is our Hope—a Child unloved, whose tiny hands, as Edith Stein wrote, already call us to follow Him and invite us to a new life of hope. Hope is like a bridge that leads us out of solitude and connects us with others who need help, a smile, or a heartfelt greeting. At times, it may seem difficult to hope—but what would our life be, here and now, if we could not hope? As Benedict XVI wrote in his encyclical Spe Salvi (no. 35): "Every serious and upright human conduct is hope in action." And again: "The one who has hope lives differently; to the one who hopes, a new life has been given." This new life is the gift Jesus brings us at Christmas. It is born among us in small gestures, in little steps; it carries us far, lifts us high, opens new horizons, and reveals a new way of living together.

A Child is born for us—to make us new, to help us be reborn with Him, to bring forth new life where death would reign, to kindle lights of hope where darkness grips us. May the Holy Family be our model for living in hope and generating hope. The home of Nazareth became a hearth of communion and hope because a different light shone there—the light of life, loved and safeguarded. There, prayer was lived, silence was cherished, work was honored. And thus peace reigned—the peace we are called to weave day by day with threads of patience, forgiveness, and humility. May these be our daily bread, our compass, and the source of our hope.

The Child awaits us! Let us give Him our hearts as His home, welcoming within them—with Him and in Him—all our brothers and sisters, great and small, and keeping them in the silence of prayer. For they are Jesus—our Hope and our Peace.

Making this desire our prayer, we wish everyone a Holy Christmas and a Happy New Year 2026!

(Benedictine Nuns of St. Andrew the Apostle, Arpino, Frosinone)

ITALY:
AUGUSTINIAN MONASTERY OF SANTA MARIA MADDALENA, CASCIA

Don't give in to the thorns

In the silence of prayer, while the world rushes on without rest, Christmas returns once again — like a light that never goes out. Each year, the Church invites us to pause before the mystery of the Incarnation: a God who becomes a child, fragile and poor, to tell humanity that, despite wars, injustice and division, hope is not lost.

We live in a time when peace seems to have vanished, and yet the grotto of Bethlehem still speaks to us with a gentle voice. That night, it was not the powerful who noticed the coming of the Savior, but shepherds — simple and watchful men. They saw the light because they were seeking it in the darkness. This is the first message of Christmas: hope is born in hearts that keep vigil, even when all around seems extinguished.

As Saint Augustine said, "God became man so that man might find his way back to God." In Christmas, this encounter between heaven and earth is fulfilled: God descends among men so that no one may ever feel alone or lost again.

In our monastery, united with so many communities around the world who pray daily for peace, we know that the hope of Christmas is a quiet yet invincible force, born from the heart of God and spreading through the humble gestures of those who choose to love. Our hands grasp no power and seek no dominion; they hold instead acts of kindness, words that comfort, and attentions that mend what is wounded. We believe that prayer, joined with silent offering, can make hope blossom even where all seems lost.

To welcome the Child of Bethlehem is to welcome peace itself, letting fall from us the defenses of pride and fear. Jesus is born again today in the folds of a wounded world — where peoples long for reconciliation, where so many families await a more just future. And precisely there, where darkness seems to prevail, He becomes a living presence, a light that never fades.

Christmas reminds us that God has not grown weary of hu-

mankind. If we gaze upon the grotto, we see no splendor or riches, but warmth, welcome, and tenderness. Mary and Joseph teach us that hope is not a vague feeling but a choice: to believe that, even in darkness, light will come; to believe that Love has the final word.

In this time when the Jubilee draws to a close, Christmas calls us to renew our hearts and rediscover the grace of reconciliation. The Holy Year has been a journey toward mercy; now Christmas asks us to bear its fruit, turning mercy into a way of life. We cannot proclaim peace unless we begin to build it within ourselves — in our families, in our communities, in our hearts. Christian hope is not naïve optimism, but faith made flesh in daily life. It is the certainty that God is at work even when we do not see Him. Like a seed hidden in the winter soil, hope awaits its time to sprout. Each day, in prayer, we intercede for this hope to grow in the world — like a small flame guarded in the heart of those who believe.

Christmas invites us to look beyond the darkness, to recognize that no night is so long as to prevent the dawn. The Child who is born is proof that God has not abandoned His creation: He becomes our companion, walks beside us, shares our humanity. This is the hope that saves — to know that we are not alone.

Saint Rita of Cascia — often invoked as the "saint of impossible causes" — is for us a radiant model of hope that never disappoints. She endured painful trials — loss, conflict, and fear — yet did not close herself off in sorrow; she allowed her suffering to blossom into intercession and compassion.

In the life of Saint Rita, we find an invitation: not to give in to the thorns, but to embrace them as a sharing in the Paschal mystery. Her story reminds us that hope grows precisely in moments when all seems lost. In her, grace shows its power in weakness, patience becomes a gift, and forgiveness a strength. Looking to Saint Rita, we can nourish the hope that even in a wounded world, God works with gentleness and constancy. She never promised that difficulties would vanish, but she lived in trust that God's faithfulness endures forever.

In the end, the message of Christmas is this: hope is not born from human success, but from the faithfulness of God. It is a gift that asks to be welcomed and shared. And even if the world seems without peace, we know that peace has already come and lives in the silence of Bethlehem.

From the heart of Cascia, we entrust the destiny of the world to the Child Jesus. May His light illumine every night, and may His hope make its way into human hearts like a song that never ceases.

The Augustinian nuns

ITALY:
BENEDICTINE ABBEY OF THE HOLY TRINITY, CAVA DE' TIRRENI

Jesus' Christmas Fills Us with Hope

+Michele Petruzzelli, OSB
Abbot Ordinary

During the liturgical season of Advent, which has prepared us for Holy Christmas, one of the most beautiful prayers the liturgy offers us each year is the invocation of the prophet Isaiah: Let justice descend, you heavens, like dew from above, like gentle rain let the clouds drop it down. Let the earth open and salvation bud forth; let righteousness spring up with them! (Isaiah 45:8). These words are imbued with hope and expectation. The prophet prays that God will reveal himself as Savior, bringing about an embrace between heaven and earth. May the heavens send down a rain of righteousness that will fertilize the earth, which, in turn, will be capable of sprouting righteousness again.

We all sense how much hope is needed today because so many events—especially wars, both near and far, that sow destruction and death and continue to instill fear throughout humanity—seem to deny this virtue, which every person needs to give meaning and purpose to their existence.

Christians, from the very beginning, have stood out for their contagious hope. Saint Peter recalls this in the famous passage of his first letter, where he invites the members of his community to know how to give a reason for the hope (1 Peter 3:15) that they demonstrate.

Our hope is born from the discovery that Isaiah's prophecy has come true. Humans were inundated with God's justice and mercy when the Just One, Jesus, the Son of God made man, was born among us. Through the work of the Church, he spread his Gospel among humanity, and thus the earth blossomed with a new justice that prioritizes welcoming and serving the poor.

Holy Christmas 2025, we know, concludes the Jubilee Year of Hope, a year of grace during which we have had the opportunity to reexamine our lives and discern how we live the gift of Baptism, that is, being children of God. A truly special year lived in the spirit of hope: we are all "pilgrims of hope," as Pope Francis, of venerable memory, reminded us. In light of this journey undertaken with the universal Church, I would like to share with you the following reflections.

The word that often recurs in the times we are living in is meta-

morphosis, radical transformation. What is changing in our era? We could say many things: habits, lifestyles, values, work... in particular, our way of life is changing, increasingly influenced by digital language and social media. To respond to today's challenges, we need greater dialogue, increasingly shared choices. Therefore, it is essential to experience a sociality and fraternity that prioritizes listening to others, mutual aid, the importance of praying together, forgiving one another and starting over. All this tells us that in life we must renew our way of being Christians, accepting change and experiencing the "metamorphosis of relationships." These changes are so engaging and radical that they become a true Easter transition: we die to certain lifestyles and learn to live differently, more suited to today, to new situations, and we grow in the mentality of giving.

The second "metamorphosis" is that of our "spiritual life." The Jubilee was a time of grace and allowed us to rekindle our faith in the Risen One and our credibility as witnesses. We need apostles, Christians who, following the example of the saints, devote their energies to Christ and the Gospel. An apostle is someone who is a disciple of the Master, of Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The quality of our life, therefore, depends on the quality of our relationship with Jesus, a relationship we experience through love, prayer, the Eucharist, meditation on the Word of God, the Eucharistic visit, the Holy Rosary...

It's not enough to do many good things, but we must also know for whom we do them, to whom our life is united, for whom we expend our energies. This metamorphosis is described by Saint Paul as the passage from the "old man" to the "new man." Every person who can say: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20) is new. We all perceive that life is changing. It is up to us to live with the certainty that in every transformation we experience Jesus' Easter. Then fear or indecision are conquered by Christian hope.

All the initiatives proposed during the Holy Year were an opportunity to be pilgrims, men and women who set out on a journey; Pope Francis reminded us: "Setting out on a journey is typical of those who seek the meaning of life. Pilgrimage on foot greatly fosters the rediscovery of the value of silence, of effort, of essentiality. Even in the Jubilee Year, pilgrims of hope will not fail to travel ancient and modern paths to live the Jubilee experience" (See Spes non confundit, n. 5).

How many reasons for hope and how many opportunities to rekindle the gift of faith and the Christian vocation, therefore: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom 15:13). It is the Holy Spirit who implants the Son of God in the heart of humanity, who works in Mary, the Mother of God, the wonders that the Church celebrates on Christmas Day. May the light of Jesus' birth be in us. A Christmas without light is not Christmas. May there be light in the soul, in the heart; may there be forgiveness for others; may there be no enmity, darkness, wars... May there be the light of Jesus, so beautiful. For Holy Christmas this is what I wish for all of you. I offer my warmest wishes for peace and happiness. May the light be in your hearts, in your families, in your cities.

ITALY:
MONASTERY OF THE POOR CLARES OF SANTA LUCIA, CITTA' DELLA PIEVE

A PATHWAY TO THE SUN

The Jubilee Year proclaimed by Pope Francis is drawing to a close. Each of us has tried to walk in step with hope, engaging personally in choices of conversion and return to God. But let us ask ourselves: can we truly hope, in today's world filled with wars, conflicts, enemies who threaten us, power games and struggles over land or rare materials? Is it not the eternal logic of Cain — of a fraternity perpetually wounded — that prevails? Salvatore Quasimodo [Italian Nobel Laureate for Literature in 1959] recites it in one of his famous poems:

You are still the one of the stone and the sling,
man of my time. You were in the fuselage,
with evil wings, the sundials of death —
I saw you — inside the chariot of fire, at the gallows,
at the wheels of torture. I saw you: it was you,
with your exact science devoted to extermination,
without love, without Christ. You have killed again,
as always, as the fathers killed, as they killed
the animals that saw you for the first time.
And this blood smells just as it did
on the day when a brother said to his brother:
"Let us go to the fields." And that cold, tenacious echo
has reached you still, into your own day […].*

We must not only think of the great global scenes of war and peace, but look into our own hearts, for it is there that the destiny of the world is decided, the place where truth may be found. My heart, — we must ask ourselves — is it at peace, or is it still prey to contradictions, weariness, resentments and inner battles? We are responsible for the world, beginning with our families, our workplaces, our religious and priestly communities. Today more than ever there is a "need for a broad 'human alliance', founded not on power but on care; not on profit but on gift; not on suspicion but on trust," Pope Francis recalled last

year on September 12. The world needs to become friendly — a place where every person may be a friend and a craftsman of communion for the whole human family, starting with those nearest to them.

Francis of Assisi, whose 800th anniversary of his death will be celebrate next year, can accompany us on this journey — he who passed from a self-centered life to the new logic of self-giving and mercy. Together with Clare, his "little plant," who through her hidden life in San Damiano shows us how the human heart, through the power of love, can contain the infinite God within itself, becoming His dwelling place (cf. Third Letter to Agnes of Prague, 21ff.), and thus reach every corner of the earth.

The world moves through history between lights of progress and shadows of regression. As believers, we also know how to discern the good that circulates through the earth — both the visible and, even more, the hidden good that lives in the folds of hearts and in the everyday. If the powerful can condition history, it is the small ones who write it in depth. It is through the small yes of each one of us that Christmas is renewed again this year. If my heart, your heart, opens itself to the Light, every night of our shared history becomes brighter. For everyone.

Christmas is not a fairy tale, but the good news that "a child is born to us" (Isaiah 9:5), that our God becomes small in order to meet His creature, entering the frailty and weakness of our human condition wounded by sin, to make us "share in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) — of the very life flowing among the Three Persons of the Trinity.

The announcement is as astonishing as it is unheard of.

But God's lowering of Himself in love chose to depend on the human body of a woman — the young girl of Nazareth — so that our small, everyday story might enter the great course of God's Story.

Save the valley of the Lord.
For the Child-God to walk,
He needs a meadow
for God to walk,
He needs the world.
Save the Mother of God,
she is tender,
she is only a young girl […].
She,
the heroine of all times,
the sweet Mother of God,
the tender maiden of love —
she will open a passage for poetry,
she will open a pathway to the sun.*
(Alda Merini)

Today, this Christmas, God needs you.

Sr. Maria Manuela Cavrini, OSC
Responsible for the journal Forma sororum.
Lo sguardo di Chiara d'Assisi oggi [The Gaze of Clare of Assisi Today]

*Translation by editor

ITALY:
BENEDICTINE MONASTERY OF SANT'ANTONIO ABATE, FERRARA

Faith sets us on the road

Christmas! In coming among us as a helpless Child, Jesus lowered himself to our level to reveal to us the Mystery of the Father's Love. Encountering Him invites us to discover the mystery of our lives. His coming has made all things new (Rev. 21:5). This is a truth of faith that, if we believe, increases hope and makes charity active. Long awaited, the One who is the New Day is born into the world: light becomes hope precisely where the darkness of night weighs: "on those who dwelt in a land of deep shadow, a light has shone" (Is 9:1). And for humanity, the challenge of faith be-gins. And it comes naturally to ask: are this certainty of faith and the hope it communicates to us not an illusion, a dream, if placed in the historical moment in which we live? Is the reassuring answer for the human heart contained precisely in that Child? Yes, and we say this confidently, because the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men" (Titus 2:11): not just for some, but "for all men," the birth of that Child brings salvation. He is the answer to the many questions that arise in the heart. "What shall we call you, O Child Jesus? Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:5): the heavens are opened wide, in you, hope begins for humanity. And we fall to our knees! You do not come with fame, but hide in the guise of an infant. The greatest becomes small, the Mighty One becomes a servant, He, the only true Gift.

In this mystery, Christmas is revealed where there is poverty and discrimination, and this is its message: bridging the gaps of division and hatred. It's understandable why on Holy Night the Angels are the first to warn the shepherds, the rejected, the excluded: those to whom the law-abiding faithful would not speak, to them the messengers of heaven speak. And the luminous trail toward heaven is rekindled, the connection between Heaven and earth is re-established. Christmas offers us a message of paths to follow, of bridges to build toward others, toward our brothers and sisters. The shepherds have no certainties, only a sign. It takes faith to recognize in that modest sign the Messiah, the awaited Savior. Faith sets us on a journey: we go to see, we go to find.

And should there be reasons for not having hope in our time, the monks have a specific word to say: stabilitas, as a declination of the love that endures. Our consecration requires us to reject the doubt that arises in our hearts and to act as witnesses of hope. The Rule of Saint Benedict exhorts us to place our hope in God (RB 4:41) and has us proclaim this on the day of Monastic Profession with the chant of the Suscipe: Receive me, Lord, according to your promise, and I will live; and do not disappoint me in my hope (RB 58). By living hope, we testify that our horizon is here and at the same time looks far away, living in a heavenly dimension, but not celestial, as if among the clouds, as if we could be exempt from earthly trials. Whether in wars between nations and continents, or in small wars in our own midst, we interpret events with a "sixth" sense, that of Eternal Life.

The darkness is there, and the Lord comes precisely in it to dispel it. If we sin, let us allow ourselves to be restored to peace. And when we are restless, let us go to kiss the feet of that adorable Child whom Scripture calls the Prince of Peace. Let us open our door to him, even though it often leads to a stable even more stable than the one in which he was laid.

We must believe that there is a crack through which the new life that descends from above will pass. This too is believing in the impossible, believing in the impossible crack through which hope passes. Saint Paul says: (Rom 4:18) hoping against all hope. From hope comes perseverance, lived in patience until the hour of death. The challenge of death becomes the locus of hope.

Therefore, a hospital bed or the bed of an elderly person, a place of war, of desolation, can be a reason and a certainty of salvation: these circumstances are like the cracks through which hope passes. Through those cracks the Son of God enters the world. Saint Bernard said in one of his sermons: Behold peace: not promised, but sent; not deferred, but given; not prophesied, but present. God the Father has sent to earth a sack, so to speak, full of his mercy; A sack torn to pieces during the Passion so that the price that contained our redemption might emerge; a small sack, indeed, but full, if we were given a Small One (cf. Is 9:5), in whom, however, "the whole fullness of divinity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9).

And this is the wish we exchange this Christmas, through the words of Isaac of Stella, a 12th-century monk: May the Son of God, already formed in you, grow in you until he becomes Immense. And he will be for you, a smile, an exultation, a fullness of joy that no one can take away from you.

Mother Maria Ilaria Ivaldi, OSB
Abbess

ITALY: MONASTERY OF SANTA MARIA DEGLI ANGELI - AUGUSTINIAN HERMITAGE, LECCETO

"YOU CAME DOWN TO US!"

The Jubilee of a Hope That Never Ends

"Our life, the true life, came down here to us; it took upon itself our death to destroy it by the abundance of its own life, and it resounded with power in its call so that we might rise up from here to Him… so that we might return to the depths of our hearts where we would find Him again. He has gone away, and yet He is here. He did not wish to remain long with us, and yet He has not left us."

This passage from Book IV of The Confessions of Saint Augustine sheds light for us as we approach the coming Christmas season, which will bring the closing of the Holy Doors and of the Jubilee of Hope itself — yet, alas, will leave open in the heart of humanity the wound of grave and bloody conflicts.

Let us try to follow the light of Augustine's insight.

To descend is proper to Love, as Pope Leo XIV reminded us — in other words — during the audience of last September 24. God's de-scent into human flesh, to assume it fully, may be understood not only as the most concrete confession and expression of God's love for humanity, but also of His faith and hope in humanity itself.

Yes, God is the first to believe in and hope for humankind!

We are His creation! God knows our potential when we entrust our-selves to His grace, when we guard His word and adhere to it with a simple and humble heart. The beautiful face of this humanity shines forth in Jesus.

Yet God also knows well — and humankind has shown it from the very beginning — how the thirst for power and domination, greed for riches, craving for sensual pleasure — in a word, self-love to the point of forgetting one's Creator, as Saint Augustine says — degrades man, estranges him from God, and therefore from himself.

Wars, past and present, remain desolate proof of this. God was not unaware that mortals would reach the utmost extremes of inhumanity in sinning, while beasts would live among themselves in greater peace and security than men — as Augustine observes in The City of God — and he adds: "Even lions and serpents do not fight among themselves as men do."

Nevertheless, in Jesus, God never ceases to stretch out His hand to humanity, to help it rise again, to recover itself.

The flesh of Jesus is the sign of God's peace with man, His ceaseless invitation to return. The Father draws us along the path of beauty and desire, making us fall in love with the true face of our humanity as we contemplate it in the Son; or He calls us back from the "region of dissimilarity," where we have lost our way, through the experience of an emptiness of meaning that seems to annihilate us, through a nostalgia — often unconscious — that burns within us. He lets us experience that "without the Creator the creature vanishes, and the forgetfulness of God renders it opaque," as the profound diagnosis of Gaudium et Spes puts it.

Today, people speak of the post-human condition. Such an expression sounds like an alarm: it is urgent to save the human being in his humanity. Only Jesus, the perfect man, who fully reveals man to himself, can guide him on this path.

Jesus came down to us — into our humanity — so that we might ascend to Him with our humanity!
This is the Jubilee of the hope that never ends, because it is anchored in the Father's love — and which the mystery of Holy Christmas gives us the grace to celebrate anew each year!

"The Incarnation of Christ," contemplates Saint Augustine, "is the expression of God's care for man!"

With wonder, Thomas Merton — the Trappist monk with an Augustinian soul, as his professor Dan Walsh described him — opens his Journal of a Guilty Bystander with these words:
"It is a glorious destiny to belong to the human race, even though it is a race dedicated to so many absurdities and making such terrible mistakes; and yet, with all this, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! And to think that such a common notion might at first seem like the announcement that someone holds the winning ticket in a cosmic lottery. I have the immense joy of being a man, a member of the race in which God became incarnate. As though the pains and follies of the human condition could overwhelm me — now I understand what we are. If only everyone understood! But it's something that cannot be explained. There is no way to tell people that they are walking around shining like the sun… If they could see each other as they really are, there would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed… I suppose the great problem would be that we would all fall down and worship each other.

But this cannot be seen — it can only be believed or 'intuited' through a special gift."

Let us invoke the grace of this special gift for one another: the gift of looking at each other with new, human eyes! To glimpse something of the gleam of light that dwells within us! To let it shine through in the concreteness of our lives, allowing the Incarnation of the Mystery within us — by virtue of our baptism — to unfold "unto death."
Father Giuseppe Dossetti loved to repeat:
"The Word of God became flesh unto death: that is the fullest way of being incarnate… The more we consent to this, the more we ourselves become incarnate and allow God, through us, to be incarnate." In this way we shall become the leaven of that new humanity which gives flavor to human hope and energy to the journey toward peace. The places of our daily life will become for the world a kind of "reclamation center" wherever the human is too polluted. Indeed, they are the most active laboratories where, on a small scale, experiments can be made that may bear fruit on ever wider scales — places where solidarity can be offered in the face of the most universal and painful problems of every age.

Whoever follows Jesus, and in Him knows and feels himself to be the beloved child of the Father, can never renounce the struggle for love toward his brother, for a step toward peace and reconciliation — all the more if he believes, as Father Dossetti taught, that in his heart the conflicts and divisions that tear the world apart can grow worse or be lessened, depending on how he resolves the small domestic conflicts of his own life.

The Jubilee of the hope that never ends is both a gift and a task!

Sr. M. Rita Piccione, OSA

ITALY:
MATER ECCLESIAE BENEDICTINE ABBEY, ISOLA SAN GIULIO

Using only the "weapons" of truth and humble love

We have become so accustomed to overloading the Christmas holiday with consumerist meanings that it seems almost impossible to speak of it in a world that so often no longer knows peace.
Yes, because Peace is He — Jesus — who came to share in the great human adventure. And He chose to do so not by placing Himself among the powerful and the great of the earth, but by offering Himself as salvation, taking upon Himself human poverty. His coming among us gives humankind's journey a goal, a good destiny that today seems stifled by violence, war, and despair.
Jesus is — in the words of Pope Francis — the "seed of hope that God plants in the furrows of our personal and communal history."
We too, as a community, have had a deep experience of this from the very first Christmas on Isola San Giulio — our small island set amid the waters of Lake Orta, in the province of Novara [northwestern Italy]. The year of Our Lord 1973. In utter simplicity, seven sisters landed here on October 11. Our Foundress, who had a gift for writing, left us a moving account of those days.
She wrote:
"… in all this poverty there was so much poetry and joy. And so, warming ourselves more with the beautiful songs of the Advent liturgy than with firewood, we came to Christmas Eve. We needed to make a nativity scene — but how? There was no stable, no figures. Nothing that could serve. The idea came to us when, among the logs for burning, we saw one that seemed hollowed out like a cradle. We placed it in the monastery atrium, beside the well, and laid upon it the Bible, open at the beginning of the Gospel according to John: In the beginning was the Word… And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And there blossomed, upon the cut trunk, the living Word — as from the holy root of David had sprung the holy Shoot. But great was our surprise when, toward midnight, we saw the basilica fill with people who had come from the western shore: good, smiling faces, filled with awed fervor as they heard us sing: Puer natus in Bethlehem, alleluia! And the island truly became Bethlehem."
(Piedini Nudi, Interlinea, 2001)
The Lord who had first called us to the island was now making us experience that we must hope for everything from Him. What followed were long years of great solitude, which we remember for their poverty, the lapping of wind-swept waters, and the cold. At first we did not even have drinking water, let alone heating. Often, the simplest and poorest people helped us, intuitively understanding our needs. Yet we recall those years with gratitude, for they allowed the community to take root in the Lord.

On Christmas night, the marvel was renewed: the basilica was filled to overflowing. Many people, by word of mouth alone, came even from afar to celebrate Christmas in the basilica with the monastic community, which — despite its limited means — was beginning to put forth new shoots and grow in number. Gradually, we were able to organize our work, and the stability of our presence, sustained by the rhythm of the liturgy and shared with guests, became an ever more meaningful point of reference for both laity and consecrated persons.

In the Benedictine monastic tradition, we welcome many guests — brothers and sisters in search of God — who choose to share the rhythm of our days, marked by prayer, silence, work, and common meals accompanied by spiritual readings. Many of them have joined us through the bond of oblation, continuing to live in the world according to the spirit of the Rule of St. Benedict. Thus, over time, and far beyond every expectation, we have been able to give life to new monasteries that in turn embrace the Benedictine ora et labora and offer hospitality to those who seek the face of God.
Where prayer has the primacy, it becomes natural to sing: "Surely, I wait for the LORD; who bends down to me and hears my cry" (Psalm 40:2).

Then hope blossoms, and joy increases as well. It allows us to discover, day by day, what Pope Leo reminded us of in the Apostolic Exhortation Dilexi te: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: though He was rich, He became poor for your sake, so that you might become rich through His poverty" (2 Cor 8:9) … From His very entry into the world, Jesus experienced the difficulties of rejection. He presents Himself not only as a poor Messiah, but also as the Messiah of the poor and for the poor." (nn. 18–19, passim).

God becomes humble, needy, small. This Christmas, might we not also choose this path of conversion — offering a sign of hope by renouncing all violence and using only the "weapons" of truth and humble love?

Benedictine Nuns

ITALY:
ABBEY OF MONTECASSINO, CASSINO

The Gaze of Hope

At Montecassino there is a place in the Abbey that is particularly dear to me: the cell of Saint Benedict. Here he lived, prayed, meditated on the Scriptures, and studied—in short, he guarded his personal relationship with the Lord. Or better yet, he allowed himself to be guarded within it. As an ancient desert saying at-tributed to Abba Moses puts it: "Sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything."
After the destruction of the Abbey during the war and its subsequent reconstruction, several episodes that Saint Gregory the Great situates in this place in the Second Book of the Dialogues were frescoed on the walls. I would like to dwell on two of them. On the left wall is depicted the scene in which Saint Benedict foresees the first of the four destructions of Montecassino, that of the Lombards. On the right wall, opposite it, the saint contemplates his sister Scholastica ascending toward the heaven of God in the form of a dove. These are two very different gazes, yet both are necessary for grounding Christian hope.
In prophesying the destruction of the monastery, Benedict does not close his eyes to the tragedies of history. He is forced to face the precariousness and instability of our human efforts in the course of the world's events—always exposed to violence and destruction, or simply to the inexorable passage of time that consumes all things. Yet this vision is illuminated by the other gaze, no longer historical but eschatological, which contemplates the fulfillment of our life—and therefore also of his searching and laborious toil—in the Kingdom of Heaven.
Contemplating these two scenes, we are reminded of the words Jesus speaks about Jerusalem: "Not one stone will be left upon another" (Lk 21:6). While everyone admires the beautiful stones and votive offerings of the Temple, Jesus notices the gesture of a poor widow who casts into the treasury two small coins—all she had to live on (cf. Lk 21:2–4). It is the gesture of love that remains, while all else passes away. Scholastica, too—she who could do more because she loved more—teaches her brother Benedict, and each of us, that in all that passes, it is love that endures and brings our existence and history to fulfillment, despite the dramas and tragedies we must go through.
Hope requires this gaze that knows how to discern what endures in all that passes. We celebrate Christmas after having lived through Advent, a time of waiting. To "wait" (attendere in Italian) is a verb we often use interchangeably with "expect" (aspettare), forgetting the distinct meaning of each. Attendere means "to tend toward," whereas aspettare derives from the Latin spicere, "to look." Waiting, then, asks us to change our gaze—to recognize the visitation of God, who comes to transfigure history. Celebrating Christmas fulfills our waiting by giving us new eyes, capable of recognizing in the humble signs announced by the angels to the shepherds the mystery of the Son of God who comes in our flesh: "You will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" (Lk 2:12).

Dom Antonio Luca Fallica

What eyes, what gaze allow us this recognition? What eyes, what gaze nourish our hope? What eyes, what gaze enable us—like Saint Benedict—to look upon a dramatic history not with despair but with hope, contemplating its eschatological fulfillment?

On Christmas night we hear the prophet Isaiah: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Is 9:1). Yet to speak of this light, we might perhaps resort to a humble, ordinary, even banal image: think of the small flame of a match. The Italian word fiammifero comes from the Latin flamma fero—"bearer of flame." How does a match produce its light? Its flammable tip must be struck against a rough surface: the flame springs forth from that encounter. The full potential of the flame is contained in the match head, yet it cannot be released until it meets—and indeed collides—with something rough, creating friction.

The metaphor is easy to unfold. The flammable head of the match is the Son of God, the power of his light and blessing. The rough surface is our humanity, with all its shadows, limits, and imperfections—with its darkness and sin, even with its resistance to light. And yet, it is when the Son of God encounters the human condition in this way—when he takes it upon himself—that his flame is kindled and his light floods us.

Let us return to Saint Benedict and his capacity to hold together two apparently opposing gazes: one that contemplates the roughness of human history, and one that contemplates the luminous glory of its ultimate fulfillment. Christmas invites us to bring these two gazes together—and in doing so, it grounds our hope.

Fr. Luca Antonio Fallica, OSB
Abbot

ITALY:
AUGUSTINIAN MONASTERY OF SAINT CLARE OF THE CROSS IN MONTEFALCO

Notes of Hope

"In the duchy of Spoleto, in a village named Montefalco, there lived a most pure virgin, Clare by name for her beauty, but 'clear' to the highest degree for her life, virtues, and learning." The Augustinian community of St. Clare of the Cross still lives today from this luminous clarity, which instills in hearts the hope of a daily rebirth. "To hope is to wait, with boundless trust, for something unknown, but from the One whose love we know." The saints do not grow old, because they have encountered this love, and "they constitute the most important commentary on the Gospel, its daily actualization, and therefore they represent for us a real path of access to Jesus. Like the colors of the spectrum in relation to light, each of them, with their own tones and accents, reflects the light of God's holiness." With their orientation, they speak to us of an eternal love!

Christian hope—blessed hope—is indeed founded on trust in the last things, the eternity of God and the resurrection of Christ, which open the horizon. Yet it does not place us outside of time; it enlightens the mind to see the eternal within time. This gentle light, trust along the journey, shines through our surroundings—not by our merit, but by the virtue of a millennial witness.

By telling us of Jesus, the saints show us the way to a full life—to live truly. They do not glorify a future land while despising their origins; rather, they live the joy of the present with the gladness of those who know they are loved. This is when one is passionately born and becomes contagious with beauty!

The relationship with Jesus brings forth our imperfection, our "not knowing," yet also the certainty of being known. From this flows the hope of being able first to glimpse and then to see the much-longed-for Face that gives meaning to history. As we contemplate Scripture, even now this vision can be given to us in part. Our intellect, in the vision, will be adapted by the Holy Spirit so as to know and love God. We grasp, then, how important the eye of the Spirit is in order to enter the wavelength of divine life. He makes us spiritual persons, passing from the psychic man to supernatural realities and allowing us to savor the sweetest Truths.

The Monastery lives by this secret, of daily new beginnings. The saying of the Desert Fathers awaits us each day at the threshold of our cell: "Today I begin again," clothing us with daily trust. The encounter between misery and mercy becomes an intimate espousal with the One who asks not for extraordinary deeds, but for the offering of our sin.

Our community of contemplative Augustinian nuns receives daily requests for help, and each day presents them at the altar. In solidarity with our brothers and sisters, we live oriented toward the day without sunset. We welcome pilgrims and those who knock at the Monastery; we too become pilgrims, sharing what we are and what we have. We walk together, pray together, and make the Eucharist the Hope that does not fade. The community lives from this joyful fire and thus overcomes the

toxins of despair and darkness; it does not live for itself, but is placed here for others, for all. We strive to oxygenate the world's lungs through liturgy and friendship. Is it little? For us it is everything given, in virtue of the Everything received: the call to live a primacy—"Nothing better than Jesus Christ." This unfolds in the great joy of Christmas: the "antivirus" has been injected forever into the course of history! We solemnly sing the unalterable certainty: Today is born for us the Savior of the world, Christ the Lord!

This certainty tells us that the world is already saved, and in this salvation each person may be reborn. Indeed, being born is a matter of depth encountered and embraced. For Clare of the Cross, it was the imprint of the loving Face within. To intercept that crossroads where the heart—not only the body—is born, is a game of love to be sought today in the arid and hectic everyday life. Here the Word becomes flesh, meets humanity, and weaves a relationship of love. We ourselves were first "encountered," and now we may "encounter."

The childhood of St. Clare, who at six years old risked everything and entered the Monastery, was a gracious game of love. Our own stories today are very diverse, yet all bear a common mark: the same great love!

Contemplative prayer resembles two children meeting, playing, longing for each other, looking at one another, taking each other by the hand, crossing the night together.

"While she was in prayer, many times the Blessed Virgin appeared to Clare with the child Jesus under her mantle, who seemed of the same age as Clare. And the child Jesus, urged and encouraged by his Mother, would approach Clare walking, and at times take her by the hand and instill in her extraordinary comforts."

As long as we do not lose this lightness of the game of love and allow ourselves to di-vertire, to turn aside the evil that assails us, we have spent a fruitful day.

In the Jubilee of Consecrated Life, Pope Leo XIV reminded us of the commitment assumed in our profession: "You have committed yourselves to being a prophetic sign, for to live the vows is to abandon yourselves like children in the arms of the Father," and indeed, "hope is the irreducible child; she goes to bed and sleeps well."

A nun's eyes shine when this communion of love is rekindled each morning and spreads around her, so that the whole community becomes a window letting the divine Sun shine through. Daily life in the monasteries resembles the life of ants—not frenzy, but the hope of bringing humanity back into the arms of the loving God through prayer and work in Christ. Everything begins with: "Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise." We are "made" capable each day of responding, and "made" Gospel for those who meet us, received with such mercy in the womb of the Church, as we slowly grow, yearning for the perfect Kingdom, and with all our strength hope and long to be united with our King in glory.

Entering into the today of God, we do not drag ourselves from one prayer to another; as vigilant sentinels we seek to watch the night and understand how much remains until the dawn of the new day. The penetrating gaze anchored in the Eternal becomes capable of discerning what is transient from what endures.

Hope is the vigil before a great joy, where the present life is the cheerful gathering of the children of God reached by the wedding feast. While we await this glorious appointment, we already have its foretaste, for example in the Eucharistic banquet, in fraternal and sacramental life, in friendship. Hope does not play only on the future, but on the already, an advance of the not-yet.

The joy that flows from certain hope has deep roots, and is the song that rises late in the evening, when each nun, returned to her cell, thanks the Father of life for this day of life.

Monasteries are beacons in the night; they remind everyone that the Father does not leave us at the mercy of the tumultuous and difficult waves of history, but has sent us the Son, the companion who is the interior Master, the Holy Spirit. The Son has given all of Himself for us; He loves us unto dying of love. The Spirit is the pledge, the down-payment of the home awaiting us.

Creation itself groans and suffers the birth pangs to participate, transfigured, in glory, when there will be new heavens and a new earth—a solemn liturgy of encounter with the Lord of history.

Thus the Christian, inhabited by hope, knows that pessimism, melancholy and distrust have no right of citizenship in the soul, even though joy is still somewhat veiled, because: "We are always full of trust, knowing that while we dwell in the body, we are away from the Lord (for we walk by faith and not by sight); yet we are full of trust and prefer to leave the body and dwell with the Lord."

In the silence of our Monastery, we know it—we are and we await the embrace of God's Mystery.

This is the mystery that has remained hidden in God from all ages, but that is now revealed to His saints—that is, to His little ones, the humble upon whom His Spirit rests, the quiet who fear His words: "All things," it is said, "have been handed over into my hands by my Father…"

The Father, therefore, makes the Son known to whom He wills, and likewise, the Son makes the Father known to whom He wills.

Sr. Maria Cristina Daguati, OSA

ITALY: BENEDICTINE ABBEY, MONTEVERGINE

CHRISTMAS, A FEAST OF LIGHT AND HOPE

Christmas is a feast that always carries within it a seed of hope. Celebrating the birth of Christ reminds us that we are never alone in life, for we have a Father who loves us so deeply that He became man in order to save us from death and sin.

In times of war and conflict, Holy Christmas offers us a powerful moment of reflection on the profound meaning of the message Jesus left us—a message of love and humility, in sharp contrast to the oppression, selfishness and divisions we witness daily. The birth of the Son of God is a powerful ray of light that breaks into human history—a light of hope and salvation; a light that conquers darkness, capable of bringing peace and joy to the hearts of all who welcome Christ into their lives. To recall the words of Pope Francis:

"In Jesus, the Father has given us a brother who comes to seek us out whenever we are confused or lost, a loyal friend ever at our side. He gave us his Son who forgives us and frees us from our sins." (Admirabile Signum, 3)

The idea of the Christ Child as a salvific light for humanity has also inspired countless artists who, with their sensitivity, have translated it into images. We may think of the many paintings in which the Child emanates light toward which all turn their gaze—and, of course, of the nativity scene, that three-dimensional representation which, over the centuries, has been enriched with figures and stories that all point back to the central message of a God who, made flesh, "came to dwell among us" (Jn 1:14).

In the nativity scene, the birth of Christ is the historical fact around which revolve both real and symbolic characters and stories that tell us of the humility of a God who becomes a Child to open for all His creatures the way to the Kingdom of Heaven. Humanity is there in all its facets—a metaphor also of our own lives, filled with suffering, sin, distractions, joy, pain, light, and shadow. And right at the center of all these contrasts lays a Child who, though born in poverty—whether in a cave, a stable, or the ruins of a temple—is acclaimed by hosts of angels and adored by nobles and beggars alike, kings and commoners, young and old. For that Child is there for everyone, without distinction, showing us how love tears down all barriers and divisions that generate hatred and war. His birth is not an exclusive event, but a great act of love

which, beginning with the wood of the manger, reaches its fulfillment on the wood of the cross—the same cross that, as depicted in the logo of the Jubilee, becomes an anchor of salvation amid the storms of life.

Christmas, therefore, leaves us all with a message of hope, reminding us once again that we have a Father who chose to enter our history, to take us by the hand and lead us to salvation—a Father who reaches out to us, yet without forcing our hand, leaving us free to choose whether to walk the difficult road that leads to the light of the manger, persevering in prayer and in fidelity to His love and teachings, or to be distracted by the bustling activity of the marketplace, or to give in to the temptations of the inn—the place that once denied hospitality to Mary and Joseph, symbol of those who close their hearts to the welcome of Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Our prayer to the Lord, then, may be this: that He make us capable of receiving the message of hope that Christmas brings, allowing His light to enter our lives so that we may share it with our brothers and sisters through acts of charity and mercy—thus making the birth of the Child a living event of today, not merely a memory of the past.

P.D. Giovanni Maria Gargiulo, OSB

ITALY:
AUGUSTINIAN ABBEY OF NOVACELLA, VARNA

Let us celebrate Christmas in the Holy Year 2025 — let us cele-brate Christmas as pilgrims of hope.

This pilgrimage of hope does not end on January 6, 2026, with the close of the Holy Year and the shutting of the Holy Doors; rather, that is precisely when it begins — after we have celebrated Christmas together, in an entirely new way!
Hope and Christmas — two words, or better, two realities, profoundly linked to one another.
Christmas is the incarnation of hope par excellence.
A child is born — a sign of life, of future, of hope in its purest sense. And not just any child (though no child is ever "ordinary"!) — the Son of God is born.
Once I read these words: "At Christmas, the Yes has come!" — they touched me deeply.
There is a God who is there for us! One who knows our lives and desires to know them even more. One who not only stands in solidarity with us but becomes, in every way (except for sin), like us — who quite literally "takes on our flesh."
Yes — and all this without if's or but's, without restrictions, without conditions.
And when this truth reaches our hearts and takes root there, something changes within us — and through us, the very face of the world is transformed.
Christmas brings us to a unique awareness:
"See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are." (1 John 3:1)
The apostle John wrote this as a sign of identity, and we hear it often at Holy Mass as an invitation to pray the Our Father.
But do we truly believe it?
If we truly believed it — really believed it — we would live differently, speak differently, act differently toward one another.
That is why it is so beautiful that the Lord, in His Church, grants us year after year the solemnity of Holy Christmas — so that we may penetrate ever more deeply into this certainty.
So that we may become ever more aware of who we are and thus come to a healthy confidence in ourselves.
We are children of God!
Therefore, away with envy, with constant calculation and comparison.
We share in the very nature of God (cf. Acts 17:28)! And God's nature — His very being — is mercy and generosity; wherever God passes, life abounds (cf. Ps 65:12)!

This is what we celebrate at Christmas.
In Jesus Christ, everything has been given to us; everything has been revealed; the door of life has been definitively opened!
We need only to cross it — this is what it means to believe.
There is nothing more.
God gives Himself entirely!
God always gives Himself completely — and always first. And in doing so, He loses nothing.
I am reminded especially of the parable of the so-called prodigal son, as we read it in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 15:11–32): the father who gazes longingly from afar, the father who runs with compassion to meet his son.
Love has nothing to lose; it can make itself small and weak, it can show itself vulnerable.
This is the nature of God — who is love (1 John 4:8).
This is the mystery of Christmas — the mystery that can move us and transform us into people who live in love and from love, and who carry it into the world.
As children of God, we do this — as messengers of hope, of peace, and of reconciliation, whose footsteps are so eagerly awaited (cf. Isa 52:7), and so urgently needed — in our families, in our societies, among nations, and throughout the world.
Christmas is the feast of hope — and at the same time, the feast of peace.
The angels announced peace to the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem (cf. Lk 2:14) at the birth of Jesus.
There is peace — because He is present, Jesus.
There is peace — where there is faith in Him.
Peace takes root where people remind and strengthen one another in the knowledge that they are beloved children of God.
From Christmas, a new peace must flow forth for the world.
How unbearable it is that people fight against other people, deny others the right to exist, or say to them, "There is no place for you here!"
In doing this, we sin against the very One we claim to believe in, to follow, and to imitate: Jesus Christ Himself. For through His incarnation, He became the brother of all!
As Christians, our witness must be different:
"Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another." (1 John 4:11)
And to love as He did — unconditionally and without reserve. It is not only difficult — looking at Jesus, we know where this can lead: to the cross.We cannot change the history of that time — but we can give it a new turning point today!
God believes in us. He trusts us, and at the same time, entrusts to us a great responsibility.
This, too, we celebrate at Christmas.
Christmas — the feast of hope and of peace. The feast that leads us from the old year into the new.
May it reconcile us with what has been, and at the same time orient us anew toward what awaits us — and what is awaited from us. May we thus continue the pilgrimage of hope.
Through the Holy Year and our passage through the Holy Doors, may we have embarked on new paths, crossed new thresholds, opened new spaces. God is counting on us — He who has called us, who leads us to encounter Him, and who then — like the Magi — moves us into the new year on other new roads (cf. Mt 2:12).
Roads built by faith.
Roads discovered by hope.
Roads that lead to peace.
Roads on which we realize that God is with us.
Before the Nativity scene, let us pray especially for all those who live — or must live — in the absence of peace.
And for those who, especially in these days, feel alone, abandoned, and without hope.
Perhaps, in one or more encounters, we may bring a little peace and hope to them.
With all my heart, I wish each of us a blessed and peaceful Christmas —
and a new year likewise marked by blessing and peace!

Eduard Fischnaller, CanReg
Abbot General of the Austrian Congregation of Augustinian Canons

ITALY: BENEDICTINE ABBEY, PRAGLIA

Relieving suffering and promoting peace

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those whom He loves," we will hear proclaimed on Christmas night.

The peace spoken of here is a profound peace — a state of inner tranquility and spiritual wholeness. This peace goes beyond the mere absence of external conflict; it entails a deep reconciliation with oneself, with others, with creation, and with God. It is a peace that belongs to those who seek to align their lives with divine grace and favor.

This proclamation, in fact, carries a promise — a promise and a hope of peace for those who enjoy divine favor, for those loved by the Lord. And to enjoy divine favor, to be loved by the Lord, one must embark on a path of inner transformation and spiritual alignment with the teachings of the "Prince of Peace," Jesus Christ. This means embodying the virtues of love, compassion and forgiveness, thereby becoming ourselves bearers of peace.

This inner peace becomes the cornerstone upon which external harmony — and therefore external peace, understood as the absence of conflict in the various spheres of human existence — is built. Yet to truly understand this inner peace, we must think of it as something that does not end within the confines of the individual. It transcends the boundaries of the self and includes the feeling of empathy, especially toward the pain and

suffering of our neighbor — even of our enemy. Empathy, the capacity to feel the joys and sorrows of others as our own, is the bridge that connects our wills, fostering understanding and nurturing compassion.

Only in the presence of empathy can peace — both inner and outer — truly exist. Peace is not merely a rational matter; it also requires feeling, perceiving, and recognizing the pain and suffering of others. As long as we perceive, see, and consider only our own suffering, there can be no reconciliation or peace. If the sufferings of others mean nothing to me, while my own are of infinite value, it is clear that peace will never exist, regardless of all the declarations and proclamations.

Feeling the suffering of others as one's own, on the other hand, encourages compassionate action aimed at offering help, support, and kindness to those in need, thus alleviating suffering and promoting peace. In situations of conflict, empathy facilitates constructive dialogue. When opposing sides truly understand one another's perspectives and emotions, it becomes easier to seek common ground, to negotiate peacefully, and to work toward mutually beneficial solutions. In short, empathy serves as the cornerstone of peace, fostering understanding, compassion, respect, and cooperation among individuals and communities. Without empathy, it becomes difficult to bridge divides, resolve conflicts, and create a world in which all can live harmoniously and peacefully.

Empathy is certainly strengthened and perfected by the action of the Holy Spirit, yet it also requires our effort to align ourselves

spiritually with the teachings of the "Prince of Peace." And this brings us to the proper understanding of Christian hope, which is not a passive waiting for God to solve the problems of creation through the new creation at the end of time. In reality, the object of Christian hope is something that has already taken place. Through the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, we have already received a foretaste of the end times and have seen the goal of history.

This allows us to resist all the poor imitations of the Kingdom of God that our ideologies and utopias attempt to construct, but it also enables us to work to anticipate, as much as possible, those aspects of the Kingdom of God that have been revealed to us most clearly in God's revelation through Jesus Christ. This "resisting and anticipating" characterizes Christian hope and distinguishes it from other forms of hope.

In the case of the hope for peace, this concretely means resisting all those proclamations of peace that never begin with ourselves and with our own transformation. It means beginning to anticipate this transformation — both ours and that of the world — by listening to others without judging them, paying attention to their words and emotions in order truly to understand their perspectives and feelings. It means opening ourselves to knowledge of other cultures and different points of view. It means imagining ourselves in another person's situation and reflecting on how we would feel and act if we were in their place. It means teaching children the value of kindness, understanding, and respect for the feelings of others — encouraging them to consider others' viewpoints in conflicts or disagreements. It means using language that acknowledges the worth of others' experiences and emotions. It means engaging in community service or volunteer work, since exposure to the diverse needs and challenges of society can nurture empathy by allowing us to see life from different perspectives and to understand the struggles of others.

As we enter the Christmas season, let us therefore remember that the spirit of Christmas invites us not only to exchange gifts but also to cultivate inner peace by sowing seeds of compassion that may blossom into a world where peace reigns — not only for a single season, but for all the seasons to come.

Dom Stefano Visintin, OSB
Abbot

REPUBLIC OF SAN MARINO: BENEDICTINE DAUGHTERS OF THE DIVINE WILL, SAN MARINO

The doors of hope never close

As the Jubilee Year of Hope draws to a close, we reflect on what it has meant for us—both individually and as the mystical Body of Christ. The Jubilee Year is a sacred time, a time of grace, a renewal of faith and reconciliation that brings great joy and moves us to gratitude toward our Lord Jesus.
Yes! Even in this ever-changing world, darkened by fear, division and uncer-tainty, we remain grateful and joyful for our hope in Jesus Christ. As Saint Paul tells us:
Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access [by faith] to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5:1–5)
And again:
"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us." (Romans 8, 18)

Christian hope is a stumbling block for the secularized world. In that world, hope is seen as a mere desire for something bet-ter—fragile, and easily leading to despair or a sense of aban-donment, because it depends on things that are temporary and uncertain. But Christian hope is transcendent; it is rooted in Christ.
"Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit." (CCC 1817)
In his Catechesis on Hope, Pope Francis quotes Pope Benedict XVI:
"If there were no trustworthy tomorrow, no bright horizon, one would have to conclude that virtue is but an empty effort. Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does the present become livable," said Benedict XVI (Encyclical Letter Spe Salvi, 2).
The Christian has hope not by personal merit. If we believe in the future, it is because Christ died and rose again and has given us His Spirit.
"Redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face

our present." (ibid., 1)

In this sense, once again, we say that hope is a theological virtue: it does not come from ourselves; it is not a stubborn determination to convince ourselves, but a gift that comes directly from God.

It is clear that faith, hope and charity are interlinked, and that hope gives us strength and inspires us to persevere through life's trials.

In The Book of Heaven by the Servant of God Luisa Piccarreta, we read:

"If faith is the king and charity the queen, hope is like a peacemaking mother who brings peace to everything, for with faith and charity there can be disturbances, but hope, being the bond of peace, turns everything into peace. Hope is support; hope is refreshment. And when the soul, lifted up by faith, sees the beauty, holiness, and love with which it is loved by God, it feels drawn to love Him. Yet, seeing its own insufficiency, how little it does for God, how it should love Him but does not, it feels discouraged, troubled, and almost dares not approach God.

Immediately this peacemaking mother—hope—comes forth, placing herself between faith and charity, and begins her office of peacemaker. She restores peace to the soul, encourages it, lifts it up, gives it new strength, and bringing it before the king of faith and the queen of charity, makes excuses for the soul, offers the merits of her own, and entreats them to receive it. And faith and charity, having regard only for this tender and compassionate mother, receive the soul; and God becomes the delight of the soul, and the soul the delight of God." (Volume 2, September 19, 1899)

It is our pure trust in God that moves us to hope in Him. When you pass through the Holy Door of the Jubilee, know that you are not alone. We walk together as pilgrims here on earth, as one Church united in Christ. It is not merely a door—it is a sign of Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life. Let us clothe ourselves in Christ and be grateful in all things, especially in the Cross.

It is in the Cross that we are transformed and united with our Crucified and Risen Lord. Let us not lose hope in suffering, but nurture hope in what comes after Good Friday… the Resurrection.

"The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Romans 8:16–17)

If we are called children of God, let us learn to trust like the little ones whom the Lord treats as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God, and let us reflect on what prevents us from fully trusting in Him.

As Advent leads us toward Christmas, let us enter into the mystery of the Incarnation and ask the Holy Virgin to teach us, to accompany us in laying our fears at the feet of Jesus. Invite Jesus—hidden in the womb of His Most Holy Mother—into the deepest wounds of your heart, those places you prefer to keep hidden. There is no need to cling—simply be open to receive Him as you are.

Look and see how the doors of hope never close; it is only through the hardness of our hearts that we shut them. Therefore, the time of the Jubilee teaches us to keep our eyes always fixed on Jesus, our hope, and as we grow more united with Him, the grace that works within us not only elevates us but also the Church, the Body of Christ.

Let us meditate on this as Christmas draws near. Welcome the Christ Child into your heart and nourish Him with love through prayer of the heart, Eucharistic Adoration, Confession, and the Holy Mass.

Life does not consist of a single heartbeat or breath, but is made up of many heartbeats and breaths. Therefore, the nourishment of our heart must be continuous. If we continue to nourish this Child Jesus within our hearts, as we decrease, He will increase. Then, by the grace of God, we too can repeat the glorious words of St. Paul:

"I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me…".

Sr. Mary Benedicta

ITALY:
BENEDICTINE ABBEY OF ST. PAUL OUTSIDE THE WALLS, ROME

Christmas in the Light of Hope

The fulfillment of Christian hope belongs to the future. It is there that the "blessed hope" — as the priest proclaims at Mass after the Our Father — will find its full realization, in the final coming of "our Savior Jesus Christ." Pope Francis reminded us of this in one of his homilies, recalling the early Christian custom of representing hope as an anchor (cf. Heb 6:19a). He said that this anchor "is firmly planted on the shore of the beyond, on the banks of the world to come, from where God comes to meet us." And he concluded: "Our life is like walking along a rope toward that anchor."

Christian hope is therefore fundamentally an eschatological virtue. It enables us to walk with the eyes of our mind and heart turned forward and upward—toward God Himself, the only One who can guarantee the truth of our hope. At the same time, it is equally true that the anchor of hope has—so to speak—its launching point here on earth, where the Son of God chose to be born, taking on our mortal flesh and becoming our companion on life's journey. To speak of Christian hope thus means to intertwine indelibly this theological virtue—by its nature oriented toward God's future — with the mystery of the Incarnation of His Son Jesus, who made Christian hope visible by giving it flesh and a face: the flesh and face of Em-manuel, God-with-us.

The coming of Jesus among us, is in fact incarnated hope. He is "our hope" (1 Tim 1:1). His birth was an answer to humanity's deepest longings. It was a sign of the infinite love that God has for humankind; a sign of the compassion He shows for each of His creatures; a sign of the kindness with which He cares for us and our fragility; an ineffable sign of His mercy which, shining on our path, frees us from the allure of evil and sets us on the way of good-ness. With the birth of Jesus, hope took root in the coordinates of time and space, showing that it is not a disembodied virtue. For even while it lifts our gaze toward the beyond, from where the Lord comes to meet us, it does not draw us out of history. On the con-trary, it constantly moves through the folds of history, carrying with it faith and charity, with which it is intimately bound.

That Christian hope must undoubtedly and urgently be rooted—

or, as the Venerable Don Tonino Bello said, "organized"—within the concrete fabric of our daily lives is suggested by two passages in the Gospel of Luke concerning the mystery of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. The first is the episode of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. On hearing the words of the angel Gabriel—who, to encourage her to embrace God's plan for her, assured her that "nothing is impossible for God" (Lk 1:37), as proven by the elderly Elizabeth who, though barren and advanced in age, had conceived a son (cf. Lk 1:39)—Mary went "in haste" to her cousin, to see with her own eyes, with a heart full of hope, the marvel that had taken place.

The second passage concerns the shepherds who, by night, kept watch over their flocks in the open fields. After the appearance of an angel who urged them to go to the stable where Jesus the Savior had been born, they—Luke notes—went "with haste" (Lk 2:16). The hope that filled their hearts moved them toward the One who would strengthen their weary spirits and quench their thirst for meaning. Yes, the hope that inspired Mary's visit to Elizabeth and the shepherds' journey to Bethlehem was a new and radiant hope which—in different contexts—filled their being and set their hearts ablaze, opening new horizons and transforming their openness to God's Word into concrete action.

It is up to us, today, to be a bold and creative reflection of the radiant hope that Jesus, by being born among us, has poured into our hearts. This luminous hope, which continues to shine forth above all from His Gospel and from the Eucharistic mystery, seeks to reach even the most hidden corners of our lives—to awaken and set in motion our inner energies and to make flourish abundant fruits of justice and peace, of joy and love—with which to counter a world marked by misunderstanding, division, and fratricidal wars.

Therefore, while we keep our gaze fixed on the "blessed hope" that comes to meet us, let us also turn it, with tenderness and gratitude, toward the grotto of Bethlehem, where our Savior, laid in a manger, teaches us to bend low over the miseries of humanity and assures us that there is no situation—even the most desolate—into which the light of His love, opening us to hope, cannot and does not wish to enter.

Contemplating Jesus in the nativity scene through the eyes of Mary, Joseph and the shepherds, let us allow ourselves to be enveloped by this mystery of love, and let us allow it to illumine the hope that dwells within us—unleashing all its potential for beauty, goodness and truth—for our good and for that of the whole world.

Dom Donato Ogliari, OSB
Abbot

ITALY: MONASTERY OF THE MOST HOLY REDEEMER, SCALA

The Nativity Scene: A School of Hope for All

In this Jubilee Year that is drawing to a close, we find ourselves before the Nativity scene, before the Mystery of God who becomes flesh, who opens His arms to us with the tenderness of a child, enveloping us in His embrace of peace and hope. Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori accompanies us in this encounter with the "God-with-us": bishop and Doctor of the Church, founder, composer, patron of confessors, moral theologians and lawyers, but above all a missionary of God's love and a herald of hope for everyone.

The Jubilee Year, a holy time in which every Christian was able to experience God's forgiveness and grace, and the meaning of setting out on a journey with brothers and sisters at the school of the Gospel, continues to show us Saint Alphonsus as our travelling companion, reminding us of the infinite goodness of God who gives us His Son. The Word made flesh is, in fact, the foundation of our hope; He is the newness that tears our humanity away from the darkness of sin and death and restores it to the free and generous love of God. In a time like ours, marked by wars and fratricidal conflict, by violence and uncertainty about the future, Christ, Hope made flesh, brings our gaze back to God's saving will, who "being great made Himself small. He hid His divine nature so as not to overwhelm us with His majesty, to give us confidence and make Himself accessible to all" (St. Alphonsus, *Christmas Novena*).

In Saint Alphonsus's thought, the cradle of the nativity and the cross are not separate but united, and the certainty of Christian hope is founded precisely on the infallible promise and the self-emptying of God, who loves us to the very end and desires us to be happy for eternity. Christian hope, however, is not only about waiting; it is also about acting. It is not a passive hope, but one rich in action and charity toward brothers and sisters, especially the most in need: hope, in short, walks even as it waits, because "the greater charity is, the greater and firmer it makes our hope" (St. Alphonsus, *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ*).

As we approach the Nativity scene in the company of Saint Alphonsus, we cannot fail to look toward Mary, who, after Jesus, is our hope.

The Virgin is the one who conquers despair by trusting fully in God even when everything seems lost. For this reason, in *The Glories of Mary*, Alphonsus invokes her with the words "Hail, our Hope," recognizing in her a safe harbor in which to take refuge. These same concepts and sentiments of the heart become poetry in his famous hymn *O bella mia Speranza*, from which I quote an excerpt:

O lovely Hope of mine,
my sweet Love, O Mary,
you are my very Life,
my Peace, it is you.

In this sea of the world
you are the friendly Star
who can steer the little boat
of my soul to safety.

Beneath your lovely mantle,
my beloved Lady,
I wish to live, and still
I hope one day to die.

And if it is my lot
to end my life
loving you, O Mary,
then Heaven too will be my lot.

(S. Alfonso, Spiritual Songs)

Let us entrust with complete confidence the little boats of our lives to Mary's maternal hands, for she is the channel, the sea of grace through which God leads us to salvation, since from her—mediatrix of hope—Christ, the Hope of the nations, was born.
Saint Alphonsus, who dedicated so much of his preaching, his writings, and his hymns to the mystery of the Incarnation, leads us by the hand to the school of the nativity scene, "a school for the gaze," a source of hope, where we learn or recall that there is no limit to God's love, "for love made Him poor as well" (as we sing in *From Starry Skies Descending*), and that the life of Christ is our path of hope.
May the poverty of Christ captivate us, as it captivated Alphonsus's heart, so that we too may experience Christmas as he describes it in the famous Neapolitan hymn *Quanno nascette ninno*, from which I offer an excerpt from the Italian:

There were no enemies left on earth,
the sheep grazed with the lion;
with the little goats one could see
the leopard at play;
the bear and the calf,
and the lamb with the wolf in peace.

The whole world was turned upside down—
heaven, earth, sea, and all the peoples.
Those who slept felt
their hearts leap in their chests
from sheer joy;
and they dreamed of peace and happiness.

The Shepherds watched their sheep,
and an Angel, brighter than the sun,
appeared and said to them:
Do not be afraid, no!
Joy and laughter are here:
the earth has become Paradise.

Millions of Angels descended
and joined in song with them:
Glory to God and peace on earth,
no more war—for already
the King of love is born,
who brings joy and peace to every heart.

Leaping like wounded deer,
the Shepherds ran to the Stable;
there they found Mary
with Joseph and my Joy;
and in that Face
they tasted a little bit of Paradise.

(Sant'Alfonso, Spiritual Songs)

With the wish that each of you may taste a little bit of Paradise!

Suor Maria D'Amato, OSSR

ITALY:
BENEDICTINE ABBEY OF SUBIACO

Peace is a path and the fruit of communion

+ Mauro Meacci, OSB
Abbot Ordinary

The invitation of Scripture, echoed in the Rule of Saint Benedict—"Seek peace and pursue it"—fills the silence that envelops the Christmas season, when the light of the Incarnate Word makes its way through the darkness of the world. This exhortation, ancient yet surprisingly alive and timely, seems to blossom precisely in the Christmas atmosphere, when the memorial of Christ's birth leads humanity back to the simplest and most necessary truth: without peace there is no fullness of life; without peace there is no authentic hope.

From the Benedictine tradition we take up a reflection that belongs to the Church and to the teaching of the Popes of the 20th and 21st centuries: peace is never merely the absence of conflict, nor a superficial calm made of forced silence or temporary agreements. It is rather a journey, a daily work on one's interior life, the fruit of attentive listening to the voice of God who speaks to the heart—through small gestures as well as through unexpected encounters. Just as Christmas is not only a remembrance but a present act—the coming of God who makes Himself our neighbor—so too peace is a work carried out in the "today," in the concreteness of human relationships, in those relationships that need conversion, as the final document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops reminds us.

This past September 7th, the Holy Father Leo invoked the gift of peace and invited the leaders of nations to listen to their consciences with strong and decisive words: "To those who govern I repeat: listen to the voice of conscience! The apparent victories won by arms, sowing death and destruction, are in reality defeats and never bring peace or security. God does not want war; God wants peace. And God supports those who commit themselves to breaking the spiral of hatred and taking the path of dialogue." These words resound in the hearts of every believer and every person of good will! Saint Benedict asks monks to "seek peace" because it cannot be taken for granted: it is born of a disposition of the heart that requires vigilance, humility, and the ability to welcome the other. In the monastery, as in every human community, peace is built through measured words, the careful use of time, the readiness to forgive, and mutual attention. It is not a gift to be feared, but a seed to be cultivated with perseverance. And on this path, Christmas becomes the highest and truest school: God does not impose peace; He offers it through the vulnerability of a Child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

The nativity scene, in its disarming simplicity, is a perfect image of the Benedictine world: every figure finds its place, every presence has its dignity—from the smallest shepherd to the distracted wanderer. Everything holds together in a balance that does not belong to the powerful, but to those who know how to recognize the hidden greatness in humble things. In the same way, in the monastery each brother, with his talents and his limits, contributes

to the harmony of the community: peace is not the result of sterile uniformity, but the flowering of differences that are welcomed, loved, and accompanied. When the Rule invites us to "honor all men," it does not outline an abstract ideal but indicates a concrete, almost domestic way. To honor means to give space, to recognize the sacredness of the other, to allow oneself to be questioned by his wounds and struggles. In the Christmas season, this gesture is amplified: a God who lets Himself be approached by anyone opens the way to a new way of seeing humanity. If God chose to be born in a poor home and to offer peace like a smile without boundaries, then human beings too are called to remember this, transforming their daily lives into places of encounter and reconciliation.

Peace in the Benedictine tradition never arises from isolation. It is instead the fruit of communion, of a patient balance between discipline and mercy, between stability and openness. Christmas itself, while inviting us to recollection, is not a solitary event: it is the feast of visitation, dialogue, and fraternity. The shepherds who hasten in the night and the magi who arrive from afar symbolically tell us that every authentic peace is nourished by movement, pilgrimage, and shared seeking.

In our time, often wounded by conflicts, social anxieties, and interior tensions, the teaching of Saint Benedict and the light of Christmas can still offer guidance. Not an immediate solution to the world's problems, but a direction: to begin again from small things, to make the heart a more hospitable space, to let peace take root in our words and presence. Peace is not a distant goal, but an exercise in closeness: a gentle gesture, a word that does not wound, a silence that listens, a choice of responsibility.

Thus, following the Rule, every Christmas can become a new beginning. And peace—far from being a utopia—becomes a real path, made of the same fabric as the Incarnation: fragility inhabited by love, humility that becomes strength, tenderness that generates hope. In this simple and immense mystery, Saint Benedict, contemplating the Mystery of the Incarnation, offers a message that crosses the centuries and reaches us as a blessing: to build, with patience and trust, a peace that does not pass away, because it is born of a God who loves and therefore comes to dwell among us.

ITALY:
TRE FONTANE AND ACQUE SALVIE

A place in Rome that has something to say today about hope

In our cities we see many churches emptying; most of the people who still attend them are elderly. We read about the decline, throughout much of the West, in the number of priests and religious. At the same time, the thirst of so many who set out in the hope of encountering something new for their lives is evident. People of every age and nation, are arriving in this Jubilee Year in Rome—some knowingly, others less so—to draw from the living source of the Gospel, which the Church offers so that the life of faith may be renewed in many, and from it the hope that brings newness, initiative, and a future, when every certainty seems to collapse.

We like to look to the Abbey of Tre Fontane on the Via Laurentina in Rome as a place of hope—not only because the Church of the Martyrdom of Saint Paul is a jubilee church, but also because of the life that is developing within, through a collaboration between the abbey's male monastic community and a small group of sisters living in the adjoining house next to the Church of the Martyrdom of Saint Paul.

A few historical notes are necessary

The Trappist monastery and its small yet vibrant and welcoming community stand in a particularly evocative place, thanks to the church that commemorates the site of Saint Paul's martyrdom in the year 67 AD. Two centuries later, in the year 298, Zenon and another 10,000 Christians were also martyred during Diocletian's persecution. This place of memory and sanctity later housed the relics of Saint Anastasius, kept in a monastery founded by Greek monks who had come from Cilicia. Around the 11th century, Armenian monks were replaced by Benedictines, and from 1140 onward by the Cistercians; the abbey church was then dedicated to the martyrs Vincent and Anastasius.

The Cistercians arrived in a problematic location—marshy and plagued by malaria. Following the style envisioned by Saint Bernard, new buildings were constructed, and with many difficulties the community sought to establish itself. The church and monastery remain, architecturally, among the rare places in Europe that still appear as Saint Bernard of Clairvaux intended. Only the stained-glass windows, redone in the 1930s, are more recent, as are the later frescoes of the apostles on the supporting columns, which depart from Cistercian simplicity. The marshy land, malaria, scarcity of means for sustenance and of vocations, and the difficulty of integrating with the Roman environment marked the early years. What followed was no easier. After a long period of decline, the site was entrusted to the Franciscans in 1826, but remained abandoned until 1868, when it was given to the Trappists.

Today

From the busy Via Laurentina, a narrow avenue lined with holm oaks and eucalyptus trees leads to the abbey church; one immediately finds oneself in an atmosphere of silence and under the gaze of the imposing statue of Saint Benedict and his invitation: Pax.

A large square and a portal dating back to Charlemagne lead into the Cistercian abbey church. To the right stands the Church of Scala Coeli in honor of Our Lady. On the small hill is the community of the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld. A path lined with eucalyptus trees leads to the Church of the Martyrdom of Saint Paul, and a short stretch reveals Roman-era cobblestones.

A small building to the left of the church houses six Trappist nuns. Since 2019, it was envisioned that a house of sisters could accompany the male community, offering a presence in the liturgy, support for organization, work, and formation, as well as for the welcoming of guests in the guesthouse. The Trappist community of Vitorchiano assumed responsibility for an "annexed" house of nuns. The initiative was strongly supported by the vicariate of the Diocese of Rome.

Integrating a male house with a female community seemed an apt way to represent the face of the local Church and of the Trappist Order, with its two branches—male and female—and an openness to the world that engages various cultural contexts while preserving its contemplative identity. The support of the Abbot General, Dom Bernardus Peeters, was fundamental to this initiative.

Over the years we have witnessed active collaboration between the brothers and sisters at Tre Fontane: the entrance into the monastery of a young Roman man now approaching his final vows to belong to the community and the Order; a postulant; and recently the arrival of a monk from Indonesia, Dom Maximilianus, as superior, as well as a monk from Brazil and two Nigerian brothers assisting the community—all signs of vitality. Collaboration has also brought better and more effective organization in monastic work and in the hospitality offered to guests. Two ecumenical events have confirmed that this path may be fruitful for the Church of Rome: in 2023 the visit of Tawadros II, Pope of the Copts, following his meeting with Pope Francis and the confirmation of the inclusion in the Roman Martyrology of the 21 Coptic martyrs killed on 15 February 2015; and more recently, on November 5, the signing of the updated Charta Oecumenica, after the joint work of the CCEE and CEC. The working group participated in an ecumenical liturgical celebration in the Church of the Martyrdom of Saint Paul before the audience with the Holy Father the following day.

If there is a word of hope that we receive from this experience, it is that in the arduous task of living through the difficulties that history—reality—places before us, the path is faith in the promise of life that the Lord gives us, according to a charism that becomes life for us and for those who meet us, sustaining the work for and in communion.

Sr. Gabriella Masturzo, OCSO
Monastery of Our Lady of Saint Joseph – Vitorchiano

IRELAND: MONASTERY OF THE CARMEL STAR OF THE SEA, MALAHIDE

Only God can help

'This was the moment when Before turned into After . . . This was the moment when nothing happened'. Words of U.A. Fanthorpe summing the extraversion of the introversion of our human experience. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany are redolent with imagery in their scriptural presentation: the gospel texts present us with both instances and images of the simplest occurrences of life, give us language to define the hazy concepts of our minds; a language not of words alone but what we can see and touch and hear, drawn out of ourselves with the shepherds, to go and see 'this thing which the Lord has done', and into the jubilant song of the angels. This moment when nothing happened, when all created was brought to its knees before a child.

Here, in our Discalced Carmelite Monastery of Star of the Sea, in Malahide in Dublin, we have been honoured over decades to have many young families gather with us for the laying of the Bambino in the manger and the celebration of the Eucharist on this great feast. Small children immediately take note of other small children. It is the child that catches the eye, rather than Santa's toy, lit candles, beautiful liturgy, bright flowers. The Child in the manger has this same attraction as the youngster. The Poet Laureate Ted Hughes, in teaching young children to write, suggested focusing on some particular object and staying there, quite simply, in mutual presence. Coming to the Nativity scene, either in imagination or physically, equally draws us, seasoned adults, by a magnetism of the heart, to focusing on the new born King; as St Augustine puts it, 'Love is our lodestar.'

What message of hope does Christmas offer in a world often without peace? There are no ready answers in our lives as, there were none in the lives of Mary, of Joseph, nor of Jesus himself. None in the often conflictual lives of the peoples of the Hebrew Scriptures and often none in the two thousand plus years since the birth of the Son of God. Who cannot but have felt and feel that it is all too, too much to bear? There are laws of predictability and seeming unpredictability; where turn in this fast turning world, where tsunamis of affliction sweep upon the innocent and defenceless? A Cistercian Abbot once spoke to me of his time, as a young officer in the RAF, of his being present at the opening up of Belsen. He said, 'Some situations in life are so bad that only God can help.' I was struck by a great sense of comfort: that despite all we see, hear, experience in our own lives and that of others, that this is God's best care of us; this rooting of us in the moment.

There is an evolutionary aspect of this care of God for his people and his world. It may be, and often is, slow to our perception. Circumstances change, we change; the sun rises and the suns sets: on the universe, as we know it, bound by what we term, 'the laws of nature' and the seeming breaking of these laws; seen, too, in our hearts, in our relationships, in our lives.

Our ability to see reality, Truth himself, always at work in the world, gradually coming into our field of vision, knowing these to be assured green pastures; our sight, often by painful arrests, but gradually losing its opacity, sharpening our vision and adjusting our value system. Often we are helped progress by those in closest proximity. How readily would I look to a child for all I need? We work with the Spirit in a way that is ever new. Is this a smooth ride? Is all this uphill work? Frequently. Then, all unexpectedly, there is a revelation to the gentile in me. How do we pray: day after day, year after year, decade after decade? As contemplative and consecrated cloistered women we have the honour of a lifetime of living in God's house and with his friends and ours. We are held and sustained but at a price. Lived, to our faltering best, consecrated life is the easiest life in the world. A selfless life is the one that Jesus lived: an easy yoke and a light burden.

What does someone in a cloistered monastery know of real life? We all lived lives outside the monastery and we certainly live lives within community. Chronologically, 'Before turned into After' with our entry into this new form of life. Every moment we, as all disciples, live in the 'valley of decision': this is a fine thing, albeit strenuous, and not for the faint-hearted. A valley forces us to go forward or back, to choose life, again and again by God's power within. It is a wondrous thing: a human voice proclaiming aloud scriptural texts, hearing one's own voice lent to God, turning the pages with my own hands , on behalf of the community at Office and the Eucharist, to know that these real human beings, whose lives were as haphazard as mine own, are the reason and the underpinning of our presence together at this moment in our monastery here above the sea, and in every place and believing heart. All this crossing chasms of millennia and experience.

The means maybe trivial, pleasant or unpleasant but there is power, given in Baptism and Confirmation, there for our taking. In our cloistered context we are blessed too with lifelong formation in prayer and community living, liturgy, scripture, the distinct charism of the Order and all the dynamic riches of the church's life. We live with others who are drawn to the same Lord for the whole of life and who are often, and surely unsuspectingly, inspirational guides. It is a truism that bad friends ruin the noblest of people; so what hope for good is ours when we are surrounded by disciples of the Lord? What of the many situations of active violence 'out there'? Are they in reality out there? I speak now of the day, standing in my cell, when I felt overwhelmed by the travail of God's and our beautiful world and its people. It came to me, as a gift, that all of this is within me; that my responsibility, my role, is to do all I can, in my small sphere of influence, to live as Christ would have me live. This pulled me back into myself from my dispersion. I have St Teresa of Jesus' clarion call, 'Always be beginning.' We are arbiters of our fate: ambassadors for Christ.

Interactions bring us a new experience of God, a new revelation with a human face. We have the immediate, and constant, blessing of life in community until death do us part, with rare exceptions: a member of our Carmel joined a new foundation in Zing, Northern Nigeria some thirty years ago. Our closeness has informed us and has brought a new revelation of God, a manifestation of presence, to us here. The Magi opened their gifts. We are used to the recipient doing this. What happens when we present our gifts, ourselves, before the Child? It can seem, and certainly feel, like a Pandoran experience: the lid is lifted and out fly who knows what? And there, below, deep down and in last place of all, is hope.

Ann Griffiths, the Welsh hymn writer, expresses well the role that calls to each one of us: the manger and the Child are 'the tabernacle set up for us to meet quietly with our God.' Every tabernacle a manger where the Son of God and son of Mary is laid. Every heart a place of welcome.

MALAYSIA: CARMELITE MONASTERY OF THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY, KUCHING, SARAWAK

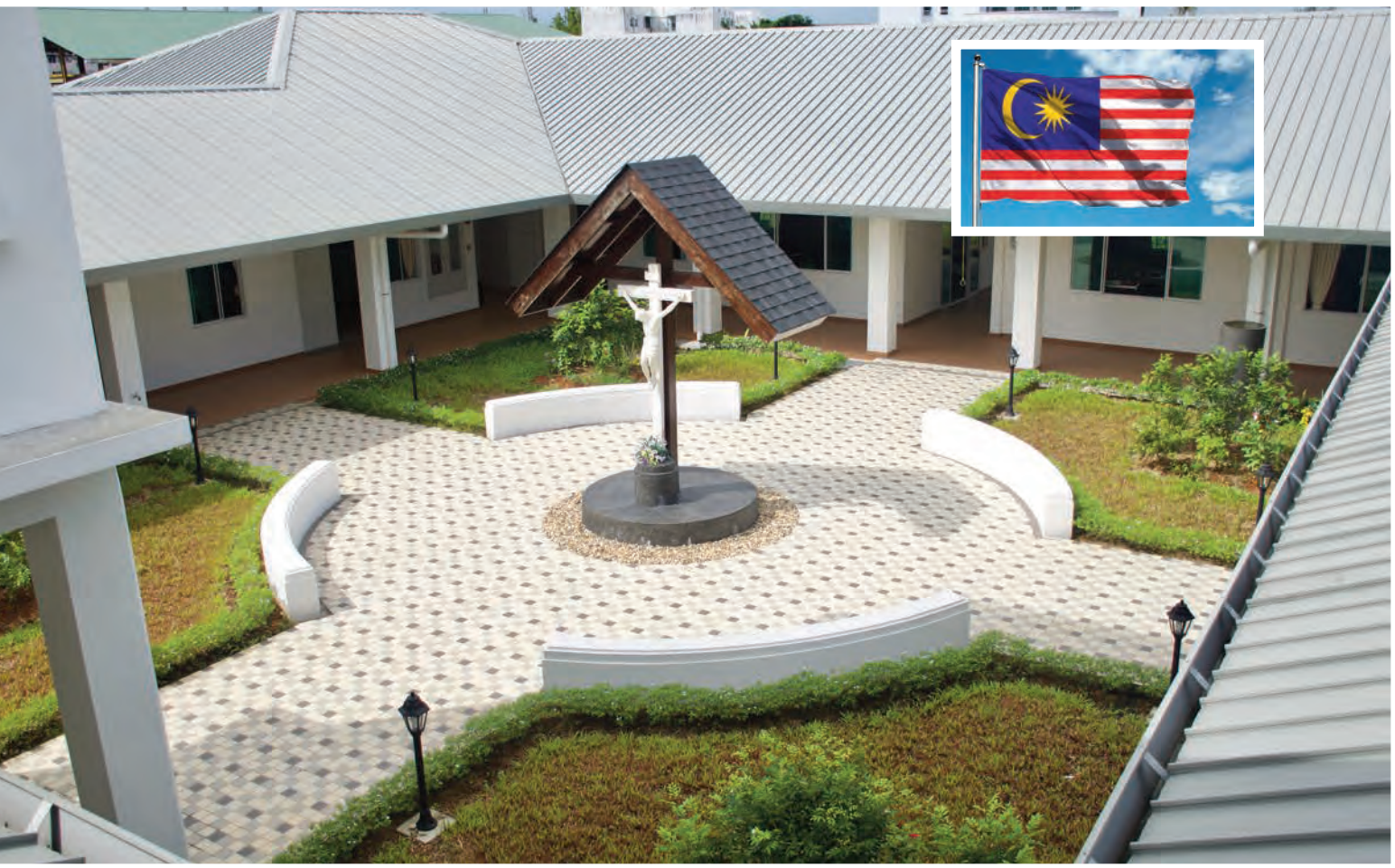
Follow Our Lady of Hope

Indeed, it is sad to hear of wars going on in many parts of the world. Here, it is peaceful enough to celebrate, to enjoy Christ-mas. But as we pray for those suffering in wartorn countries, we wonder how much more difficult it is for them to hope for peace. What message of hope can Christmas offer to us and to them?

It is clear that war was the choice of certain nation's leaders, although God had already blessed them with much power. But somehow, on Christmas day, the universe's all-powerful Creator chose to become powerless. God became a weak, helpless baby and allowed himself to be persecuted by a powerful king - Herod. On Calvary, He again made himself weak, and allowed the Pharisees to overcome him in a powerful alliance with the Romans, the ruling powers of his time. A great mystery of hope lies here. Why did God, the Mighty One, the Great One, chose to come in swaddling clothes and become a victim of persecution, close to us in our helplessness?

For one, He is telling us that He is with us, Emmanuel (Matt 1:23), walking with us, saying "I know how weakness feels. I made myself weak in order to save you, at all cost." and "I am with you, yes, to the end of time." (Matt 28:20) God is alive! Thanks to the Resurrection! He is living with us, though we do not see him. And because of His closeness to us, we have His strength, to walk the way He walked.

Since Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn 14:6), was He showing us the way by choosing to become weak? We know for a fact that His self-emptying and sacrificial love led to the greatest triumph ever. He won in the end by losing. He told us, that His Kingdom is not of this world (Jn 18:36). If victims of war do not see peace in their country in their lifetime, the hope of an eternal peace in the next world is assured to them by following the way Jesus trod - conquering hatred with love. What a message of hope this brings! It is the weak ones (united to Christ) that become the real powerful forces in saving the world. For the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, until it grows into a big tree (Luke 13:19). The Carmelite Martyrs of Compiègne walked willingly to the guillotine, singing and offering their lives for the peace of France. They lost their lives, but soon after that, the war drew to a close, and an era of peace was ushered in.



If we ever question, is God ever going to end the war? How long are we to wait? We only need to open our eyes to see that God has already given us signs of hope. We have a pope (Pope Leo XIV) that soon after his inauguration, called for prayers and fasting for peace, and ventured to call for peace with the Ukraine President. Christ did promise to give us peace. Our hope will not deceive us. We need only to open ourselves to the promise of the coming of the Savior - the great One foretold in the Old Testament and whose coming is still being awaited in the New Testament. His coming is everyday, in the now. We can find him anywhere, even in a Nazi concentration camp, as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross did: "The dear Child Jesus is with us even here," and because of this hope, she ministered to other prisoners as an angel of peace.

In the words of Pope Francis: " The Kingdom of God is already present in our midst, like a seed that is easily overlooked, yet silently takes root. Those to whom the Holy Spirit grants keen vision can see it blossoming. They do not let themselves be robbed of the joy of the Kingdom by the weeds that spring up all about. In Christ, even darkness and death become a point of encounter with Light and Life. Hope is born, a hope accessible to everyone, at the very crossroads where life meets the bitterness of failure. That hope doesn't disappoint because God's love has been poured into our hearts (cf Rom 5:5) and makes new life blossom like a shoot that springs up from the fallen seed. Seen in this light, every new tragedy can also become a setting for good news, in as much as love can find a way to draw near and to raise up sympathetic hearts, resolute faces and hands ready to build anew." This is the confidence of hope.

We must learn from Mary, our most perfect Mother and perfect disciple of Christ, how to hold on to hope in the face of such grim sight - dead bodies littered on the ground and the rubble of buildings after a bombing. She stood at the foot of the Cross and saw her son tortured and left hanging in utter misery and spiritual desolation. We can imagine what a bleak sight that was to her physical eyes. It can be likened to seeing the aftermath of a nuclear bomb….all hope seems wiped out forever.

Yet she never forgot the message of the angel "He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High…and His kingdom will have no end" (Luke 1:32-33). How did she do it? She kept the word of God firmly fixed in her mind, treasuring them up and pondering them in her heart. Yes, may Our Lady of Hope obtain for us the strength for us to follow her to the end.

Sr. Karen Emmanuel of Jesus on the Cross, OCD

The message of hope Christmas offers in the world often without peace is that earth is not the eternal home for us as God the Father has created us as His children to know Him, to love and serve Him here on earth and to be happy with Him forever in heaven after the end of our earthly journey. To reopen the gate of heaven which was closed down because of the original sin of our first parents Adam and Eve, God the Father sent His Son Jesus Christ into this world to do His holy will as Redeemer and Savior for all human beings. To enable us to be able to reach our heavenly home, God the Father our Creator gave us the Ten Commandments to keep, Jesus Christ our Redeemer gave us the beatitudes and the Holy Spirit our Sanctifier gave us the beautiful seven gifts so we must be faithful to observe them in living our earthly life for hope of Christmas is to bring us to our heavenly home to live as God's children there at the end of our earthly life.

Sr. Mary John of the Cross, OCD

MAURITIUS:
CARMEL OF PORT-LOUIS

Walking Together as One Family

We are the cloistered Discalced Carmelite nuns of Saint Teresa, whose mission is to pray for the ministers of the Church, for preachers, and for the whole world—with its technological progress, its joys, and its sorrows. During the past year, in our Diocese of Port-Louis, in the presence of our Bishop, Mons. Jean Michaël Durhône, the People of God, in all their diversity, gathered each month for the Eucharist in different churches to pray together as one family, following a chosen theme. We Carmelites were united in prayer and in heart during these gatherings, so that the hope of walking together as a family might be fulfilled, helping one another face trials such as unemployment, drug addiction, illness, and mourning.
For us, who pray with the texts of the Liturgy of the Hours, we joyfully participate in the prayer of the Church, which allows us to remember what happened 2,000 years ago. God our Father lovingly sent His only Son, Jesus, into the world to save humanity from its sins. And the Angels proclaimed glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth to those He loves. After prayer, we gather fraternally around beautifully set tables, enjoying delicious meals and seasonal tropical fruits. There are also exchanges of gifts, games that make us laugh, and even, through television, we visit other countries. Now, with modern technology, the nuns can see and speak with their families, and sometimes we talk with sisters from other Carmels, which strengthens our bonds of friendship. There are also joyful meetings with parents, friends, and benefactors who are in their home countries. Even the poor—those without food or shelter—knock at our door, and we welcome them and help them as best we can. We also receive visits from people who wish to meet us, get to know us better, and discover our spirituality.

At the time of Jesus' birth, the King of Peace, the history of Israel was a complex interweaving of Roman domination, religious tensions, and political unrest. The reign of Herod, in particular, was marked by violence and cruelty, contributing to a climate of fear and resentment. The birth of Jesus, as Messiah, took place in a context of both despair and hope, as the Jewish people awaited liberation from Roman occupation.
Jesus became man; he came to live among us, sharing our joys and our sorrows. The causes of war are often multiple and can include factors such as territorial disputes, political ideologies, natural resources, ethnic or religious tensions, and economic interests. Despite the teachings of many spiritual figures and efforts to promote peace, conflicts continue to arise for a variety of complex and interconnected reasons.
Understanding and resolving these issues often requires diplomatic efforts, open communication, and international cooperation. It is also important to recognize the progress made toward peace and global cooperation, as well as the persistent challenges that remain. Peace is an ongoing process that requires the commitment and effort of each one of us.
The message of hope for the Jubilee of 2025 is a hope founded on faith in Jesus Christ, on the promise of the Holy Spirit, and on the love of God. It is an opportunity to rediscover trust in our relationships, in society, and in the respect for creation. Pope Francis has invited believers to become

"messengers and builders of hope" and peace, becoming "pilgrims" for others.

The message of hope of Christmas in a world without peace is to contemplate the birth of Christ, the "Prince of Peace," the central event that ignites love and hope in the hearts of our lives, our families and our communities. Since God has loved us, we are called to follow His example to build a more just and loving world and to become instruments of divine peace.

Christmas reminds us that even in a world not always at peace, it is possible to cultivate a perspective of hope founded on faith and on love for God and neighbor.

Sr. Marie-Noëlle Joseph, OCD

MOROCCO:
TRAPPIST MONASTERY OF OUR LADY OF ATLAS

What hopes do we cherish at the end of this Jubilee Year 2025?
As every year, the Christmas celebrations mark the end of the year. The Church and Pope Francis, of venerated memory, placed the year 2025 under the sign of the Great Jubilee of Redemption. Here and there throughout the world, Christians of all generations have had the opportunity to spiritually experience this ecclesial grace through moments of reflection, retreats, and pilgrimages. Our monastery of the Atlas in Morocco had the privilege of being chosen by our Archbishop, Cardinal Cristóbal López Romero, as one of the four diocesan pilgrimage sites during this year. We therefore had the joy of welcoming to the Pilgrimage of Hope several young students from sub-Saharan Africa, currently in Morocco for their studies. Most of them are deeply rooted in their parishes and serve as pastoral agents contracted with our Diocese of Rabat. They possess a vibrant dynamism that sustains our Church and keeps it awake, open to others, respectful of differences, and sensitive to the interculturality that largely characterizes Moroccan society.
The emphasis placed on the Christian virtue of hope is what has struck us most deeply as a community during this past year. For this reason, we wanted to share with our pilgrim guests all the practices offered by the Church to benefit fully from the grace of the Jubilee. One of these practices was passing through the "Door of Hope" erected within our chapel. We all know that the celebration of Christmas is closely tied to hope — a hope present in the angelic song of Christmas Eve: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to those whom he loves" (Lk 2:14). Already the prophet Isaiah proclaimed in his day:
"You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing; They rejoice before you as people rejoice at harvest, as they exult when dividing the spoils. For every boot that tramped in battle,every cloak rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for fire. For a child is born to us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace" (Is 9:2, 4–5).

Yes, in our hearts and minds, hope rhymes with joy, love, justice, and peace. But in our world at the end of 2025, how can we recognize and live these foundational principles when pockets of hatred, violence and war have multiplied across the globe with no apparent effective solution to end them? Immense is the clamor of weapons, rockets, screams, and tears rising to Heaven from Central Africa, Palestine, Ukraine… Of what hope are we speaking amid so many paradoxes? And yet, hope is intrinsically tied to the entire biblical Revelation and especially to the message of Jesus in the Gospels. How can we live it and bear witness to it in today's world?

The Experience of the Monastery of Our Lady of Atlas in Morocco
Our Community, present in Morocco since 1988 — first in Fez and then here in Midelt from 2000 — continues its monastic life with a twofold objective: first, commitment to truth and fidelity to the Cistercian charism, and second, the determination to carry forward the witness of our martyred brothers. Here we experience the grace of hope as a "Visitation," a communal journey to meet the other, different in faith but a brother or sister in humanity.

Several factors have facilitated this experience of "Visitation and Encounter."
The acquisition of the property "Kasbah Myriem," owned by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary since 1936, and the significant influence they had in the entire region, contributed to the acceptance and even adoption of the Community by the surrounding Muslim population. Moreover, the strong sense of hospitality and concern for maintaining social peace in Morocco allowed the community to quickly develop bonds of fraternity and friendship with the local population. Inspired by the experience of the Franciscan Sisters, the monks accepted invitations to visit Muslim families during the Ramadan fast. These evening visits, around a family table for the breaking of the fast, were not only opportunities for mutual understanding but also moments of authentic religious exchange, occasions to discover what unites us in each of our two faiths and what distinguishes us. This often led to greater mutual understanding, a reduction

in prejudices stemming from a lack of accurate information, and above all, great mutual esteem and respect.

In 2002, just two years after the Community's settlement in Midelt, Father Jean-Pierre Schumacher, one of the two survivors of Tibhirine, celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of his priesthood. The celebration organized at the monastery for the occasion gathered a large crowd of Muslim friends who came to express their affection and friendship both to the "Chosen One" and to the entire community. Songs and dances continued late into the night. From that moment until today, the hope we live here is expressed through meeting and sharing our joys and sorrows with the surrounding population. Without any temptation to draw those around us into our faith, our concern is simply to cultivate the quality and authenticity of our presence to others. This begins with attention to our fraternal relationships and mutual respect within the community. This witness inspires confidence in those outside it who observe our lives and encourages them to develop authentic relationships with us, because they see us as similar to them: people of prayer and seekers of God within a different religious tradition.

For us, living hope in the perspective of the "Visitation," following Mary's example in the Gospel of Luke (chapter 2), means offering others a loving, humble, and often hidden presence, whose authenticity invites those close to us to go beyond what is immediately perceptible. It means allowing Him who, in us and among us, is the Source of true peace and fraternity among human beings to shine through our presence.

Our hope, here and now in Midelt, is that oases of peace may multiply across a world surrounded by hatred and violence, so that love and fraternity among people may reach the ends of the earth. This "utopia" is presented to us as achievable by the "Child of Bethlehem."

This spirituality of the "Visitation" was already lived by Father Christian de Chergé before us in Tibhirine. He wrote: "Through the mystery of the Visitation, we make it our own so that, through our life, by constantly visiting the other in Islam, Jesus may reveal himself when and how he wills. It is enough for us to be there and to carry him within us as Mary did… In other words, it is for us
to be fully disciples and fully monks."

Conclusion

The Christian hope that animates us is a gift from God that continually flows from the manger of Christmas. It is fragile like a newborn child, and yet it carries within itself the promise of a world according to God's heart — a world where justice, peace, and human fraternity reign. These are intimate desires we carry within our hearts in a world marked by violence and injustice. Our hope is lived concretely where God has placed us and in the specific circumstances of our lives. It is constantly nourished by the Word of God, which is effective and ever relevant. It is a dynamic and spiritual force that enables us to walk with steadfastness and perseverance in the heart of a world "in labor pains," to use Saint Paul's terminology in his Letter to the Romans (chapter 8, verse 22).

Hope is both a task and a responsibility, insofar as it always sets us in motion, first toward ourselves, because it requires a conversion and self-denial that are never complete. Hope is the welcoming of the Word of God, which seeks only to take flesh and blood in our lives. Such hope commits us to set out toward our brothers and sisters, to walk together in dialogue and mutual respect. It makes us witnesses and missionaries of the coming of a "New World," whose foundations are already being laid through our cooperation and the trust we place in one another. It is an inclusive process that helps banish evil and gather the first fruits of peace and happiness here and now, wherever men and women come together, serving their fellow human beings with love.

The hope of which we speak goes far beyond the present world. It finds its source and fulfillment in God. This God establishes and makes possible the fraternity of all human beings, whatever their differences.

Let us give the final word to Father Christian de Chergé:

"I shall be able, God willing, to look into the Father's eyes to contemplate with him his children of Islam, as he sees them, all radiant with the glory of Christ, the fruit of his passion, filled with the gift of the Spirit whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and restore the likeness, playing with the differences."

This is the conclusion of his Testament.

Father Germain Mbida Mbida, OCSO

MOROCCO:
THE CARMELITE MONASTERY OF THE HOLY FAMILY AND OF SAINT TERESA OF THE CHILD JESUS , TANGIER

The ministry of intercession

December twenty-fifth. 8:30 in the morning. The bells ring. And hundreds of children and teenagers enter to begin a new school day, while their parents go to work—some at home, some in offices, some in factories…

Indeed, in Tangier, December 25 is a day like any other: we are in Morocco, a confessionally Islamic country where Catholics represent only 0.1% of the population. Here, Christmas truly has a special flavor: a tiny Christian community, in the midst of Muslim brothers and sisters, like leaven in the dough, celebrating the inconceivable mystery of God becoming one of us to save everyone. A bit like in Bethlehem more than 2000 years ago, perhaps…

We, the Discalced Carmelite nuns—a small monastic community within the already small Catholic Church—also celebrate with ever-new joy this mystery of the Infinite becoming small for our sake. And this smallness shared between God and ourselves allows us to welcome the Child Jesus with hearts free from the noise and consumerist concerns that have elsewhere obscured the authentic meaning of Christmas.

And so our monastery fills with light and with Nativity scenes arriving from all over the world—much like us: from Asia, Europe, Africa, the Americas… And before the "all-colors" Child Jesus, the cry for peace becomes even stronger and more piercing, the cry of hope for a new world to begin… here and now. Starting from me and from you, starting from us. Like leaven in the dough, as we said. For our ministry of intercession can only live from this active participation in the coming of the Kingdom. And so we too set out, like the shepherds, to adore the Child Jesus, who is the only hope, the only peace the world awaits. And, like the shepherds, we offer him our poverty and we ask him:

Lord Jesus, who willed to become one of us and to live with us and for us, make hope grow within us:

the hope of learning to love you as you are, and not as we would like you to be;

the hope of learning to love you as we are, and not as we would like to be;
the hope of learning to love our brothers and sisters as they are, and not as we would like them to be.
For only from you can we learn this self-giving, defenseless, absolute love that you show us in Bethlehem. Only from you can we draw the strength of that humble Love capable of making all peoples one single family.

You, the God of hope, fill us, in believing, with all joy and peace (cf. Rom 15:13), so that with our lives we may say to our brothers and sisters—all our brothers and sisters—that you chose to be with us so that we might all be with you and with the Father, in the embrace of the Holy Spirit, forever. Amen.

Sr. Maria Virtudes de la Asunción, OCD
Prioress

NORWAY: DOMINICAN MONASTERY OF LUNDEN, OSLO

The Lord of light and life

Christmas. Hope. Peace. Is there anything left to say about these three themes? For hundreds, yes, thousands of years, we have gathered in the night, singing about glory to God and peace on earth, only to wake up the next morning to find the world still filled with human beings—ourselves among them—seeking their own glory, with strife and conflict as a constant companion in the search. What message of hope does Christmas bring in a world often without peace? Is there still a message of hope to be proclaimed at all?

What is the message of Christmas? 'Today, a Saviour is born.' 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we saw His glory.'

A Saviour is born. Celebrating the anniversary of a birth is always an act of memory, of remembrance, and memory and hope are closely connected. The memories of God's goodness towards us in the past nourishes our hope for the future.

The celebration of Christmas, however, is more than a simple commemoration of something that happened a long time ago and that may or may not have something to do with us today. It is the recognition, in faith, that just as the birth of a child forever changes the world for the family into which it is born, so the birth of this particular child, Jesus, has forever changed something for the entire human family. No matter how dark and desperate our situation may be, Christmas proclaims that the Lord of light and life has bound Himself so intimately to humanity as to become one of us.

And so, He is present there, in the midst of all the suffering, in and through those who seem to be beyond hope.

God sending God's Word, God's Son into the world; indeed, God coming into the world to dwell among us, is a sign that God has not given up on us. God still has hope for our world. The delayed Parousia not only testifies to God's patience, as 2 Peter 3 reminds us, it also testifies to God's hope that all people will come to experience conversion, and as a result, that our world will become ever more like the Kingdom.

It might be helpful to remember that it is precisely when things seem hopeless that we need hope. As Romans 8,24–25 has it: 'Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.'

At times, maybe most of the time even, we ask God to increase our hope, but what we mean is that we want circumstances to change so that we no longer need hope—just as we pray for courage and really mean that we no longer want to feel afraid, or for strength, meaning that we do not want to be challenged.

Wanting to feel safe, strong and content is not in itself bad. Indeed, it is perfectly justifiable to ask God for security and happiness. However, in our broken world, we also need to pray for the virtues required to face life when it is unstable, frightening and unsatisfying. We need to pray for strength, courage and for hope, hope to sustain us when we do not see the way forward, when we do not understand how the problems facing us individually and collectively can ever find a solution, when it seems impossible to imagine that there ever will be peace on earth.

Christmas. Hope. Peace. Maybe part of our task as Christians is to make sure that these words do not lose their meaning. By entering ever more deeply into the mystery of Christ's birth, by nourishing our vision of the world by the memory of God's goodness and by the confidence that God is ever present and will be faithful to God's promises, by committing ourselves to do what we can to allow the Kingdom of Peace to come on earth as in heaven.

Sr. Ingeborg-Marie, OP
Prioress

NEW ZEALAND: CARMEL OF CHRIST THE KING, CHRISTCHURCH

Solidarity fuels hope

Greetings from Christchurch, New Zealand! It was on Christmas Day 1814 that the Gospel was first preached on New Zealand soil. Two centuries later it would seem that this Good News hasn't had the impact that such wonderful tidings should have, as New Zealand society largely remains indifferent to its message. Christmas is often commercialized and overlooks its central figure, Christ. Still, it is a time when families gather to be together and to give each other gifts. Many people still come to Church at Christmas, perhaps for the one time each year. Christmas is in Summer here, the time when schools and businesses take their main holidays for the year. During December shops abound with decorations and enticing things to buy. But once the day is over, the Boxing Day Sales begin, and Christmas is left far behind.

Not so in Carmel. For the weeks of Advent, we have been quietly preparing for this great Feast, singing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!", and preparing our hearts again for the coming of the Babe of Bethlehem.

We want to share a glimpse of the Christmas celebrations in our Carmel, centred around the two major processions that almost frame the Octave. After the 1st Vespers on Christmas Eve, the prioress carries a statue of Our Lady while the subprioress holds a statue of St. Joseph, and the community processes through the monastery singing carols. Each cell is prepared to welcome these guests, unwelcome more than 2,000 years ago. Our second-to-last stop in this procession is the Novitiate Oratory, where a very simple yet special crib is on display.

During World War II our founding sisters, hearing the plight of the Carmels in Europe, sent parcels of food to some Carmels in France. The priest handling our Carmel's banking at that time was surprised that they would do so, since their finances were in the red. Still, our sisters continued, knowing the great need. At the end of the War, one of the Carmels in France sent a gift to us – a set of wax figures of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. They

wrote that the New Zealand milk powder our sisters sent kept their sick and elderly sisters going during the War. This crib set serves as a poignant reminder of war, eventual peace, and hope. Looking at it all these decades later, we recall the hope that persists even in the absence of peace.

On Christmas Eve night, our Chapel has Mass during the Night with a large congregation from many nations of the world. Afterwards we process to another crib, hidden behind doors on our cloister for most of the year. This sight offers a "Wow" moment for newcomers. Our Christmas then begins in earnest and unfolds throughout the season. We enjoy picnics outdoors in the warm weather and gather on several days for carols before our evening meal.

Almost at the end of the Octave, we have our other major procession of the season. This too includes a story from Carmel in Europe. In 1957 our Sr Teresa (now aged 96!) wrote to the Carmel of San Jose in Avila, asking them if wooden statues similar to that which Our Holy Mother St Teresa loved and venerated were still obtainable in Spain. They told us they had not been made for many years, but they felt moved to send us their "El Niño Andariego" - a carved wooden statue of the Child Jesus called the Little Gadabout - which had stood for centuries in the hermitage of St Augustine built in their garden by Our Holy Mother herself. One of their sisters wrote a poem to accompany him, and has him saying to us: "Pray that my kingdom may be extended and bring all souls to eternal happiness in that kingdom that has no end… For this did Teresa found you!" This Little Gadabout travelled thousands of kilometres to Christchurch, and stands in our recreation room. Every New Year's Eve, he is dressed in his finest Christmas attire and carries a small bag containing a gold sovereign. He goes around the monastery to bless the cells and offices, ensuring our needs are met for the coming year.

These simple processions and ceremonies keep alive the memories of all those decades, of times both peaceful and tumultuous. Kneeling at each crib fills us with renewed hope, reminding us how profoundly a seemingly ordinary scene can impact the world. As we conclude this Jubilee Year of Hope, we reflect on the many graces received and look ahead with great hope to what the Lord has in store for us.

Although we are geographically distant from Rome (18,388 km!), we feel spiritually close. As we work towards finally constructing the permanent chapel that our early sisters could not afford, we hope to install a replica of the St. Peter's Holy Spirit window in our sanctuary. This will express our closeness to the Holy See and our desire for the Holy Spirit to continually renew our Carmel, our Church, our Country, and our world. Visit our website at www.christchurchcarmel.org.nz.

May God bless each of you abundantly this Christmas!

Sr. Cushla of Mary Immaculate, OCD
Prioress

PORTUGAL: MONASTERY OF CHRIST THE REDEEMER, AVEIRO

Pilgrims of Hope With Mary, Toward the Birth of our Lord

Hymn to Hope

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access [by faith] to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Rom 5:1–5)

I became aware of the place that hope holds in my life as I prepared to live this jubilee as a pilgrim of hope, undertaking my spiritual pilgrimage with Mary, within the enclosure of Carmel. I began by placing myself before the great hope of Mary and my own great hope.

Mary's great expectation is the hope of her people: the coming of the Messiah. Mary awaits the coming of the Messiah.

My great hope is the hope of my vocation—that is, union with God.

We find three passages in the Gospel of Luke that speak to us of how Mary lived her waiting for the Messiah.

"Rejoice, Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you."

1. Faced with this greeting, Mary was troubled and wondered what it might mean. This wondering means reflecting: "But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be." (Lk 1:29)

To reflect means to enter into dialogue: Mary enters into dialogue with the Word. She develops an inner dialogue with the Word that has been given to her; she turns to it and lets it speak to her, in order to discover its meaning.

"And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." (Lk 2:19)

2. The visit of the shepherds to the grotto of Bethlehem. This keeping of words in her heart—this pondering, this remembering all that had been told her—recalls for us the role of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John: "But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth." (Jn 16:13)

Mary sees in events, in these "words," happenings full of meaning, because they come from the will of God, who gives meaning to all things.

Mary translates events into the Word, penetrating the Word and welcoming it into her heart, into that inner space of understanding where meaning and spirit, intellect and feeling, inner and outer contemplation intertwine.

What happens externally finds within the heart a place of permanence, able gradually to reveal its depth without erasing the memory of the event itself.

"But they did not understand what he said to them." (Lk 2:50)

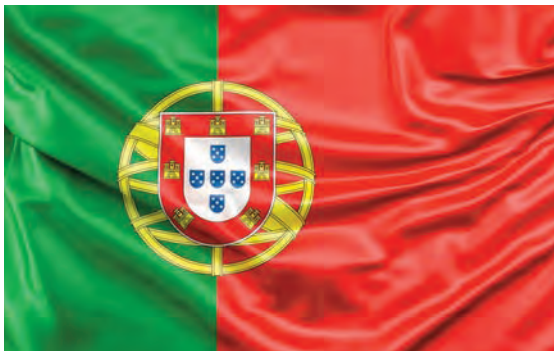
3. The finding of Jesus in the Temple among the teachers of the law.

Mary's attitude shows that even for those who believe and are open to God, His words are not always immediately clear or comprehensible.

Mary does not understand her Son, but she keeps His word in

her Heart. She loves the word of God, carries it in her heart, meditates on it day and night, and is penetrated and enlivened by it.
Mary abides in the Word, and what Jesus says in the Gospel of John comes true: "Whoever remains in me, and I in him, bears much fruit." (Jn 15:5)
This abiding is not static. It is an active root that draws from ever-stronger currents and in times of drought does not wither but remains green and fruitful, as the prophet Jeremiah says (Jer 17:7–8).
In Mary there is the true greatness and the deep simplicity of hope.
Hope consists in a permanent relationship with God, so that the person becomes ever more open to Him, until this relationship takes on the character of spousal love and motherhood.
In a Contemplative
A vocation is sustained by a promise: the promise of union with God. All the works of a consecrated person must be directed toward this goal.
It is through union with God that we collaborate in:
– the renewal of the Church,
– the salvation of our brothers and sisters,
– the building of a world of peace and fraternity.
Thus we become a presence of God for many.
Because all our efforts, labors, sacrifices, renunciations and prayers are directed toward union with God, everything gains meaning.
God desires to live this union within us: He has already done everything on His part. Now what remains is ours to do.
Our effort, our work, our prayer will never be in vain, because hope does not disappoint, for "the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Rom 5:5)
In Times of "Despair," What Can a Contemplative Communicate?
The same thing that the angel Gabriel communicated to Mary in Nazareth:
to be a messenger of hope—
to announce to humanity and to the world the new time that has been given to us and that comes to us in the birth of our Savior.
The angel's announcement to Mary—"Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." (Lk 1:28)—is the same announcement that Saint Paul makes in his letter to the Romans: an announcement of hope, expressed in different words, words addressed concretely to them but containing exactly the same message.
To Mary, the angel says:
"Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." (Lk 1:28)
To the Romans, Paul writes:
"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Rom 5:1)
Let us see:
"Justified by faith, we are at peace with God." (Rom 5:2)
This is the greatest invitation to joy that Paul could make. It is an invitation that springs from the wounded side of the Risen One, who justifies us and gives us peace with God. Justification produces peace, and peace with God bears fruit in joy. Rejoice!—this is the first proclamation.
Paul continues:
"through whom we have gained access [by faith] to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope." (Rom 5:2–4)
Paul presents to us the fullness of the Grace in which we are called to live—the grace that, in its dynamism, generates hope. Here we find a true movement for cultivating hope: a tested, steadfast hope, full of grace.
And finally:
"hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Rom 5:5)
This is precisely the same announcement made to Mary: "The Lord is with you."
The Lord is with us through the love poured into our hearts and through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.
Every contemplative, a pilgrim of hope with Mary, can proclaim to the world:
Rejoice,
whoever you are,
for God has chosen to clothe you in His grace
and to remain with you forever,
for His love has been poured into your heart
through the Holy Spirit who has been given to you.
Rejoice,
for hope never fails nor deceives,
and God has given you feet of hope
to run to Him.
Rejoice, wounded humanity,
for God descends to earth,
in the fragility of a child,
to meet you.
Rejoice,
humanity, full of grace,
for the Lord is with you!
Rejoice,
for today a Savior is born for you,
and from the heights of heaven God has said once more:
"You are my Son; today I have begotten you."
The "today" of God is and will always be
the source of humanity's hope.
Rejoice, humanity, pilgrim of hope!

The Discalced Carmelite of the Carmel of Christ the Redeemer



PORTUGAL: CARMELITE MONASTERY, COIMBRA

Christmas: A Perennial Hope

"God reigns only in a peaceful and free soul." (St. John of the Cross, Maxim 70)

When, from every latitude, we hear news of wars, massacres, and conflicts of all kinds, we almost forget the approaching liturgical season. And we, Discalced Carmelites, are not immune to the temptations of anguish and despair in the face of the times we are called to live in.

But God, who knows our weakness and the narrowness of our vision, has called us to His "garden" and prepared for us teachers who can guide us safely through the nigth , reminding us at every step that behind the dense darkness the sun continues to shine.

Indeed, the Carmelite knows that she walks in the poverty of the night, illuminated only by faith and charity, but held fast by the hand of the Mother of Hope. Therefore, she knows—and experiences—that hope is made of waiting. She knows that God's rhythms are not aligned with the immediacy to which technological development has accustomed us; that, on the journey toward Him, knowing how to wait is essential.

Now, in the light of the teachings of our saints, we believe that focusing on the contingencies of the present world in order to assess the hope that the mystery of Christmas can offer us reflects our human tendency to want to confine God within our limits.

When, more than two thousand years ago, the Word became flesh, He came to answer the deep desires that beat in the heart of humanity. What happened in the small grotto of Bethlehem was the divine answer par excellence to human hope. He was not frightened by our existential poverty or our inner divisions, but chose to assume them in order to transform them.

On the other hand, it is also typical of human beings to project outward the belligerent climate with which each of us, in the depths of our being, will always have to contend. Indeed, while our hearts are saddened—no doubt in good faith—by the conflicts that today create new "holy innocents" in various parts of the world, we avoid confronting the struggle between good and evil being waged in our own hearts; we

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pretend not to perceive the darkness of our sin; we allow the "old man" to continue to rule our being and our actions.

Thus arise the following questions: What is a world without peace? And is my inner world at peace?

Teresa of Jesus discovered within herself a castle with seven mansions, in the last of which dwells the King. To reach that principal dwelling, "where the most secret things happen between God and the soul," one must undertake an inner journey of self-knowledge, awareness of the impurities that infest this space, and the hard work of purification.

Among us, the Venerable Sister Lúcia of Jesus is a perfect example of how, by entering this work with "determined determination," it is possible to have peace in a world without peace, and thus receive from Christmas its message of hope: the Prince of Peace who wishes to reign within us!

It is worth noting that Sister Lúcia, universally known as the "Shepherdess of Fatima," lived almost a century and witnessed two world wars, the Spanish Civil War, the Portuguese colonial war, and even the rise of terrorism at the beginning of this millennium. She therefore lived her long life in a world outwardly without peace, yet she attained that much-desired inner peace, following in the footsteps of Saint Teresa and guided closely by the Mother of Hope, who is the Queen of Peace.

In his book Living in the Light of God, Father François-Marie Léthel, OCD, shows how it was a "hope entirely directed toward her Lord" that sustained this Carmelite on her path of purification, leading her to the longed-for peace of heart.

Moreover, the Carmelite soul sows the theme of hope throughout her writings and blooms in abandonment into the arms of God. In 1999, she wrote in her Diary: "I desire that my life be a faithful and constant journey toward the eternal encounter with the Lord, and that, under the maternal protection of Our Lady, I may be granted the grace to be forever the little child cradled in the arms of the Heavenly Father." This is also confirmed by the prioress of our community in the biographical note published at the time of her death: "Yes, completely stripped—even of her own will—the Little One remained in God's hands, abandoned to His will!..."

As a daughter of Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross, it was the journey through the Night toward the deepest center of her soul that purified Sister Lúcia's longings and taught her to wait for peace only from the One who can grant it. Thus, in the face of the various political tensions of her time, Lúcia always abandoned herself to God and to Our Lady. On April 25, 1974, during the coup d'état in Portugal that overthrew the ruling dictatorship, the Carmelite wrote in her Diary: "News arrived that political matters had become so complicated that the leaders of the nation had handed over their portfolios to the army. We are in God's hands. In Him we trust, and in the protection of Our Lady. – Hail Mary!"

The nuns who lived with her also recount that, when during recreation one of them would express anxiety over the problems of the world, Sister Lúcia would always remain serenely anchored in the One in whom she placed her hope and would gracefully reply: "God has been governing the world for a long time!"

Let us therefore ask for the intercession of this woman of peace, disarmed and disarming—as Pope Leo XIV calls us to be today—so that we may be prepared to welcome the greatest message of hope that Christmas offers us: the very Prince of Peace, whom "Mary brings to light as the Way through the night of history."

Sr. Susana Maria, OCD

PORTUGAL: CARMEL OF ST. JOSEPH, FATIMA

Jesus comes in smallness

If the Jubilee of Hope began at Christmas and ends with Christmas (Epiphany), it is because Christmas holds a human and emotional depth that opens the door of hope in each of our hearts.

In the Western world (and not only there), we have become rather unrealistic, placing our faith in realities we ourselves—or others—have fabricated. In doing so, hope is placed in something fragile and uncertain, as if the fulfillment of these desires could contain an essence so powerful, so fertile and satisfying, that it could forever fill our hearts and our lives. In the end, even when we achieve what we sought, we often find ourselves facing an "emptiness", and we fall into disappointment, even depression, and a sense that life has no meaning.

Moreover, we tend to want to control everything in our lives. We have lost much of our ability to see the "miracle," to welcome the unexpected, to believe with the simplicity of a child. People often say, "This world must change." Many long deeply for something better in their lives, yet they do not know where to turn… and remain trapped in mere wishing, weighed down by discouragement and the burdens of daily life.

How can one believe, how can one hope in Jesus, when around us reign comfort and convenience at any cost, the world of smartphones, the power of artificial intelligence, technical and medical progress, political and economic gains? This seems to be the only reality for the great majority of developed nations. At the same time, we find ourselves immersed in a world on fire—endless wars, restless hearts: some hardened in their positions, unable to forgive or to dialogue… others insecure and without inner criteria, guided only by what is imposed on them from outside.

Jesus is the "Unexpected One" of all nations—and yet, never so awaited. "Beneath the surface of secularization there is not an absence of faith, but a deep spiritual hunger that the Church must recognize and respond to with renewed sensitivity," Archbishop Grušas of Lithuania remarked. The heart of a Christian and the heart of an atheist are alike. In the depths of every human being dwells the irrepressible desire to love and to be loved—a poverty that "cannot be satisfied with anything less than the Infinite."

And… at Christmas, Jesus is born.

How does He come? Not with great noise or splendor demanding our acceptance. Jesus does not crush our freedom; Jesus loves us.

The Gospel tells us: While they were there [in a stable, in Bethlehem], the time came for her to give birth, and she bore her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them at the inn.

Jesus comes in the night—quietly, in poverty, in smallness, in fragility, in meekness, in tenderness—offering Himself to each of us as a safe harbor, as a sure Hope. He is Love; He is the unexpected answer to all the longings of a hungry humanity. He comes through Mary, a young and unknown woman from Nazareth, an obscure place. In Jesus, everything is unexpected and astonishing.

Jesus is an "unarmed and disarming" response, in the words of our beloved Pope Leo XIV. He stands in contrast to the immense powers of the world. Jesus is the total paradox of Love—bearing within Himself an unstoppable strength that springs forth and will never cease to grow, flooding ever more hearts that open themselves to Him. Love is the only Truth, the Good, and the one true Hope for all humanity—whether we believe it or not.

Because He is the Truth, Jesus comes clothed in humility—a humility that does not conceal the Light, but reveals it only to those who themselves dwell in humility. He comes to heal all ills—yes—but also to grant happiness and gratitude to the suffering, filling them with profound inner joy. For this reason, He is our health: of soul, of mind, and of body. When He enters a heart, He gives His peace, His effective help. He brings security and trust, allowing us to abandon our lives into the hands of His Love, like a child, and to let the best of ourselves unfold.

But He wishes to enter us, because He wants to be our greatest Friend, our All, on this earthly pilgrimage. As St. John so beautifully expresses this love: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us"—that is, He came to dwell among us and within us, as St. Elizabeth of the Trinity so magnificently writes.

He enters us through the Sacraments—especially through frequent Eucharist and Reconciliation, through good works done with compassion, moved by the Love with which we ourselves have been loved.

He enters our lives through prayer and meditation on the Word. A holy layman once said: "[Prayer] is the cradle of hope." These words are addressed to every Christian.

But after we have given our hearts fully to Jesus, there is another marvelous way to experience Him alive within us: through the difficulties of life—when we live them united with Jesus, placing all our hope in Him. Even when everything seems to collapse around us, a simple YES to Jesus—a trusting abandonment in Him, even in the darkest night—never ceases to be heard. It is precisely then that we can experience what it means to cry out, "Out of the depths I call to you, O Lord," and to discover that Jesus always helps—perhaps not as we wished, but always in the best way.

He comes in many ways, and we can place all our hope in Him. To encounter Him and allow ourselves to be found by Him is a lifelong journey. We meet Him more and more deeply as our lives unfold. Only those who meet Him in this way—secure in being loved—can truly love. "To love is to give everything and to give oneself." Then we can begin to love with the very love we receive from Jesus. We will radiate not ourselves, but the One who loves us.

All our hope is Jesus.

This is the hope of the Christian—one that must be witnessed not so much through words, but through the manifestation of Truth and the lived experience of God's love. Jesus becomes our Hope when we live Him in our daily lives.

Mary of Nazareth, Mother of Hope, always give us your Jesus!

Discalced Carmelite Sisters

PORTUGAL:
THE DOMINICAN MONASTERY OF THE PERPETUAL ROSARY, FATIMA

"Missionaries of the Ave"

On the 16th of June 1954, Monastery Pius XII opened in Fatima, Portugal. The Dominican Nuns of the Perpetual Rosary – 'missionaries of the Ave' - had been invited to make a foundation in Fatima by the French-Canadian Dominican Fr. Pius- Marie Guadrault, OP. He had been sent to restore the ancient Portuguese Province after the revolution of 1910, when all religious were expelled from the country. Like St. Dominic before him, he called upon the Nuns to come to unite in prayer and sacrifice for the success of this mission.

We are an international community of 10 Sisters from seven different countries. Our way of life follows that of all Dominican cloistered contemplative nuns. It is a life of prayer, Liturgical and personal; of life in common according to Rule of St. Augustine and our Constitutions; living under the freedom of the Vows of Obedience, Poverty and Chastity; life of study of the Sacred Word; and a life of work, each Sister being assigned her duties.

Here, under the heavenly gaze of Our Lady of the Rosary of Fatima, we are conscious of the relationship between our Dominican charism and the appeals of the Mother of God in Fatima. St. Dominic founded the Order for the preaching of the Truth, the Gospel, for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. From the beginning, the Holy Rosary became an integral part of the Order as a method of prayer, contemplation, intercession and evangelization.

It was in the summer of 1217 on August 15, that St. Dominic sent forth his first friars preachers two by two from southern France. Among them were two friars who arrived in Portugal. Seven centuries later, in the summer of 1917, the Most Holy Virgin came from Heaven and spoke a Message that was rooted in the Gospel and called insistently and repeatedly for the daily prayer of the Rosary for peace. Throughout those intervening centuries, the Gospel and the Holy Rosary had been preached throughout the country, to rich and poor alike, by the Friars Preachers. Our Lady's message, like St. Dominic's, was urgent, calling us all to assist poor sinners on their way to eternal salvation.

As Perpetual Rosary Nuns the prayer of the Rosary is continual here, at the Rosary Hour of Guard. Close to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the 'soul of Fatima', we feel the pulse of the

Church as we pray and offer hospitality to many pilgrims who visit here from around the world.

Now, with the whole Church we have arrived at the closing of this Jubilee Year of Hope.This closing presents a new beginning on our journey as Pilgrims of Hope. We have a mission, first from our Baptism and also from the late Pope Francis, to be bearers of hope all along the way, supported by the graces of this Jubilee year. To go forward, praying the Rosary of Hope as often as possible for the conversion of hearts and for peace as Our Lady asked and multiplying our acts of charity.

'Going to the poor' as Pope Pius XI exhorted us to do. "To priests in a special way," he wrote, "We recommend anew the oft-repeated counsel of Our Predecessor, Leo XIII, to go to the workingman. We make this advice Our own, and faithful to the teachings of Jesus Christ and His Church, We thus complete it: "Go to the workingman, especially where he is poor; and in general, go to the poor." (Divini Redemptoris on Atheistic Communism, March 19, 1937, para. 61)

And today Pope Leo XIV strongly repeats this fundamental Christian appeal: "I am convinced that the preferential choice for the poor is a source of extraordinary renewal both for the Church and for society, if we can only set ourselves free of our self-centeredness and open our ears to their cry." (Apostolic Exhortation, Dilexi te, 4 October 2025, para. 7)

Whether it is in the mansions of the rich or the tents of the street dwellers, Christ is our Light, our Hope and our Salvation. We pray that all will indeed "open their ears to the cry of the poor" as St. Pier Giorgio Frassati, OP, St. Carlo Acutis and St. Bartolo Longo, OP did. From the Jubilee Year we walk on as Pilgrims of Hope, sharing with everyone we meet, our Hope, Who is Christ. From Fatima in the Terra de Santa Maria, we send to all, our best and prayerful Christmas wishes!

In a world where peace is so fragile or even absent, one may ask: What message of Hope does Christmas offer? Christ is our Hope and our Peace.

Whether the world is at peace or at war we need Christmas. Where there is peace, in families, in communities, in countries we need the coming of Jesus, Prince of Peace to help us maintain it. Without Him we cannot do this. Where there is no peace, where the conflicts continue and the bombs shatter the silence and peace of our lives, we need Jesus' coming to help us make peace, first in our own hearts and then, we pray, with our neighbour and even our enemy. In our cloister we do not exchange Christmas gifts. There is no need. CHRIST is THE GIFT and it is He Whom we receive and share with our Sisters, the Church and the entire world.

Dominican Nuns of the Perpetual Rosary

NETHERLANDS: ABBEY SAINT BENEDICTUSBERG, VAALS

Midwives of hope: knowing hope

The church of the abbey is austere. The monk-architect was much inspired by the apophatic mystic tradition of pseudo-Dionysius and Saint Gregory of Nyssa. No images, apart from three icons, painted to respect the philosophy of the architecture. The centre is the Altar. It bears a Crucifix. The only one. All the other crosses in the house are without the Corpus. The space in which we live our monastic life embodies the words of the Letter to the Hebrews: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Hope is about what we don't see. As Saint Paul says in his first Letter to the Corinthians: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived— the things God has prepared for those who love him." The hope of faith is not something childish or simplistic. It is not a list of desires fulfilled, not even a dream or something like "end's well all's well." Our daily life in its architectural, monastic and human reality is meant to challenge us to abandon expectations. Hope grows where our own thinking, wishing, and doing are laid to rest.

How must the Mother of God - who under this most precious of her titles is the patron of our church - have wondered without knowing when the Angel visited Her with such incomprehensible words: "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of his father David, and He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." She did not see, but answered with hope: please let Your will be done. As she did when she saw Her Son, Son of the Most High, resting in her leap, just lifted from the Cross. She did not see, but she knew hope. For us contemplatives she is our example in patience, in keeping vigil to the day that, in the words of Joan of Norwich "all shall be well." A free translation of a poem of St. John of the Cross captures the inner meaning of our way of celebrating Christmas so well.

If you want,
the Virgin will come walking down te road,
pregnant with the boy, and say,
"I need shelter for the night,
please take me inside your heart,
my time is so close."
Then, under the roof of your soul,
you will witness the sublime intimacy, the divine, the Christ taking birth forever,

as she grasps your hand for help, for each of us
is the midwife of God, each of us.

The empty church is decorated with flowers and two wimples. In the night the stars glow through the many windows above us, that connect our inner space with the all embracing universe. As we celebrate the Day Eucharist, we will be engulfed in light through these windows. During the long Vigils and the Midnight mass we feel as in a grotto, waking in the night by a fire. The fire of prayer, holy chant and adoration. The mystery is beyond words: God becomes one of us. The timeless Gregorian melodies, the readings proclaiming Gods promises received and, in faith renewed by countless generations, the mystical intensity of the Eucharist: they make really present for us the unthinkable incarnation of the Son of God. The redeeming fact of ultimate humility that only omnipotence can conceive, the unspeakable joy of us sons and daughters of the Father being loved so much.

We hope because wo do not see. What we see is this broken world of us, born out of so much troubled hearts. Hearts that feel abandoned, not loved, not seen. Wild phantasies driven by a will to power, unbridled lust, and a blasphemous mastery of death; they only generate despair, idle dreams, pitiful human pride. The Godless world that we know of in all the horrible events of this year, near and far. But then, we adore the humble Child of Bethlehem. His humility heals and purifies our troubled hearts. We are seen. Seen from within. If we dare to share in His humility we ourselves become the midwives of hope, of God being our most intimate real.

Our small band of mostly elderly brothers keep vigil in the night. Every night. Some say monks are the watchers of the night, called to serve the Church by a zealous expectation of the morning of the Day-without-end that will be the fulfilment of all hopes. Maybe. But we certainly are one with you in celebrating the Birth of our Redeemer. We know hope, share hope, and so, with Gods' help, we may be midwives of hope. Simply by gazing with wonder, joy and gratitude every other human, sister and brother, reflecting the ever loving gaze of the new born Christ. What more do we need to feel a joy that is real in a world that longs for nothing else.
Happy Christmas!

fr. Matthieu Wagemaker, OSB
Abbot

SAMOA:
CARMEL MONASTERY OF SAINT JOSEPH, APIA

The Hope of Christmas in a World Without Peace

In a world often torn by division, conflict, and sorrow, the message of Christmas arrives not as a fleeting comfort, but as a profound and enduring hope. It is the proclamation that God is with us—not in distant majesty, but in the fragile form of a Child, born into poverty, welcomed by shepherds, and cradled in a manger. We are called to share this hope through forgiveness, kindness, humility, and love. As St. Thérèse of Lisieux reminds us, hope is not based on our merits but on God's infinite mercy. It is trust that He can transform our littleness into greatness through the Little Way of simple, loving actions. Before Christmas comes the season of Advent—a time of reflection on the mystery of the Incarnation. We await the fulfillment of the promise first spoken in Genesis 3:15, the Proto-evangelium: "I will put enmity between you and the Woman, between your seed and Her Seed." In the fullness of time, God sent His only Son to redeem us from sin and death. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son…" (John 3:16). The Birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise, light shining in the darkness. In our country Samoa, Christmas is a time of joy and celebration. As Advent begins, homes and churches are decorated with flowers and Christmas lights. Buses echo with Christmas carols, and both Protestants and Catholics begin singing carols thirteen days before Christmas Day, preparing their hearts for the Lord's coming.

A Carmelite Christmas in our small island, Samoa

In our Carmelite family, Advent is a sacred time of silent expectation. While the world outside expresses its longing with festive noise, the cloister is filled with quiet reflection on the mystery of the Word made flesh. On the First Sunday of Advent, we bless the Advent Wreath and light the first purple candle as a sign of hope. Through Liturgy, we journey slowly toward the great feast marked especially with the singing of the "O" Antiphons beginning on December 17th. On the morning of Christmas eve, we hold a procession through the dormitory, re-enacting Mary and Joseph's search for lodging. The Prioress carries the statue of Our Lady, the first councilor carries St. Joseph, and two senior sisters bear lanterns as we sing carols. If a sister is celebrating her first Christmas in Carmel, the Holy Family visits her cell first—a moment of awe and tender welcome.

After Morning Prayer, we gather for the Kalenda, the Solemn Announcement of the Lord's Birth. A sister, flanked by candle bearers, proclaims the history of salvation from creation to the Incarnation. At the words "The Word became flesh," we prostrate in reverence. It is a deeply moving moment. Before Midnight Mass, we chant the Office of Readings, singing "Christ is here, Emmanuel." Our parishioners join us for the Solemn Mass of Christmas Night.

Afterward, we gather in the Chapter Room to sing carols before sharing Christmas supper. Each Sister finds a small gift at

her place in the Refectory, lovingly prepared by the Prioress. During the three days after Christmas, we sing carols after half an hour of mental prayer and procession before meals, extending the joy of the Nativity through New Year's Day and the Epiphany.

On the Feast of the Holy Family, when the Gospel recounts the Finding of the Child Jesus. The Prioress hides a small statue of the Infant. After Mass, we gather in the recreation room, hear the Gospel, and then search for the hidden Child. The Sister who finds Him sings aloud: "Laudate Dominum omnes gentes!" We process to the Choir, where she places the statue on the side altar and intones the Te Deum, joined by the whole community. She may also offer a hymn, poem, or dance in honor of the Little Jesus during evening recreation.

On the final day of the year, our community gathers in solemn procession throughout the monastery, carrying the statue of the Infant Jesus and singing Christmas carols in thanksgiving for His Divine Providence over the past year. Each Sister prepares for this moment by lovingly cleaning her cell and the office where she serves, so that the Little Jesus may bless both her place of rest and her place of work. In the evening, we celebrate Holy Mass offered for peace in the world, peace throughout our Archdiocese, and peace in every heart. After Mass, we remain in quiet prayer until midnight, giving thanks for the year that has passed and entrusting the coming Year to the Lord's Mercy and Grace. As the Christmas season draws to a close with the Baptism of the Lord, we carry forward the hope that has been rekindled in our hearts. The Jubilee may end, but the grace it has poured into our lives continues. In the quiet of the cloister and the joy of the island, in the solemn liturgy and the laughter of the community, we proclaim: Christ is born. Hope lives on.

Sr. Maria Elisapeta, OCD
Mother Prioress

SPAIN:
ROYAL MONASTERY OF SAINT DOMINIC DE GUZMÁN, CALERUEGA

Hope of the Peoples

"And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
since from you shall come a ruler
who is shepherd to my people Israel." (Mt 2:6)

Caleruega is a small village in Castile, about two hours by car from Madrid. The census says there are about 387 inhabitants, but in the cold winter there are barely a few of us left: the Caleruegans who endure, the Dominican friars and the nuns who guard the place where Saint Dominic de Guzmán was born. Some families come to the village around Christmas time, but it is nothing like the crowds that fill the streets of the capital where I grew up. The town council hangs a few decorative lights on the lampposts, and we do the same, but when night falls, it is still the moon and the stars—the real ones, in the almost always clear sky of this place—that shine and illuminate.

There is a service station that provides the locals with enough variety and supplies, but it cannot be compared to the department stores where people are used to spending the savings of the past twelve months during these days. In the monastery we have a slightly more special meal, but luxury does not exist within the cloister. While women outside wear their finest clothes, we put on our white habit and carefully iron the black cloak that completes our dress. That day we don't go to the hairdresser—the black veil of our consecration to God becomes our best adornment. And as our only jewel: the wedding ring on our hands reminds us whose brides we are. Christmas in a monastery is very different from how we used to experience it before entering. But I think that even outside the cloister, Christmas in a small village is a completely different experience from that of the big cities.

When on the evening of the 24th we gather to celebrate Midnight Mass, tradition dictates that the shepherd brings along the smallest lamb from his flock. As we sing Christmas carols, his movements are not a well-rehearsed performance but real music, and the sound of the little hooves slipping on the wooden floor accompanies the entire Eucharist. Together with the shepherd boy and his family, the sisters, the friars, and a few others—few in number and with little to boast of—we sing to the Child God. Strangers to the great festivities, we partake in the Banquet par excellence. Our current Master of the Order, Fr. Gerard, likes to refer to this place as

the "Dominican Crib," and every year I think that our assembly bears a special resemblance to those who must once have crowded the real Manger. Because it is no longer fashionable to belong to the people; every aspiration looks to the city, to the glitter, to consumerism. So those of us who have stayed behind are, in some measure, those who have failed to conquer success—at least as our society defines it.

Every December 24th at night, when I go to bed much later than usual, and in haste because the bell will soon ring again, a feeling of hope fills me. I have an inner joy that moves me deeply: for these, Christ has come. To us, God is born. No VIP pass is required to live this Good News. One does not need to belong to any social class, or to reach this or that status; much less pay any fee, or live in a privileged palace. There is no need to dress in great luxury or boast of stunning beauty.

God comes freely into our lives—into ours, which, like those of the shepherds of the first century, have nothing to boast of, are weary, or even marginalized. The hope of Christmas is that Grace has preceded any merit of ours: "In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins." (1 Jn 4:10). God looked upon our need, our longing hearts, and our poor lives, and sent His Son to save us. He was moved by our loneliness and emptiness, and became one of us—born in a dark stable, on a cold night, in an unknown village of Judah, amid the silence of the powerful and the ignorance of the masses. And so, when we share that same poverty, emptiness, loneliness, darkness, ignorance and silence, there are still reasons for Hope. Because there—precisely there—God has chosen to be present. As if He had a preference for the humble, for those who have nothing to boast of, who are neither admired nor desired. As if He had a soft spot just for us.

Sister Teresa of Jesus Cadarso, OP

SPAIN: MONASTERY OF THE CONVERSION, SOTILLO DE LAADRADA, AVILA

Daily life at Christmas is transformed

Marian expectation. Advent gives autumn (in the Northern Hemisphere) a special sense of solemnity, of silent expectation, of offering. This is how the forty sisters of the Community of the Conversion, located in the Tiétar Valley, in the Sierra de Gredos (Sotillo de la Adrada, Ávila, Spain), live this prelude to Christmas. All the nature that surrounds and embraces us invites us to recollection, to silence, to daily work, to welcoming the many who come to our monastery seeking guidance, accompaniment, and communion. The austerity of this season has a limit, and that limit is the trusting expectation, the joy of Mary carrying the Savior in her womb. With her, we live the Vigil of the Lord's Coming, a vigil of preparation, a vigil of expectation with lamps lit, the vigil of Humanity's long-awaited great feast. The Maya Calends resound, for from the East we see His Light approaching.

The night of December 24. Christmas Eve, the shortest night, the Silent Night, while we sing in the Midnight Eucharistic celebration—the culmination of all the time lived and the beginning of the new time brought to us by the Newborn. After the silence of Advent, songs burst forth—carols and liturgies; fraternal love and friendship among us deepen; we welcome one another with the Good News, with the great news of Love made flesh, of the Word made flesh. "Come, Gaudete." When, in the midst of the Eucharist, the priest, raising the Bread and the Wine and pronouncing the words that the Lord Himself spoke at the Last Supper—"This is my Body... this is my Blood"—we behold the Mystery of the Incarnation, the same Mystery that Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the Magi, the humble and the poor of that time contemplated. "The Word was made flesh!" It is the Pasch of the Nativity, the beginning of the Lord's Pasch that will culminate in His Death and Resurrection.

Daily life in the Community is transformed at Christmas: the Domus becomes a beautiful and magnificent Nativity scene, because in every corner the Sisters recall the Event: in one corner, the Virgin Mary, Joseph, and the Child, alone; in another, the Three with the shepherds; in another, the local people join them,

a whole village coming to see and adore; in yet another, the Magi draw near from afar… Everything is a Remembrance of His Birth in the flesh.

Each year the Nativity scene in our Church of Reconciliation is renewed, with crèches from all over the world: from Bavaria, with the Alps behind the small stable where Jesus is born; or from Quito or Lima; or from Japan or Norway; or from Ukraine or Palestine; or from the grotto of Bethlehem in Jerusalem. For our whole small world was His homeland, and to its very last corner He brought, through His birth, the most authentic hope and joy, peace, light, compassion, and redemption for all. That night we passed from death to life because we came to know the Love of God made flesh. The joy of this season fills the whole monastery.

Christmas carols. Alongside the precious Christmas liturgy of our community, we find our traditional Spanish carols. These are popular, ancient, medieval songs, sung a cappella or with pastoral instruments such as tambourines, castanets, or guitars. "In Bethlehem the bells are ringing." The angels sing "Glory to God in the highest," and our shepherds and the country folk, who for centuries have sung to the Child Jesus, "Riu, riu chiu." Ballads, seguidillas, and splendid compositions from the Uppsala Songbook. "Welcome, shepherds" (the first Christmas carol of the 15th century, from Toledo).

The unique character of our community has brought carols from all over the world—Poland and Costa Rica, Germany, Ireland and Lima, the United States, Colombia and Hungary, Italy and Spain… Galicia, Catalonia, Seville, Malaga, Extremadura, Castilla-La Mancha… Our songs come from many places. Let every language praise the Lord. "Noel, Noel… Rejoice, rejoice… Lullaby, my sweet little child… The prophecy is fulfilled and before us stands the Consoler, the Prince of Peace."

Before Christmas, our Community offers a Prayer-Concert in preparation for His Coming and we remain open to welcome groups wishing to share the faith, rekindle it, deepen their understanding, and be accompanied on their journey of faith, supported in difficult moments of life. The Community offers retreats, spiritual exercises, prayer encounters, periods of interior reflection, days of study and reflection, formation programs, catechesis… and, beyond this hospitality—which takes place throughout the year—Christmas is a special time for the Community to grow in fraternity, prayer and rest.

Love that endures. The mission of our Community is hospitality—first of all among the sisters themselves—mutual care and fraternal charity, from which springs a Love that does not cease and cannot end.

Yes, the Lord's Christmas is for all of us the reason why we welcome others: those who draw near to us or those to whom we draw near. What remains of this Season of Grace is Love for God and for Neighbor; Love as the source of a sure Hope that continues to resound beyond the time and place in which we live.

M. Prado

SPAIN:
MONASTERY OF SAINT JOSEPH, LA SOLANA, CIUDAD REAL

Joyful in Hope

We are living in turbulent times, "difficult t imes," a s Saint Teresa of Ávila would say, in a society with so many open fronts, where war, the lack of peace in so many areas of our society, and so many kinds of deprivations make speaking of hope seem contradictory, even utopian. And yet, despite everything, it is always a time for hope.

We are concluding the Jubilee of Hope that we have celebrated throughout the year, and this has reminded us of the constant expectation that life is—from birth until the end, leading to the final encounter with the Lord.

I am a contemplative nun, living my vocation according to the charism of Saint Dominic. I live in a monastery under papal enclosure with my nine sisters in community. We feel blessed because we live joyfully in the Lord 24 hours a day, hoping for a joyful encounter with Him. And in the midst of our life of prayer, we present to Him the needs of so many people who thirst and hunger for the one true thing, at times without even realizing it!

Throughout this year, I have observed once again that humanity always lives in hope, even if not always in expectation of God, of God's gift, or of the joy that life receives from Him. From our Christian experience, each of us lives this according to our specific vocation.

This Christmas season draws us closer to the hope that only God is worthwhile—that we have enough reason to hope simply by contemplating Him in the smallness of a Child and the poverty of Bethlehem; that our hope never ends; that, if we looked with the eyes of faith, we would see all that is hidden in simple and unassuming things.

The celebration of Christmas urges us to lift our gaze to heaven, to understand the immense love of God who became man and was born of a Virgin. And at the same time, it fills us with the greatness of Mary in her humility—in signs that offer us yet another reason to understand her greatness and to live it supernaturally. For great works are born in this way: from the heart and without clamor.

By being born of the Blessed Virgin Mary, through the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ reveals to us the profound truth of our humanity; He takes nothing away and gives everything. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem is not an event to be relegated to the past. Before it stretches the whole of human history: our present and the future of the world are illuminated by this event. This birth, unique in all of history, surpasses all the expectations of humanity and always will. It is the only means through which the world can discover the high vocation to which it is called. "In the Child of Bethlehem, the smallness of God made man reveals to us the greatness

of humanity and the beauty of our dignity as children of God, as brothers and sisters of Jesus" (Benedict XVI).

In this mystery, the believer perceives the nearness of God in Jesus. Behind the noise of these festivities lies the silent truth that God has drawn near to humanity once and for all and has irrevocably committed Himself to us. God entered into our abandonment in complete silence, and there He welcomed us, and there He tirelessly safeguards His hidden love for us.

Beyond our attention or negligence, the God who is deeply passionate about humanity waits for us in silence. Therefore, the celebration of Christmas calls us to understand that the vast spaces in which we wander, lost, are not empty and cold, but overflowing with the love of God who tirelessly awaits us.

At Christmas, we can open ourselves, without reservation or suspicion, to the irrevocably determined acceptance of God's love for humanity. God has chosen to have a destiny within humanity and with humanity. He did not wish to be God without humanity. God goes out to meet humanity and becomes man.

May the Christmas festivities fill everything and everyone with deep peace and hope, and may they flood every home with profound joy—the joy and peace found in the One who was born in Bethlehem of a Virgin, who is God-with-us, the face of God who is Love.

"This is why hope does not give way in difficulties: it is founded on faith and nourished by charity, and thus enables us to advance in life. Saint Augustine writes: 'In whatever kind of life, one cannot live without these three inclinations of the soul: believing, hoping, loving'" (Bull Spes non confundit, no. 2, Pope Francis).

May this be known to all people, and may all live in this awareness, so that a truly new and hope-filled humanity may emerge, capable of communicating the love with which it is loved.

And all this thanks to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who said "yes" and obeyed the Word of God as the faithful Handmaid of the Lord. Before arriving in Bethlehem, before taking part in the joy of the Holy Night of Christmas, when everything is flooded with the light of God's love in the Child, let us pause to contemplate Mary—the young woman spoken of by Isaiah, the spouse of Joseph, the Mother of Jesus. Mary at the Incarnation; Mary at the manger; Mary the Mother who carries in her arms and cradles the divine Son of her womb. She is the source, she the mother of hope, she the gate of heaven opened upon the earth. With her and like her, let us draw near to celebrate these holy days, so that her maternal joy may always dwell within us.

Sister Inmaculada Serrano Posadas, OP

SPAIN:
BENEDICTINE MONASTERY,
LEYRE (NAVARRE)

The Silent Hope of Bethlehem

This year, the Christmas season arrives with a special weight: the Jubilee fades like a lamp that has burned for months, and in its final flame it leaves us with a burning question — where can we find hope in a world that seems to have forgotten peace? In other words: are we not perhaps turning our backs on the reality of a world groaning in pain from the fratricide of war? This is no abstract question. It is enough to look around us to feel the tension among peoples, the confusion of words, the mistrust between human beings. And yet, in the midst of all that noise, resounds the oldest and most ever-new voice of the Gospel: "The angel said to them: Do not be afraid, for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." (Lk 2:10).

Christian life is not born of optimism or naïveté. It does not rest on statistics, political agreements, or promises of prosperity. Our life, founded on hope yet "hoping against hope" (cf. Rom 4:18). It does not close its eyes to the world's reality but is able to see it transfigured by the light of the Spirit. Our hope blossoms like the Child of Bethlehem — in what is small, fragile, and deemed hardly worthy of attention by the world. The message of Christmas is that God does not abandon human history but visits it from within, becoming flesh of our flesh. And that divine gesture, silent and humble, is the unshakable foundation of all hope.

The manger, a sign of poverty, thus becomes the first altar of the new world — a prefiguration of the new heavens and the new earth (cf. Rev 21:1). The weakness of the Child reminds us of the weakness of our world, always so fragile and at the mercy of the powerful. In Bethlehem, there are no speeches — only a silence that enfolds the Word. And perhaps that silence is the first act of hope: to be silent so as to listen, to stop so as to see, to open a space where God may speak. In an age saturated with pain and meaninglessness, the believer is called to guard that inner space, as Mary kept in her heart all that she saw and heard.

Benedictine spirituality, so discreet and yet so timely, knows this language well. Ora et labora is not merely a monastic rule but a way of keeping hope alive in daily life. In prayer and in work, the Spirit labors within us to gather the fruit of peace. The monastic rhythm reminds us that hope is not built through grand gestures, but through small fidelities, repeated with love. For hope is not looking forward with illusion, but looking inward with faith. In a world torn apart by wars — by a "third world war fought piecemeal," as Pope Francis has often said — hope is not the naïveté that denies the evidence, but the trust that God transforms darkness into a path.

The Child of Bethlehem does not change the world through power, but through presence. He does not promise to solve humanity's problems but to accompany us from within. He comes not to remove suffering, but to fill it with meaning. In his infant cry, the Father's entire mercy is already contained. Therefore, when we look at the manger, we understand that Christian hope is not an escape, but a commitment: to welcome the light in the midst of the night and to share it with others. For the Child who has been given to us came to suffer and to free us from sin and death. This is why the Easter proclamation says: "Surrexit Christus spes mea" — "Christ, my hope, has risen" — and we too can say: "Christ, my hope, is born."

Perhaps this is the deepest message the Jubilee leaves us as it closes: not a balance sheet of activities, but an invitation to return to the origins — to the humble and radiant gesture of the God who reaches down. The Holy Year has been a time of open doors; now begins the time to keep them open in our hearts, to continue proclaiming that hope which the Gospel brings to a world ever more orphaned of it. Christmas, each year, renews this mission.

In a world without peace, Christian hope does not mean ignoring wounds, but seeing them with the eyes of God. The light of the manger does not eliminate the night — it transforms it. Faith does not promise us safety, but companionship. And those who have experienced that companionship can say, even through tears: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (Jn 14:27). It is not sentimentalism, but a promise — a strength that allows us to remain in this world and transform it with joy, with the trust given by the event of Bethlehem, never despairing of the mercy of God (cf. Rule of St. Benedict 4:74).

At the close of this Jubilee year, Christmas approaches as the final gesture of divine tenderness — as the last and, at the same time, the first word of the God who never tires of beginning anew with us. In a time when war, fear and indifference seem to have the final word, the Child of Bethlehem returns to tell us, in his radiant silence: "There is still hope." For if God chose to become a child, then nothing is lost.

Fr. Ignacio Esparza. OSB
Abbot

UNITED STATE OF AMERICA: BLESSED SACRAMENT MONASTERY, ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

Signs of Hope

In this distant land, unknown to many, we welcome the birth of Jesus with joy and rejoicing. Christmas is very special for us, Sisters of Perpetual Adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament, since our Blessed Mother Foundress, Mary Magdalene of the Incarnation, adored and contemplated in an admirable way the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God in Mary's womb, and celebrated it with great joy and song. In one of her writings, in an act of faith in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, she says: "O Jesus, my Savior, I firmly believe in the real presence of your Most Holy Humanity and Divinity in this ineffable Sacrament. I believe that You are the same One who was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, your most worthy Mother, that You were born of Her in a stable and that You were placed by Her in a manger."
Advent is a special time to prepare ourselves with joyful hope for the coming of the Lord. During this time, it is customary in our Order to pray 1,000 Hail Marys, which we offer to the Child Jesus from November 29 until Christmas Day, and when we offer them, we say a beautiful prayer. During the Christmas novena, we prepare the manger with practices of virtue. Each day we ask for lodging in the Mexican style, since this Monastery was founded by Mexican sisters. We celebrate the "posadas" with the novena, songs, and our own prayers. Christmas is a special time to share in fraternity the joy of the birth of Jesus, who out of love for us became Man, and through his birth calls us all to be brothers and sisters, since in him we are all children of God and heirs to the Kingdom (Rom 8:17).
Our Eucharistic life leads us to live community life in fraternity, as stated in the Rule of St. Augustine, which we follow and strive to live. St. Augustine exhorts us to be of one heart and one soul directed toward God. All of us who are called by vocation to fraternal life in the consecrated life are also called to give witness and hope for unity and fraternity in the midst of a world ravaged by divisions that cause wars, injustices, corruption, and misery. We are called to be a light and to console those who suffer, especially contemplative nuns with our hidden life, in prayer and dedication to what God asks of us each

day. Any small act of love and sacrifice for our sisters and the people who approach us results in abundant graces for humanity.

Alaska is truly a mission land. There are few priests, deacons, and missionaries, yet they make great sacrifices to bring the Word and love of God to the most remote and difficult-to-reach villages and islands. To celebrate Christmas, the priests, despite the inclement weather, travel long hours to celebrate Christmas Mass in different and distant villages, doing so with great generosity and joy. We are contemplative nuns, and our monastery is the only one in Alaska. That is why we have committed ourselves to living our mission in this place, supporting our archdiocese through constant prayer, offering in an attitude of adoration everything we do: the Divine Office, Eucharistic Adoration, Lectio Divina, recreation, work, and study. Not only do we do this, but so do the lay adorers associated with our Order who come to our chapel to adore Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, praying and interceding for humanity and especially for our local Church.

Every year we decorate the Chapel, set up the nativity scene, and adorn the throne of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, seeking to create a Christmas atmosphere that leads the faithful to contemplate the wonderful birth of Jesus and to find in the Eucharist the Child who, in Bethlehem, became Flesh, and that Flesh, under the appearance of Bread, is the same that we adore in the Most Holy Eucharist.

It is wonderful to see the Chapel filled with the faithful on Christmas Eve, and not only on that night, but throughout the Christmas season and every day of the year, as they come to adore Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, which is solemnly exposed throughout the day, in this holy place, they find the silence, peace, and strength they need. Here, Jesus is never alone. There is always a Sister in front of him, but there are also faithful who come from their homes to adore him, regardless of the darkness of winter, the low temperatures, or the snowfall. Nothing stops them because, like the shepherds and the Magi, they saw his star, his light, and they come to adore him. Clearly, this is a sign of hope, the good works of the children of Light, who, out of love, overcome darkness.

May Jesus continue to be born in our hearts, in our communities, in our families, and in our society, which is so in need of his love and tenderness, this Christmas.

Christmas Blessing!

Sr. Miriam de Jesus Cantu, APSS
Community of Perpetual Adorers of the Blessed Sacrament

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: TRAPPISTS'S ABBEY OF THE GENESEE, PIFFARD, NY

We are the times

What message of hope does Christmas offer in a world often without peace?
We should pay close attention to the depth of Christian wisdom in the response of Pope Leo XIV to a young aspiring doctor. She wrote to him asking, "What does the future hold for us?" and "What can young people do to aspire to a better world, when there is so much injustice, tragedy, and war today?" The Pope did not offer her one more technique and one more program. He went to the heart of the matter - the human heart. He replied, "It is true we live in difficult times. Evil seems to overwhelm our lives. Wars are taking more and more innocent victims," but we must never stop hoping, he writes. He goes on, " As I have already said, quoting Saint Augustine: 'Live well and the times will be good. We are the times.' Exactly so - the times will be good if we are good! For this to happen, we must place our hope in the Lord Jesus."

Today, there is a fascination with programs and techniques to improve the world. There is always one more program out there, one more organizational plan that will solve war, hunger, and poverty. In this context, the Pope's advice might sound naive and simplistic. However, experience shows us that every plan, however well-intentioned, continues to operate within the matrix of the power of sin because it cannot heal the source of all wars - the heart of man. The Pope is only echoing what the Letter of James said so well - where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from? Is it not from your passions that make war within your members?

St Paul, in his letter to Titus, shows us what the power of sin does to the heart of man: "For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another." Sin estranges us from God and from ourselves. From this rupture, as from the abyss, there rises the terror of cosmic loneliness, the paralyzing fear of death, the despair of one who will forever be unloved. We are damaged. We hate ourselves and hate each other. "Whether we are alone or involved with others, we remain separate and hostile, alone even in our involvement," says Olivier Clement
And this deadlock cannot be unloosed by technique, nor the 'massification of technique' (to use a term coined by, I think, Jacques Ellul)

It can only be broken by a love that is greater than all that the powers of sin and death can throw at it. This love alone can heal the self-hatred caused by sin and teach us to love again through the experience of being loved gratuitously. And so Paul will say

"But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

Christ does not come with one more technique. He loves us into new life. And he does this one heart at a time. Imagine, God Himself is 'naive' enough to think that the transformation of the world is effected one heart at a time. This is why St Augustine can say so confidently, ' Live well and the times will be good. We are the times." The secret to the transformation of the world is not technique but saints. Saints are the creative force in the new world unleashed by the Resurrection and the Sending of the Spirit. And all of us are called to be just that -saints to work with Christ for the transformation of the world. I conclude with the great French Catholic writer, Georges Bernanos, "Every Saint's life is like a new blossom in spring."

Father Gerard D'Souza, OCSO
Abbot

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: SAINT JOHN'S ABBEY, COLLEGEVILLE, MN

Christmas: A Hope the Darkness Cannot Overcome

Christmas carries within it a beautiful contradiction. It doesn't wait for the world to be calm before it comes. It breaks in—then as now—into a world that knows too little peace. It does not deny the darkness; it dares to light a candle right in the middle of it.

The absence of peace is all around us. We find it in the headlines and in the hidden struggles of our own hearts. It's in the wars that rage, the divisions that harden, and the quiet griefs that mark our days. We long for God to act with power—to silence the noise and fix what is broken.

But Christmas does not come with thunder or decrees. It comes with a cry in the night, a fragile child laid in a manger. That is the hope of Christmas: God does not shout from far away—he whispers from the stable. He does not overwhelm with power—he disarms with love. He does not stay clear of our struggles—he enters into them.

And that changes everything.

The hope of Christmas is not that all conflict vanishes on December 25. It is the assurance that, in the very midst of conflict, God is with us—Immanuel. His presence sanctifies our struggle. We are not abandoned; we are accompanied. This is peace at its deepest level—not the fragile peace of perfect circumstances, but the lasting peace of presence.

Saint Benedict, writing in a world also marked by turmoil, invited his followers to "seek peace and pursue it." His wisdom still speaks to us today. It is not a call to escape the burdens of life but to root ourselves in faith and compassion right where we stand. This is the kind of grounded hope Christmas proclaims—a peace that begins within and radiates outward.

Think of the shepherds—poor, forgotten, dismissed. Yet to them the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace." The message of peace came first to those who had little of it. The peace of Christmas is not a reward for the powerful; it is a gift for the weary, the overlooked, and the afraid.

And think of Mary and Joseph. Their road was not easy. Mary said yes to God without knowing what that yes would cost. Joseph trusted a dream that changed everything. They walked forward not because they understood the future, but because they trusted the One who called them. Their story invites us to the same kind of hope—a willingness to move forward in faith, to listen for God's quiet word, and to trust that love can make a way even when the path is uncertain.

Christmas also teaches us something about the scale of hope. It begins small. A teenage girl. A forgotten town. A manger that barely held a child. If God could use these to change history, then God can use the smallest things in our own lives: a kind word, a gesture of forgiveness, a moment of courage.

Saint Benedict's teaching echoes here too. He reminds us to "treat all things as vessels of the altar"—to see the sacred in the ordinary, the divine hidden in the everyday. Christmas invites us to do the same: to look with reverence on the small and simple moments where grace takes root.

The story of Christmas also points us forward. The manger leads to the cross, and the cross to the empty tomb. The child wrapped in swaddling clothes is the King who will one day wipe every tear from our eyes. The flicker of light in Bethlehem is the dawn of a day that will never end. The peace Christ brings is not a temporary ceasefire but the shalom of a world made whole—justice and mercy meeting, every wrong made right, every wound healed.

This vision of peace may feel far off, yet it has already begun. The first Christmas reminds us that God is at work even when we cannot see the full picture. Mary could not have imagined, holding her newborn son, how his life would redeem the world. In the same way, we may not see how God is quietly weaving redemption through our own lives—but hope is alive.

We celebrate Christmas not because the world is already peaceful, but because we believe peace is possible. The light shines in the darkness, John's Gospel says, and the darkness has not overcome it. Every candle lit, every carol sung, every act of generosity or reconciliation bears witness to that defiant truth: the light still shines.

So let the lights on your tree be more than decoration. Let them be signs that the darkness has not—and will not—overcome the light. Let the gifts you exchange remind you of the greater gift: God's presence given to a weary world. Let the carols of "peace on earth" rise not as wistful wishes but as bold prayers and living commitments.

Saint Benedict's ancient wisdom offers us one more invitation for Christmas: to welcome each person as if they were Christ himself. This is where peace begins—in our willingness to listen, to forgive, to make room for one another. The hope of Bethlehem grows in hearts that open themselves to others with humility and care.

And so, as this Christmas unfolds, may its quiet promise stir something deep within us. May we become people who carry light into shadowed places, who speak kindness where there is division, who act with courage where there is fear.

This is the mystery and the glory of Christmas: hope has a name. And that name is Jesus. Because he entered our world, our weariness can find rest, our divisions can find healing, and our hearts can discover the peace that truly passes understanding.

The world is often without peace. But into this very world, a Savior is born. And that changes everything.

Fr. Douglas Mullin, OSB
Abbot

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: CORPUS CHRISTI MONASTERY, BRONX, NEW YORK

Christ Our Hope Is Born Today

There is something in the human heart that finds joy at new beginnings. The joy at seeing the first crocus come from the ground or the first bud on the trees or the arrival of the robins at the beginning of Spring never fail to bring a sense of wonder and renewed hope. In my monastery there is always a sister who looks anxiously for the first signs of new growth coming through the snow and is excited to share this revelation with the community. Events in our lives as big as marriage or making profession of vows, or something as "ordinary" as a new job, or a new place to live elicit something from inside of us of hope and expectation for the future.

Many things in life bring upon us feelings of hope and expectation that enable us to move forward through life but there is something uniquely special about the joy that rises from deep in our hearts when we look on the face of a newborn baby. It is an astounding miracle of God's creative action, a promise of his love for us.

And so, it is fitting that God should take on our human nature to save us by being born into this world as a tiny, helpless infant. In time, this was over 2,000 years ago but year after year, when the Infant Jesus is laid in the creche at the beginning of Midnight Mass we look in silent love, in wonder, in expectation, with joy, *Venite adoremus!*

We are filled with the same sense of wonder and awe each year at the Easter vigil when the dark is filled with the light of the flame of the newly lit paschal candle. *Lumen Christi! Deo gratias!* A few hours later at the morning mass of Easter the sequence articulates the feeling of our heart, "Christ our hope is risen."

This is the message for every person, for all times, for every place---that only in Christ can true hope be found. We have many feelings of hope; hope that a dear friend will recover from cancer, hope that a job will be secured, hope that our favorite team will win the World Series (in America) or the World Cup (everywhere else!) But this hope, placed in our hearts at baptism like the tiny mustard seed of the Gospel is something much more, it is the hope rooted, anchored in God who created us for nothing else than eternal life with him. We don't often ponder about this gift we have been given.

Stop now and think about this for just a few minutes—you and I have been created by God for nothing less than to live forever in the eternal embrace of the Love that is the Three-Personed God. Imagine how our lives would change if we really grasped what this means!

God gives us the beginning of this hope and throughout our lives pours his grace into our souls so that this hope can grow and flourish, but we also must do our part. We have to water and nourish this gift of theological hope—theological because it is rooted God and directed toward God—by our own free acts of hope and trust. Just like we must exercise so we don't lose muscle and atrophy, so we have to exercise the hope that is within us so that it will grow, become strong and anchor us in God.

The tiny, newborn Infant can teach us all this. Our Blessed Mother and St. Joseph can teach us as well. Like so many people today, their lives were uprooted because Herod wanted to kill Jesus whom he saw as a threat to his power. In a few sentences St. Matthew tells us that the Angel of the Lord told St. Joseph in a dream, "Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt,* and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him." (Matt. 2:13)

We know nothing about these years when the Holy Family lived in a foreign land. Can you imagine what was racing through St. Joseph's mind? How often he must have had to renew his hope and trust in God that he was doing the right thing for precious Child entrusted to him.

We often think, "It is hard to be hopeful when we hear of so much violence, wars, and persecution all over the world and even in my country, or neighborhood." It is true. It is not easy. The Evil One will tempt us to place our trust in ourselves not in God.

As we celebrate Christmas we can be tempted to stay captivated by the joy of the Newborn Infant. But the fullness of our faith, the mature living it out is when the entire mystery of salvation—the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus —becomes our own. Only by contemplating the Incarnate Word in all his beauty can we glimpse something of the mystery of human suffering. God created us with free will and he doesn't stop respecting our free choices and actions even when they are twisted by sin.

Christmas is a time of giving gifts. Perhaps, this year give a gift of prayer for those whose choices seem determined to inflict pain and suffering on others. Pray and sacrifice for them. Your silent, hidden gift may end wars and conflicts and bring new joy and hope to others which you will learn of only in heaven. "I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:7)

May Jesus be your true joy this Christmas!

Suor Mary Catharine di Jesus Perry, OP
Prioress and President of the Association of Mary, Mother of Mercy of Dominican Contemplative Monasteries in North America

UNITED KINGDOM:
PLUSCARDEN ABBEY, ELGIN, SCOTLAND

The hope that belongs to Christmas: a reflection

"Hope is born of love and based on the love springing from the pierced heart of Jesus upon the cross," wrote Pope Francis in the Bull of Indiction for the Jubilee Year (Spes non confundit, 3). The Paschal Mystery sits at the centre of our faith, at the centre of each liturgical year. And yet the Holy Door of the Basilica of Saint Peter, opened on the 24th of December 2024, will not be closed until the 6th of January 2026, by which time we will have celebrated Christmas twice within the Jubilee. It is surely significant. The beginning and the end belong to Christmas, as it were, to the time when the heart of Jesus was small and still beating very fast. What message of hope does Christmas have to offer?

In the beginning, as we know, "was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made through him; in him was life" (cf. John 1:1-4), outside of him nothing at all. When creatures fall out of their relationship with God, they simply tend towards the nothingness that lies outside of it. "For the wages of sin is death", as St Paul put it (Romans 6:23). The Incarnation was, by all accounts, a drastic solution to the problem of the fall, proof of the immensity of God's love for us. The eternal Word, in whom everything exists, "submitted to our corruption" by taking to himself a body "from a pure and unspotted virgin", a body as a temple "in which to be known and dwell," wrote St Athanasius; a body in which he could suffer and die (De Incarnatione, 8). And so, when Our Lord did eventually die on the cross, the whole of creation died with him, and the wages of sin were fully paid, for everyone, for everything and for ever. Since his resurrection and ascension into heaven, we have "a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain," acting as "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (Hebrews 6:19, cf. Spes non confundit, 25).

In the end, however, what overwhelms us at Christmas is a very different reality, far removed from all abstract considerations, at least at first glance. A little Child in a manger, crying perhaps, waving his tiny arms, sucking at his mother's breast, or just sleeping. "A wonder is your mother", wrote St Ephrem, "the Lord entered her and became a servant; he entered shepherd of all, a lamb he became in her, he emerged bleating" (Hymns on the Nativity, 11:6). Jesus bleating like a lamb in Mary's arms. We can easily relate to such images, easily grasp at the reality

behind them. All children are "signs of hope", as Pope Francis reminded us (Spes non confundit, 9), let alone this One. Here then two perspectives clash, God's and man's. And yet the genius of Christianity consists precisely in holding them together. The two are one in Jesus himself, of course, in his heart, but in Jesus for us, and so potentially in us as well. This is where we find the hope that belongs uniquely to Christmas, by looking at this fragile, adorable Child, who is at the same time "a sure and steadfast anchor" from God.

Yet in order to see Jesus for who he is, one needs to belong to the reality in which he appeared. It is "the people who walked in darkness" that "have seen a great light", we are told (Isaiah 9:2). Who are they? They are the ordinary men and women whose lives are easily thrown into darkness by the great events of history and by natural disasters. People whose influence over those forces is very limited, whose joy is "the joy at the harvest", as the prophet put it (Isaiah 9:3). That is, they are the ones who truly desire peace (cf. Spes non confundit, 8) and rejoice when the natural cycles of life are not interfered with by war or other calamities. Here also lies the Good News of Christmas; here is a wellspring of hope for our troubled times. With these people we can say "to us a child is born, to us a son is given" (Isaiah 9:6). With them we can no longer be reduced to the dust of history, as the great ones of the earth and the gods of nature, war and money play their games above our heads. The yoke is broken, the yoke of being a very minor statistic in the grand scheme of things, doomed to disappear without a trace after death. God was born to us, not somewhere above our heads, in the upper echelons. He came to dwell with the little ones, with ordinary people worrying about the harvest, about jobs, money, schools, children, elderly parents, food, health, politics and weather. True, the great ones with their ambitions and nature with her laws can still throw us into the tumult of history. We are as vulnerable as ever. But at Christmas we celebrate the Source of all light itself moving down precisely to our level, jumping headlong into our darkness, in order to save us.

Fr. Simon Piątkowski, OSB
Prior

HUNGARY: MONASTERY OF ALL SAINTS, MAGYARSZÉK

A Carmelite Community on a Pilgrimage of Hope

On the night of Christ's birth, in the plains of Bethlehem, the Angels announced to the shepherds the glory of God and the birth of the Savior. The shepherds—just like monks and nuns—are watchmen, wrote Pope Benedict XVI; it was they, not those who slept peacefully, who heard the Good News. Simeon, Anna, the shepherds, and all those who, in that humble beginning, recognized the promise of salvation, were men and women of hope.

At the Christmas Vigil, when the Roman Martyrology resounds in our monastery, the unfathomable mystery touches us anew: God, Lord of time, submitted Himself to the limits of space and time; He became man. Then our eldest sister carries the statue of the Child Jesus, carved from olive wood, lifts it, and lays it in the manger before the altar, while the younger sisters place candles and incense around it. I will never forget the radiant faces of our older sisters as they presented the Child Jesus. For me, this gesture has become a symbol of the entire story of our community, marked by the long waiting of Advent. The rebirth of the Carmelite nuns in Hungary came through the power of the Holy Spirit and the sacrifice of a few faithful hearts. It is a living testimony to how God's work unfolds from a small and seemingly insignificant beginning.

Our monastery in Pécs was founded in 1936. The life of the seven foundresses was characterized by prayer and fraternal charity. Many young women asked to join them, so that by 1950 the community counted thirty-one nuns and was already

planning a new foundation. That same year, the communist regime suppressed all religious orders. The nuns faced this trial with prepared hearts. They offered their lives and their monastery for the good of the Body of Christ, the Church. Thus began a long and difficult time of waiting—a pilgrimage of hope—forty years without a monastery or community life. The prioress had sown in her sisters' hearts the spirit of fraternal charity and self-giving. From this inspiration sprang the strength that allowed them, despite dispersion, never to abandon their religious vocation. Living hidden lives, far from one another, they continued to sustain the Church and their people through prayer.

In the late 1980s, the hope of return began to take shape. In 1989, twenty-six families still lived in the former monastery. Our sisters were able to resume wearing the religious habit only in 1991. With five sisters, the visible history of our community could begin anew. In 1992, two sisters came from France to support the internal reconstruction of the Carmel: Sister Marie-Élisabeth, who later became prioress, and Sister Colette-Marie. Sister Marie-Élisabeth, who was granted little time, for the Heavenly Father called her to Himself in 1999 at the age of fifty-one, became the spiritual restorer of the reborn Carmel. Her life, her teaching, and her self-offering profoundly marked our community. Young women called to the Carmelite life began knocking one after another at the monastery door. The first solemn profession took place in 1996; since then, twenty-three young nuns have made their perpetual vows.

As the community grew, it settled in 2002 at Magyarszék, fifteen kilometers from Pécs, where stables and farm buildings had to be transformed into a monastery. Our religious life has been shaped by the example of our sisters who bore witness to total abandonment to the Lord and serenity in suffering: Sister Kinga (1973–2009), whose spiritual diary—translated into several languages—has become for many a model of trust in God; Sister Erzsébet (1983–2017), who also entered the Father's House at a very young age; and Sister Colette-Marie (1944–2019), who lived for twenty-seven years in Hungary and, as novice mistress, formed many young sisters in fidelity and simplicity.

In 2006, at the request of the Archbishop of Alba Iulia, several of our nuns went to Transylvania to found a new monastery. Today, fifteen sisters live in Magyarszék and seven in Marosszentgyörgy, the Transylvanian foundation.

The history of our community bears witness that God brings forth new life from fidelity and silent sacrifice. Our hope is not rooted in what is seen, but in the trust that God can transform us and draw us to Himself.

"Hope reaches out toward things not yet possessed and rises above all that is not God," teaches Saint John of the Cross. This hope keeps our hearts watchful in the night of Christmas. Hope is the pilgrim's virtue: it keeps us on the journey toward the invisible—toward the fulfillment that is already present but not yet possessed.

Thus our Carmelite community lives today: with a vigilant heart, praying for peace in the world, and silently bearing witness to hope—the unfailing faithfulness of God.

Sr. Angela, OCD
Prioress

HUNGARY: BENEDICTINE ARCHABBEY OF PANNONHALMA, VÁR

The Jubilee of Hope

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access (by faith) to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us". (*Romans* 5:1-5)

The Apostle Paul explains the Christian interpretation of hope in numerous places. The chapter quoted teaches that the path of faith is not an escape from the world, but a reconciled life with God. That is, peace with the sins of the past, grace in the present, hope for the future, and all-encompassing love. Paul sums up the whole inner dynamism of Christian life in a few sentences: from justification through faith to hope matured through suffering.
It is not by keeping the law, but by faith in Christ that man becomes righteous before God. "Peace" does not only mean spiritual tranquility, but also a reconciled relationship with God —the end of enmity caused by sin. Justification is therefore not merely a moral state, but a divine gift that restores our communion with our Creator.

The grace in which we live is the new form of existence, the present time of salvation: as believers, we already live in grace, in God's friendship, we do not merely hope for it. Our faith is not a single decision, but a state of life. Our glory lies in the fact that we are God's children, and we will attain the fullness of this in eternal life. Christian hope, therefore, is not an uncertain desire, but a certainty that comes from faith: what God has promised, He will fulfill for us. And it is the Holy Spirit who truly pours out God's love in us, which is the source of true peace: the presence and work of the Spirit in our hearts.

The Jubilee offered us countless practical opportunities: the hope of healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. For everyone's life story contains setbacks, difficulties, tensions, the horrors of war and natural disasters. The important message of the Jubilee is that even though discouragement and anxiety take hold of us again and again, one of Jesus' important questions must always find its way into our hearts: why are you afraid, you of little faith? And at such times, it must become clear to us that Jesus, at the last moment when he said goodbye to his disciples, promised to teach us the courage that ultimately leads to peace and tranquility.

Christ's fondamental message – do not let your hearts be troubled or discouraged – is strengthening and encouraging. He also conveys in a parable that our Heavenly Father cares for the flowers and the birds, feeding them and dressing them in splendid clothes. Does He not care for and provide for us even more? Believers greatly need this kind of hope, because our concerns are not unfounded, but we cannot live without hope.

Our usual summer St. Benedict pilgrimage was, of course, also built around the theme of hope. In Rome, the youth of the diocese of Pannonhalma took part in the youth pilgrimage, while those believers who were unable to travel there arrived at Pannonhalma Archabbey as part of the Jubilee pilgrimage. The "pilgrims of hope" prayed for an end to wars and for peace, for children who suffer abuse in the Church, for the healing of wounds and divisions in families, and for the restoration of the created world.
A Christian cannot remain indifferent to the tense issue of war and peace, since human lives become victims of hatred and power interests. Jesus did not view peace as merely a political state, but as a gift from God, and he preached reconciliation that springs from the heart. It is the duty of believers to be "instruments of peace" in the world through their prayers.

The wounds inflicted on children who suffer abuse in the Catholic Church are an affront not only to human dignity, but also to the face of God. The prayers of the Christian community are a path to healing, truth, and purification, so that our Church may once again be a home of protection and mercy. The Church is the body of Christ—when one member suffers, the whole body suffers with it. That is why it is especially important to pray for the healing of wounds caused within families. The family is the place where people experience love, but unfortunately, they also often experience its breakdown and imperfection, even to the point of lack of affection. The proclamation of the Gospel can be made complete with prayers offered for reconciliation, forgiveness, and the restoration of love.

Individuals, families, and wider communities all exist in the world created by God. Creation is the greatest gift that the Father has entrusted to our care. The environmental crisis is also a spiritual crisis: it is the consequence of selfishness, irresponsibility, and indifference. Our prayer for the protection of creation is not only an ecological action, but also a profession of faith that God still sees the world as good and calls us not to exploit it, but to preserve it. Christian prayer is not an escape from the world, but the deepest form of love and responsibility.

It is important to mention here that Jesus' teaching about hope is for everyone, which the Church must also convey to non-believers. People today are in great need of something to hold on to, something to grasp. Hope can be such a hold for everyone. It can also be found in people who demonstrate their hope in God's mercy and love through their example. One of the most authentic members of the hungarian benedictine community, our legendary former brother, Father Placid, who passed away in 2017. His whole life was about hope. When hope seemed truly lost, because he had been taken to the gulag for decades and his comrades had died there beside him in inhumane conditions, the realization was born in his heart: "I exist because I have a mission." Because suffering is not the opposite of a righteous life, but the path to it. The perseverance experienced in suffering matures faith. This experience is not bitter fatalism, but a Christ-like perspective: God's love is at work even in his suffering. As Christians, therefore, we do not seek suffering, but we recognize the work of grace in it.

Even if they punish me, even if they want to destroy me, I will still find a deeper meaning in my life, which is that I have a mission: to live for others, to keep hope alive in others under all circumstances.

Cirill Tamás Hortobágyi, OSB
Archabbot

VATICAN CITY: MONASTERY OF *MATER ECCLESIAE*

Saint Benedict of Norcia and Hope: Trusting in God as the Way of Life

Saint Benedict of Norcia (480–547), father of Western monasticism and founder of the Benedictine Order, left the Church a spiritual inheritance of immense value: the Rule. Written in the sixth century, this text is not only a guide for monastic life, but also a beacon of human and Christian wisdom that enlightens all who seek God amid the difficulties of the world.

Among the many themes running through the Rule, one holds a central place: hope placed in God.

In an age marked by instability and the fall of the Roman Empire, Saint Benedict offered a path of order, peace and trust. In Chapter IV of the Rule, where he lists the *Tools of Good Works*, he writes:

"Never despair of the mercy of God."

This seemingly simple phrase contains a profound theology of hope, for Benedict, the monk—and every Christian—must live in awareness of his own limits, falls, and fragility, yet always sustained by the certainty that God never abandons. Divine mercy is stronger than sin, and hope in God thus becomes the force that drives conversion and fidelity.

Benedictine hope is not a passive attitude of waiting without action. On the contrary, it involves a dynamic trust that expresses itself in work, obedience and perseverance. The Benedictine motto *Ora et labora* ("Pray and work") expresses precisely this fruitful tension between faith in God's providence and personal responsibility.

To trust in God does not mean to abandon human effort, but to orient it toward Him, knowing that every action, however small, has meaning when carried out in His presence.

Saint Benedict conceives the monastery as a "school for the Lord's service." In this school, the monks learn patience, humility and charity—virtues that nourish hope. Community life becomes a visible sign that it is possible to live relying on God rather than on selfishness or fear. Hope, in the Rule, is not lived in isolation but shared: each brother supports the other in times of weakness, reminding him that God's love is eternal and faithful.

In Benedictine monasteries, such as ours at Mater Ecclesiae, hope is manifested in concrete gestures and in daily fidelity. The day of a nun begins before dawn, when the community gathers in the church to sing the psalms of Lauds. In that prayer, while the sun has not yet risen, they entrust the new day to God, hoping in His mercy and light.

After prayer, work takes an important place. Some sisters work in the garden, others in the kitchen, in sewing, or in the guesthouse. Every task, no matter how simple, is performed with care and joy, as a form of collaboration with God's creative work. This attitude reflects a concrete hope: the certainty that goodness grows even in small, hidden, everyday acts.

Hope is also expressed in community life. When a sister is sick or tired, the others help her silently, sharing her work or praying for her. In the silence of the cloister, they learn that hope is nourished by patience and by trust that the Lord acts in every situation, even in what cannot be understood.

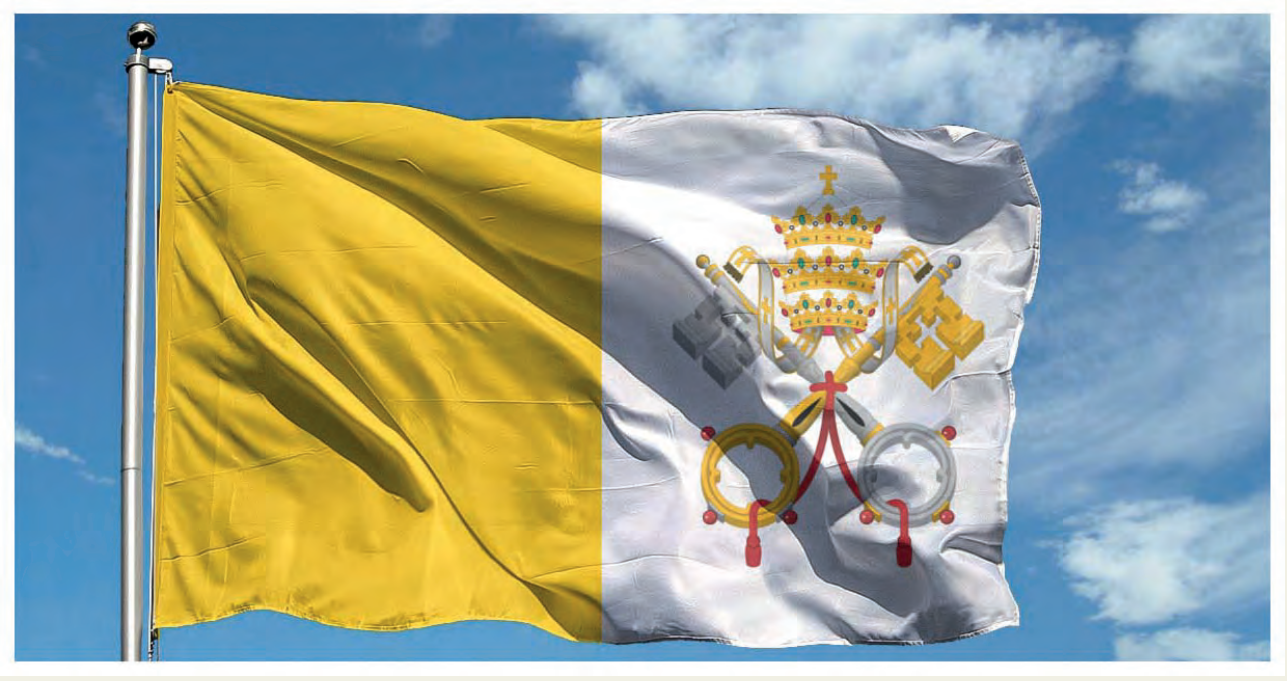
In times of difficulty—whether a drought affecting the garden, an illness, or a shortage of resources—the nuns live hope not as an idea but as a daily decision to trust. They know, as the Rule says, that "every good that is in us comes from God," and that He never abandons those who rely on His love.

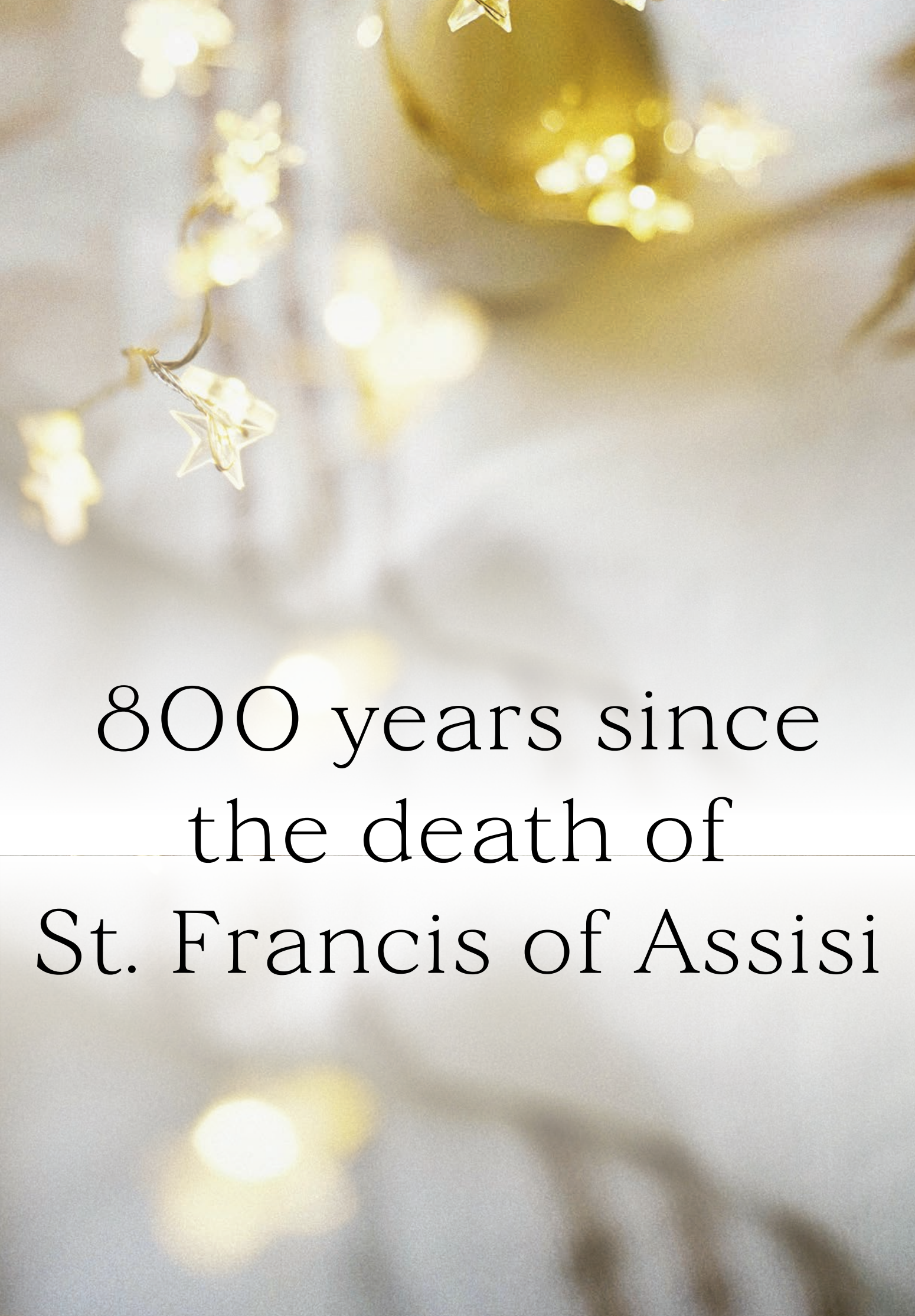
Thus, the Benedictine nuns embody hope in the simplicity of their lives: praying, working, welcoming, listening, waiting. Their silent witness reminds the world that hope is neither escape nor illusion, but a concrete way of living daily fidelity with hearts set on God.

In a world marked by uncertainty, Saint Benedict's message remains profoundly relevant. His invitation to "never despair of the mercy of God" resounds as a call to trust and serenity. Christian hope, according to Benedictine teaching, is neither naïveté nor evasion, but the firm conviction that God acts in history and in our lives, even in the darkest moments.

To place one's hope in God ultimately means to live with the heart anchored in His faithfulness, building each day—with prayer, work, and love—a world more filled with light and peace.
A more human place to live, as Christmas reminds us each year and as the choir of angels proclaims:
"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will."

The Benedictine nuns




800 years since
the death of
St. Francis of Assisi

Christmas:
A Seed of Hope in the Heart of the World

The Light of Bethlehem and the Lesson of Greccio in the Jubilee Year

As this Holy Year dedicated to hope draws to a close, Christmas once again calls us. In a time marked by conflict and division, the birth of Christ in Bethlehem is not an escape into sentimentality, but the proclamation of a presence that transforms history: God became flesh and placed him-self among us — regardless of the difficult and troubled history.
This year marks the 800th anniversary of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi, who in the mystery of Christmas did not merely contemplate the poverty of the manger, but chose it as his way of life. He understood that in fragility lies the divine logic that overturns the values of the world: bitterness turns into sweetness of spirit and body, as he witnessed through his encounter with the lepers.

The town of Greccio: See in Order to Believe

It was Christmas night in 1223 when Francis experienced something unique in Greccio: to "see with the eyes of the body" the poverty that Jesus embraced in His birth.
Francis did not wish to reproduce or stage the Nativity; he wanted to see — through a bit of hay, an ox, and a donkey — the destitution into which Jesus chose to be born. Thinking was not enough for him: he wanted his whole person — senses, sight, hands — to be involved. For Francis, faith is life.

At the heart of the event was the Eucharist, celebrated in the cave. There Francis perceived the continuity of the mystery: "Each day He humbles Himself, as when from His royal throne He descended into the Virgin's womb; each day He comes to us in humble appearance; each day He descends from the bosom of the Father upon the altar." The Child "born on the way," poor and without shelter, continues to be born in the Eucharist and in the poor, the forgotten, the discarded.
The Hidden Strength in Weakness
The Christmas message of hope is paradoxical: God appears as a helpless newborn, "born on the way," who "has nowhere to lay His head." He chooses weakness to reveal the true strength that alone gives hope without illusion.
Saint Francis understood this in his own flesh. He, who had dreamed as a youth of military glory and wealth, found peace by descending into the condition of the lepers. He allowed himself to be reached by their suffering, shared in their marginalization, and there discovered the mercy that transforms. Hope is not born of possession but of gift; not of power but of the acceptance of one's fragility.
Christmas reminds us that God's logic is different: it is the logic of the seed that dies to bear fruit, of the hidden yeast, of the small light that

breaks through the darkness. As Saint Francis sang at La Verna: "You are joy and gladness, You are our hope." Hope is not an idea, but a living Person.

Building Fraternity, Not Just Waiting for It

The Jubilee has called us to be pilgrims of hope. But how can we find hope amid wars and injustices? Christmas answers: God did not remain indifferent; He entered into our suffering, becoming a "pilgrim and stranger" with us.

Francis crossed the Crusader battle lines to meet the Sultan, seeking dialogue where others saw only enemies. Peace is born of deep conversion — reconciliation with God, with oneself, with others, with creation.

We are called to become "leaven of fraternity." There, hope takes shape and becomes possible.

The Joy No One Can Take Away

There is a particular joy in Christmas — one that does not depend on circumstances but on the certainty of being loved. Saint Francis experienced it and called it "perfect joy."

This joy springs from God Himself. "Where there is poverty with joy," Francis wrote, "there is no greed." Evangelical joy is inseparable from humility, from the embrace of weakness.

This is the hope Christmas offers: not the promise of a life without problems, but the certainty of never being alone — of being accompanied by a God who knows us, loves us, and walks with us as a pilgrim on the way. It is the hope that does not disappoint, because it is founded not on our strength but on God's fidelity.

An Invitation for Our Time

The example of Francis points us toward a path. There is no need to flee or close ourselves off in pessimism. We must step out of our "comfort zone" and journey toward places that may seem hostile, where we can listen to the longing within us: to see the Lord in the mystery of His poverty.

Christmas invites us to pause before the crèche with the eyes of Francis: to let ourselves be converted by God's tenderness, to rediscover that greatness lies in becoming small, that true wealth is in love freely given. "Let them be lesser and subject to all": Francis rejected all power in order to remain faithful to his vocation.

To see and to believe — the steps of Francis, disarming in their simplicity. His "physical" gaze touched the Lord in the Gospel; he saw Him in the leper, in his brothers. He looked human fragility in the eyes, freed from bitterness and fear, and from that encounter the joy of faith fully blossomed.

This journey reached its fulfillment in Francis's Easter — his encounter with death, which he called "sister." There lies the arrival at the goal of true hope, the light that guided Francis's steps as a Christian man. It is precisely in his death, the completion of his journey, that we recognize the hope that animated his entire life, anchored in the Gospel even in its darkest moments.

We, too, live through one of these difficult passages in history. We refuse comforting interpretations or cheap hopes. We are painfully aware of living in a time that feels "suspended," and we seek a word that can illuminate its meaning and give us reasons to hope — not only for ourselves but for the many people of goodwill today, too often marked by a hope denied by reality.

Can we still hope? And in what? The Emmanuel — God-with-us — whom Saint Francis sought and followed in poverty throughout his life, and encountered in his return to the Father, is Himself our hope. The hope that does not disappoint.

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A Kiss That Opens the Door to Hope

Last October, the parishioners of our Basilica of the Holy Apostles made a pilgrimage to the Holy Door of St. Peter's. Upon their return, I met two women who collaborate with us in the parish; amid their fatigue and emotion, they said to me:

"Father, we are grateful to God. We crossed the Holy Door and kissed it, because Christ is the Door—our door to eternal life. It was like kissing Jesus."

That simple gesture touched me deeply. Not only because it echoed the Gospel—"I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he will be saved" (Jn 10:9)—but because in that kiss, filled with faith, I saw the very heart of this Jubilee Year that is coming to a close: humanity on a journey, in need of hope, seeking—even groping—the closeness of God.

That kiss on the Holy Door, like the kiss we will give the Child on Christmas night, expresses the faith of a people who do not give up: a people who walk, who pray, who hope, who believe. A kiss that seals a year lived in true hope—the kind that does not disappoint, founded not on empty promises but on God who becomes a Child with a promise of eternity: "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20).

Hope in a World Without Peace

Today more than ever, hope is not a luxury—it is a necessity. We live in times when peace seems distant and fragile. Wars multiply, divisions deepen, and the "every man for himself" mentality seems to prevail. What can Christmas offer amid all this?

This year, here in Rome, I have been a witness to it. I have seen so many people walking with difficulty, yet with a moving inner strength—men and women, children, the elderly, the sick, religious, bishops, and even Pope Leo XIV himself: all moved by something greater than themselves, walking with their gaze fixed on the faithful God. Perhaps within them echoed the exhortation from the Letter to the Hebrews: "Let us hold unwaverlingly to our confession that gives us hope, for he who made the promise is faithful" (Heb 10:23).

There I understood that hope is not escapism—it is endurance. Every step was like an attempt to wrest from God the hope needed to illuminate the darkness of our times. It was as if the people of God, walking together, were pleading with heaven: "Do not leave us without hope!"

That is why the angels' announcement to the shepherds still re-

sounds for us today: "Today, in the city of David, a Savior has been born for you" (Lk 2:11). And the entrance antiphon of the Mass at Dawn proclaims it powerfully: "Today a light will shine upon us, for the Lord is born for us! His name will be: Wonder Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His kingdom will have no end" (Is 9:1–6).

That Child, Christ Jesus, is our hope. In Him, "justice and peace shall kiss" (Ps 85), and through Him, a reconciled world becomes possible. How we wish that the kiss given to the Christ Child on this Christmas night might become a sign of reconciliation for wounded marriages, strength for those who love faithfully, inspiration for leaders who seek peace, and light for those who live in loneliness or despair.

The Child of Bethlehem and Francis' "Yes"

This year, Christmas finds us within the context of the 800th anniversary of the passing of St. Francis of Assisi—the one who, more than anyone, knew how to live this mystery with vibrant and passionate faith.

For Francis, Christmas was "the feast of feasts," the celebration of God's humility. He wanted to relive it intensely in the night of Greccio, where—as Thomas of Celano recounts—"the Child Jesus, long forgotten in many hearts, was brought to life again by the grace of God through Francis' faith."

And just as he contemplated the Nativity with tenderness, Francis also lived his death as a final Christmas. He asked to be laid naked upon the earth, like his Lord; he asked that songs be sung; he blessed his brothers. In his testament, he left no possessions, only words: "Let them always love one another, love holy poverty, and remain faithful to the Church." He did not fear death—he called it Sister. He knew it was only the threshold to Life.

His hope was no illusion but complete trust in the God who became a Child and conquered death. Francis died as he lived: radically surrendered to God. And for this reason, eight centuries after his "Easter," his life continues to nourish our hope. He teaches us that true hope does not lie in earthly success but in knowing in whom we have placed our trust (2 Tim 1:12).

The Kiss That Changes Everything

On Christmas night, priests will kiss the Gospel and the altar where Christ becomes Bread. Families will kiss the image of the Christ Child in their homes. And all of us, in one way or another, will kiss the hope that has come to visit us.

May that kiss also be a promise: of renewed faith, of fidelity to the Gospel, of communion with the Church, and of solidarity with the poorest. For, as the Church reminds us, hope is not passive—it moves us, urges us, commits us (Rom 5:5).

A kiss that seals a year in which we have learned—or want to learn—to build our lives on hope: not just any hope, but the true one, the lasting one, the eternal one.

How I would love to think that, in the kiss to the Christ Child—our door to hope—the promise of wounded marriages may be renewed, and the love of those who live it fully may be strengthened! May that kiss become both prayer and commitment, so that He who is called the Prince of Peace may also be the sign of a stable and lasting peace among peoples.

This is the wish I share this Christmas: that each person, gazing upon the Child, may be touched by the tenderness of God, and that, like Francis of Assisi, may learn to sing with joy even when night falls. For those who hope in the Lord will not be disappointed (Is 49:23).

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FRANCIS AND THE THRESHOLDS OF HOPE

In the Upper Basilica of Assisi, among the cycle of frescoes depicting the life of Saint Francis, one stands out for its transparent relevance: the fresco showing Pope Innocent III dreaming of the penitent of Assisi as he supports on his shoulders the crumbling Basilica of the Lateran. It is a sign of difficult and ominous times, in the face of which, however, a hope was about to rise—one that would change the destiny of the world and of the Church.

Among those who interpreted those times was also Dante Alighieri who, in the Divine Comedy (Paradiso, Canto XI), opposing greed and avarice—the "senseless care of mortals" (XI,1) that "makes thee beat thy wings below" (XI,3)—recalls the figures of Francis of Assisi and Saint Dominic. Drawing from the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas, he reveals the wise truth that all History lies in the hands of Providence. "The Providence that governs the world" (XI,28), he writes, "ordained two princes for her good" (XI,35), that—supported on either side (XI,36)—the "bride of Him who with loud cries espoused her with His blessed blood" might "go forth toward her beloved, secure in herself and more faithful to Him" (XI,31–34).

The journey of Hope cannot falter, for it is sustained by the presence of Divine Providence. To the sound of this Voice, the first steps of Francis, the son of Pietro di Bernardone, are attuned: "Go, Francis, repair my house" [FF 593]. Upon those footprints the whole path of his life would follow—threshold after threshold—the path that the Saint of Assisi would entrust to his brothers in his Testament.

"The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin to do penance: for when I was in sin, it seemed to me very bitter to see lepers; and the Lord Himself led me among them, and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I tarried a little and left the world" [FF 110].

These are the first three verses of the Testament (1226) that Francis of Assisi would "entrust" to his brothers shortly before leaving his earthly dwelling. Everything began with that first step—and not without that step!

The first threshold, that of conversion (1206), had been crossed, and the grace of the Lord would lead the young man of Assisi to other thresholds. This is the jubilee journey to which the Lord, through the Church, calls all people—threshold after threshold, or, if one prefers, gate after gate—to silence the sounds of fear and death and to let resound the voice of life and hope. The Angel of the Lord, as in the struggle with the patriarch Jacob [cf. Gen 32:24–34], was now to "baptize" the young Francis with a new fatherhood.

This is the second threshold, the "Jubilee Gate" (we may allow ourselves the use of this expression, anachronistic though it may be for Francis's time): the stripping before the Bishop of Assisi [cf. FF 344]. Having cast off his father's garments, he clothes himself with the veils of Lady Poverty. God alone is his Father! In the world, but not of the world, as the Letter to Diognetus (ch. 5–6) [Funk 1, 317–321] would say—a reminder of the sapiential life to which every Christian is called.

A third threshold now presents itself to Francis. Just as the Father once gave disciples to Jesus [Rnb 22,42–43], so now the Father blesses Francis with brothers (1208). Brother among brothers! From now on, the gift of fraternity will accompany him, in joy and in trial, until his final breath.

Hence the fourth threshold: to live in listening to the Word of God, according to the form of the holy Gospel, and in steadfast obedience to the Lord Pope. Thus begins the path of evangelical obedience within the Church. "And after the Lord gave me brothers, no one showed me what I should do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the holy Gospel. And I had it written down in few words and with simplicity, and the Lord Pope confirmed it for me" [FF 116]. Minor, poor, and without privileges. "This was always his glory: that, setting aside all appearance of privilege and pride, the power of Christ dwelt in him" [FF 1726].

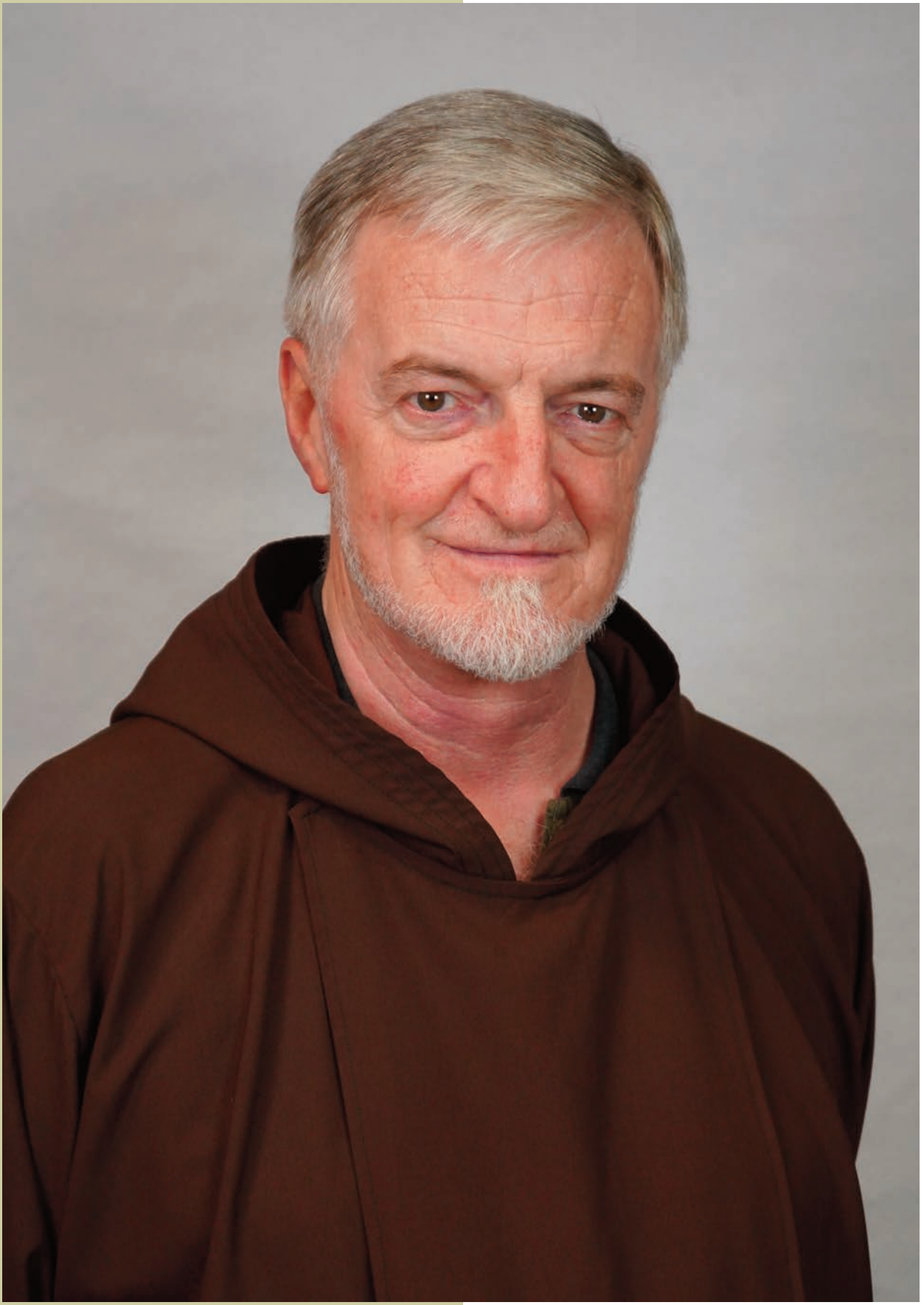
A fifth threshold will be the mission among the Saracens, which will engage him in the gift of himself, in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the guidance of his brothers. To this period belong the Letter to All Clerics, the Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples, the Admonitions, the Letter to a Minister, and the Letter to the Faithful. Francis becomes an evangelizer and neighbor to all, aware that no threshold can be crossed lightly or without wounds.

The penultimate threshold is fulfilled at Greccio (1223). There, mindful of his first calling, Francis meets in ecstasy the newborn Jesus, the last among the least. "And every time he said 'the Child of Bethlehem' or 'Jesus,' he would pass his tongue over his lips, as though to taste and swallow all the sweetness of that word" [FF 470]. Forged now as a man of prayer and contemplation, he is ready for La Verna (1224), where he meets the Crucified Lord who impresses upon him the stigmata of a shared Passion, making him the image of the new man. The Canticle of Brother Sun will seal the embrace between the Father and His creature.

The final threshold will be crossed at the Porziuncola (1226), where Sister Death will open for him the last Gate—the Ianua Coeli. "It is finished": the consummation of the new man, Francis of Assisi.

Dante Alighieri weaves his passing in these words:

"When Him it pleased, who to such good had brought him,
to draw him up to the reward deserved
by making himself lowly in the world,
to his own brothers, as to rightful heirs,
he gave in charge his most beloved lady,



and bade them love her faithfully" [Par. XI, 109–114].
The jubilee journey of Francis of Assisi marks the Gates to cross, the thresholds to surpass, and the paths to live. To this Providence calls us; from this, Hope draws its nourishment—
for a world of Peace and Good!

"And he said to the brothers: 'I have done my part; may Christ teach you yours'" [FF 1239].

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Christmas in Bethlehem and the 800th Anniversary of St Francis

Eight hundred years after the death of Saint Francis of Assisi, his message of peace and hope continues to resonate powerfully—especially in Bethlehem, the city where everything began. This year's Christmas takes on a special significance: not only because it commemorates the event that changed history—the birth of Jesus Christ—but also because it recalls the man who more than anyone else knew how to live and proclaim the humility of that mystery.

The Humility of the Incarnation and the Charity of the Passion

Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of Francis, writes that "above all, the humility of the Incarnation and the charity of the Passion were constantly present in his mind, so much so that he rarely wished to think of anything else." These words capture the heart of Franciscan spirituality: contemplating the God who became small, poor and fragile out of love.

For Francis, the Incarnation is not a theological concept but a concrete encounter with the tenderness of God who bends down toward humanity. To see the Child of Bethlehem meant for him to understand completely that God became man to draw near, to share everything—even poverty.

The Desire to See with His Own Eyes

It was from this very desire that the Nativity scene of Greccio was born. Francis did not want simply to remember Christmas; he wanted to see it, touch it, live it with his eyes and heart. He wished "to see with his own eyes the poverty and humility of the birth of the Lord," as Thomas of Celano recounts.

In 1223, on a cold and silent night, in the small cave of Greccio, the Saint recreated the Gospel scene: the ox, the donkey, the manger, and above all the Eucharist, the heart of the mystery of the Incarnation. The way Francis arranged that Nativity made one feel as though standing before the cave of Bethlehem: the manger beside the altar, the poverty of the place, the light rising from the mystery. It was as if Francis wanted to bring Bethlehem to Italy, making the mystery of God made man accessible to everyone.

Greccio and Bethlehem: Two Caves, One Single Mystery

Eight hundred years later, the two caves—the one in Bethlehem and the one in Greccio—continue to speak to each other. The same light shines in both: the light of a God who enters the world in the most disarming form, that of weakness.

Bethlehem today still bears the wounds of war, tension and uncertainty. But right there, where the Prince of Peace was born, the cry of the Gospel is renewed every year: "Peace on earth to those whom God loves." It is the same peace that Francis sought, lived, and proclaimed. A man of reconciliation and fraternity, he became a pilgrim of peace even in the Holy Land when he chose to meet Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil during the Crusades, showing that dialogue and fraternity are stronger than violence.

Francis, the Man of Peace and Hope

Eight centuries later, Francis remains the man of peace and hope.

He is the one who sings the wonders of creation and the wonder of the human person, capable of forgiving out of love for God. His clear, disarming voice still crosses the centuries and speaks to a world wounded by wars and divisions. At a time when fear seems to prevail, Francis reminds us that peace is born only from a reconciled heart—from a heart that allows itself to be touched by the mystery of Jesus' birth.

The Peace That Comes from a Child

With the birth of Jesus, Peace entered the world. Wars have not ceased—not even in the Holy Land—but for those who welcome that small child in need of everything, a new peace fills the heart and a new hope opens the future. Christmas, then, is not a sentimental memory but a call to be transformed: like Francis at Greccio, like the shepherds of Bethlehem, like all those who saw the light and made it their life.

In the silence of the Holy Night, among the ancient stones of Bethlehem and the Umbrian valleys of Greccio, the same proclamation is renewed: "Today a Savior has been born for you, who is Christ the Lord."

It is the announcement that continues to change history, the one Francis has helped us hear for eight hundred years with the simplicity of a loving heart.

Merry Christmas from Bethlehem, in the spirit of Saint Francis—man of peace, man of hope.

Father Francesco Ielpo, OFM
Custos of the Holy Land

Hope Is Built in Fraternity

As the Jubilee draws to a close, the Church gathers around the mystery of Christmas as around a fire that never ceases to burn. It is the time of hope, the season in which faith reminds us that history—though wounded and full of contradictions—remains inhabited by God. In a world that seems to have lost peace and trust, Christmas continues to resound as a proclamation of life: God continues to draw near, to walk with humanity, to be born in the folds of our fragility.

Christian hope is not naïve optimism nor simply waiting for better times. It is the certainty that God's love is stronger than any night, that His faithfulness never fails. Christmas invites us to look at reality without denying its harshness, yet discovering within it the discreet presence of the Lord who works in silence. Where everything seems motionless, the Lord opens a path; where fear paralyzes, the Lord rekindles the courage to begin again.

As we know, at Christmas in 1223 Saint Francis of Assisi wished to contemplate this mystery with a simplicity that has endured through the centuries: in Greccio, longing "to see with his bodily eyes" the poverty of the Child of Bethlehem. He was not seeking a devout representation, but a real encounter. He had a manger prepared, with hay, an ox, and a donkey: humble signs to remind us that God chose the way of littleness.

Francis—whose eighth centenary of death we are about to celebrate—understood that the God of Christmas does not rule from on high, but lowers Himself to share our humanity. He is a God who does not impose Himself but exposes Himself, who does not demand sacrifices but gives Himself. And it is precisely in this vulnerability that the strength of hope is revealed. In the end, this is the witness that peace is not won by weapons but by a reconciled heart. It is the sign that hope is built in fraternity, in welcome, in humble and concrete service.

We live in a fragmented time, in which it is easy to give in to cynicism or resignation, yet the birth of Jesus continues to remind us that every story can be renewed, that light still overcomes darkness, that love always has the final word. And it asks

us to become bearers of hope ourselves—not through grand gestures, but through the daily patience of doing good: a listening that consoles, a word that encourages, a hand stretched out. This is how God continues to take flesh in the world. Hope becomes concrete when we choose not to turn away from suffering, when we safeguard the dignity of every person, when we build bridges instead of walls.

The Jubilee now ending has reminded us that God's mercy does not run out but is continually renewed. Christmas invites us to contemplate this mercy made flesh: a God who does not remain distant but comes to dwell in our history. He is the true hope, because nothing human is foreign to Him.

By contemplating the Child of Bethlehem, we learn the language of tenderness—the language Saint Francis used when speaking to all creatures—and the language of peace, which is born from recognizing universal fraternity.

Christmas, then, is not an escape but a mission. It is the call to become light amid the darkness of our time, to bear witness that God continues to believe in humanity. It is the feast of a God who never tires of beginning anew, who entrusts Himself to human hands to be welcomed, protected, and loved.

For this reason, even today Saint Francis invites us to kneel before the nativity scene not to flee from the world, but to learn to look at it with the eyes of hope. From that poor manger continues to flow peace—the true peace that does not arise from treaties but from hearts renewed by love.

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A Light from the Porziuncola: Pilgrims of Hope in the Jubilee Christmas

In the heart of Assisi, the Porziuncola, preserved within the Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels, represents the very essence of the Franciscan charism. In his Bull Spes non confundit announcing the Jubilee of 2025, Pope Francis recalls how, as early as 1216, Pope Honorius III granted Saint Francis's request for the indulgence for those visiting this sacred place—anticipating by eighty years the Jubilee tradition itself (cf. n. 5).

This tiny chapel, built with stones begged from Mount Subasio and dedicated to Our Lady of the Angels, safeguards the story of Saint Francis, known affectionately as the Poor Man of Assisi. Here, he repaired the little church in obedience to the Crucifix of San Damiano: "Francis, do you not see that my house is falling into ruin? Go then and repair it for me" (Franciscan Sources n. 1411). Here he founded the Order of Friars Minor in 1209; here, in 1211, Clare received the religious habit, giving birth to the Poor Clares; here, in 1216, Francis obtained the Indulgence. Finally, it was here that he welcomed Sister Death, singing, on October 3, 1226.

It was from his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1219 that Francis's desire was born—that all might "see with the eyes of the body" the humility of God. Thus, eight hundred years ago, he created in the town of Greccio the first Nativity scene (cf. Franciscan Sources nn. 466–471). The profound meaning of "making the Nativity" lies in the encounter with the Incarnation: God revealing Himself by becoming man, entering the world in poverty.

"Pilgrims of Hope" is the motto chosen by Pope Francis for the Jubilee of 2025, and it is undeniable that we are in need of hope. Our society, often absorbed in the present and unable to look toward the future, is in deep need of it (cf. Francis, Homily, May 9, 2024). The Nativity scene thus becomes a tangible sign of this hope—a wondrous sign that always inspires awe and wonder, proclaiming the mystery of the Incarnation with simplicity and joy (Francis, Apostolic Letter Admirabile signum, December 1, 2019). In continuity, Pope Leo XIV, carrying forward the spirit of the Jubilee during the feast of Saint Francis in 2025, emphasized that the Jubilee is "a time of concrete hope," a time "to find forgiveness and mercy, so that everything can begin anew" (Leo XIV, Jubilee Audience, October 4, 2025).

At Christmas, Saint Francis prayed: "This is the day the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad in it! For the most holy beloved Child has been given to us and is born for us along the way, and was laid in a manger because there was no room at the inn" (Franciscan Sources n. 303). In a violent time like his—and ours—the Poor Man sought peace, which is Christ Himself. Therefore,

to celebrate Christmas is not to flee from reality but to recognize that the poverty in which Jesus was born is present today in places of suffering and war, and is the key to understanding that light which people so often refuse to receive: "The light came into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light" (John 3:19).
The vocation of celebrating Christmas at the Porziuncola—also through the annual International Nativity Exhibition—invites four reflections: to recognize the greatness of divine love in the Son who became our brother; to be bearers of humanity toward all, especially the excluded; to make room in our hearts for Jesus and for the little ones of the Gospel; and to follow the path of humility, as Francis did, who evangelized with the simplicity of the Nativity scene, calling everyone to follow Jesus from the manger to the Cross. The Child of Bethlehem is the face of the Father's mercy, and at the Porziuncola, thousands of pilgrims each year encounter this face in the experience of Forgiveness, departing with the echo: "His mercy endures forever" (Psalm 136).
When the Jubilee of 2025 comes to an end, the message of hope from the Porziuncola will not fade: the Porziuncola remains an "ever-open door." The gift of the Indulgence is daily and perpetual. In a world without peace, the Porziuncola will continue to remind us that each day we can be pilgrims of hope, proclaiming that God continues to make Himself present in humility and mercy. Even when the Jubilee doors are closed, the path remains open toward that Child who, as at Greccio eight centuries ago, is born anew in the hearts of those who have the courage to proclaim Him (cf. Franciscan Sources n. 470).
The words left by Saint Francis from the place of his blessed passing resound today as a testament for every person: "I have done my part; may Christ teach you yours" (Franciscan Sources n. 1239). The responsibility is ours—to continue the journey, bringing into the world the light of the Gospel with the humility and joy that Saint Francis has shown us.

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From La Verna to Greccio

In 1223, Saint Francis had the Nativity of Jesus represented during the Eucharistic celebration of Christmas in the town of Greccio. From that moment, the practice of staging sacred representations of the Nativity — what we now call the Christmas Creche — began to spread. The following September, he experienced that unprecedented spiritual event at La Verna, where — though still alive — he found himself crucified like Jesus.

In truth, the events that have unfolded throughout this year 2025, now drawing to a close, invite us to consider how hope can lead us to take the reverse journey: from La Verna to Greccio. If we too wish, within our families, to celebrate the birth of Jesus in a meaningful and authentic way, we cannot keep outside the door the despair that has pervaded the lives of millions of people in many parts of the world.

The "Jubilee of Hope," which comes to a close, reminds us that we can find a reason to hope that does not arise merely from human dynamics or abilities, but that is given to us from above — from a source beyond our reach. It is the hope that divine forgiveness for human evil might touch the hearts of the powerful and turn everyone's gaze toward what is weak and in need of care — like a newborn child. Celebrating Christmas without closing our eyes and hearts to the world's tragedies means refusing to settle for a traditional moment of distraction, a season of good feelings expressed only through shopping and a few exchanged greetings. It means instead being moved by the hope that every act of love toward the weak exposes us to criticism, to misunderstanding from those close to us, even to solitude — yet if it is truly love, it must become concrete care for this world that the media show us every day.

To love, then, is to accept being crucified by others — to be wounded, disapproved of, opposed — yet without giving in to resignation or freezing in indifference, numbed and dazed by the flood of information. Only those who have experienced Easter with Jesus, as Saint Francis did at La Verna, can celebrate his Christmas with warmth and truth. Around the family table, we will find ourselves

wounded but alive, marked by love's stigmata yet genuine lovers of this world — a world that, having lost faith, so often seems to have lost reason as well!

May Saint Francis, stigmatized by love, help us to be men and women of concrete love, of steadfast hope, of unshakable trust in humanity's ability to change course and become builders of peace. Francis died eight centuries ago, yet his message — and above all the Spirit that animated him — remains alive and relevant. Certainly, none of us is a Saint Francis; few are lions of courage. But each of us can begin where Francis began: by standing before a painted crucifix in a ruined, abandoned little church, and by no longer fleeing from the living crucifixes — the lepers whom everyone avoided. Let us begin with the lepers of today, with those whom human laws or social customs allow us to ignore, and let us begin with a simple response to the appeal their silent existence constantly makes to us: "Yes, I see you. You are here. I cannot pretend your cry does not touch me."

Through our smartphones, our computers, and the vast screens of our televisions, we can see the whole world — but to see is to welcome a call; to know is to be stirred to love. Only when we accept to live as Jesus did, within his paschal mystery, can we truly move from La Verna to Greccio: from sharing in the world's wounds with Jesus to celebrating his birth authentically with Him.

This is what we hope for each of us — and for this we commit ourselves, so that from 2026, the commemoration of Saint Francis's death (which we call his transitus), we too may "pass over" into a peace that will never be merely just, the result of accords, dialogues, and forgiveness — the fruit, therefore, of Easter! This is our hope, this is the hope of the Church, and we glory in professing it in Christ Jesus our Lord.

A blessed spiritual journey to all — from La Verna to Greccio, in every home, in every heart!

Father Guido Fineschi, OFM
Guardian of the Sanctuary of La Verna

“You are peace! You are our hope!”

Christ, “the Word of the Father, so holy and glorious,” born for us — He “whom the most high heavenly Father, through His angel Gabriel, announced to the Virgin Mary, and from her womb received the true flesh of our humanity and frailty” — is our peace and our hope.

It is in this fragile Child, like all children, that St. Francis loved to contemplate our salvation. Above all other solemnities, “He celebrated Christmas with inexpressible tenderness and called the day on which God made a tiny infant, suckled at a human breast, the feast of feasts.”

In Jesus, God enters human history — and as St. John Paul II said, “a history of life made up of joys, anxieties, and sorrows; a history encountered by Christ, which, in dialogue with Him, resumes its journey of hope.”

In perfect harmony of thought, today Pope Leo XIV assures us in a Catechesis that “there is no history so marked by disappointment or by sin that it cannot be visited by hope.”

In the coming year, we will celebrate the Eighth Centenary of the Passing of St. Francis (1226–2026) — the anniversary of a death that speaks of Life, because in Francis, the “alter Christus,” we can contemplate the Mysteries of the Life of Jesus brought to fulfillment.

Two years before his death, already marked in heart and body by the stigmata of Christ and totally conformed to his Beloved, he exclaimed in the Praises of the Most High God:

“You are security, You are peace. You are joy and gladness. You are our hope. You are protector, You are guardian and defender, You are strength, You are refuge. You are our hope. You are our eternal life, great and admirable Lord, almighty God, merciful Savior.”

Twice Francis repeats: “You are hope.” The first time, we see it joined to sure trust — a pledge of peace and joy — because everything is in God’s hands; the second time, it is linked to salvation, for He is our refuge, defender, protector, our future of eternity.

Hope was already alive in the heart of young Francis, when before the Crucifix in the church of San Damiano, he prayed:

“Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart.

Give me right faith, certain hope, and perfect charity, sense and knowledge, Lord, that I may carry out Your holy and true command."

This prayer reveals his state of inner darkness, but also a radiance of light: the certainty that only faith, hope, and charity can truly illumine the heart and transform life; the conviction that all knowledge, by itself, is vain without the will to fulfill God's "holy and true command."

Pope Benedict XVI once said:

"In our many sufferings and trials, we also need our small or great hopes — a kind visit, healing from inner and outer wounds, a positive resolution to a crisis, and so on. In lesser trials, these kinds of hope may suffice. But in truly great trials, when I must make the definitive choice to place truth before well-being, career, or possessions, the certainty of true and great hope becomes necessary."

Human hopes, though good in themselves, are not enough. Without an interior passage from "human expectations and hopes" to "divine expectations and hopes," we cannot truly understand the Gospel, which overturns all earthly expectations. Then, God Himself will lead us from the sadness of disappointment to peace and joy; divine hope will shine as a radiant light in the darkness of our hearts and in the shadows of fear, war, and death that darken the life of the world.

So often, the Lord has granted the Saints the light of faith — the ability to discern the saving thread within events, to watch, like sentinels from the high towers of the City of God, for the faint yet certain signs of divine hope: the coming of peace while the world is at war, the unfolding of the eternal plan, the possibility of the miracle as the overflowing gift of God's heart, the certainty that "hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

It is this Spirit of Love that prays and hopes within us, that grants us the trustful surrender of children who cry out with confidence: "Abba, Father! I hope in You!"

As we approach the conclusion of the Jubilee Year and await Christmas, all of us — pilgrims of hope, or even wandering seekers of meaning and fullness of life — look to the future with confidence, together with Mary.

Through her, the message of the "Great Hope" reaches us:

"For a Child is born to us… and His name shall be: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His dominion shall be vast and peace without end."

The Poor Clare Sisters of the Protomonastery of Assisi

A Jubilee Message of Hope at Christmas

As we conclude this Jubilee Year, we find ourselves in a world that often seems devoid of peace. In times of turmoil and uncertainty, the message of hope carried by Christmas becomes ever more vital for all people of goodwill.

The essence of Christmas hope is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, whose life and teachings continue to inspire billions across the world. The event of His birth is not merely a historical moment, but a cosmic declaration that the true Light has pierced the darkness. The angelic proclamation to the shepherds—"Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10)—captures the very heart of the hope revealed at Christmas. This joy does not depend on our circumstances; it is a profound reminder of the divine presence that offers comfort amid life's trials.

Many, during this Jubilee Year, have experienced hope as a spiritual anchor. In a society often struggling with conflict, division, and despair, hope stands as a pillar of strength rooted in faith. The biblical narrative insists that hope is not passive; it is active and dynamic, calling us to engage with the world through the lens of love and compassion. Romans 15:13 proclaims: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." This passage invites us to seek hope actively, cultivating it through prayer and community.

Our faith community plays a vital role in nurturing hope. All our

communities, in one way or another, contribute to fostering hope—especially during the Christmas season. When believers gather to celebrate, they form networks of support and encouragement. The communal aspect of Christmas illuminates our shared human experience, reminding us that we are not isolated in our struggles. The familiar carols sung in unison, the sharing of meals, and the acts of charity all help strengthen the message that together we can cultivate hope, even in the darkest times.

Hope also endures amid global challenges. The world today faces numerous trials—conflicts, poverty, climate change, and social injustice. Each of these can lead to feelings of despair. Yet Christmas calls us to rise above despair, upholding peace and reconciliation in a broken world. The teachings of Christ urge us to be agents of change, promoting justice, caring for the marginalized, and creating environments in which all people can flourish. The Jubilee celebration has led many to reflect on a call to action: we are invited to live out the message of hope. We might ask ourselves: what does it mean to embody the hope of Christmas in our daily lives? It begins with our actions. Practicing kindness, reaching out to those in need, and offering forgiveness are concrete ways we can express this hope. Christmas is not only a time for reflection but also a summons to action. We must commit ourselves to building a world that reflects the peace preached by Jesus—a world where love triumphs over hatred, understanding over prejudice, and unity over division.

In our personal reflection, we are called to find hope within ourselves. Hope is not external; it fundamentally resides within us. It compels us to look beyond our immediate circumstances and to recognize the potential for goodness and grace within ourselves and others. Self-reflection during this joyful season allows us to face our fears and doubts, creating space for hope to blossom.

As we embrace the theme of hope this Christmas season, let us remember that the true message of Christmas is relevant to every person who embarks on a journey of faith and goodwill. We are continually invited to believe in the beauty of transformation and the power of love. This Christmas, may we carry forward the hope that is reborn—ensuring that it not only dwells in our hearts but also flows outward, into our communities and throughout the world.

As we celebrate Christmas, may we embody its spirit of hope, allowing it to guide our actions and interactions in a world yearning for peace. May this season bless us with renewed hope, creating a ripple effect of positivity in the lives of all whom we encounter.

Fr. Luca Gregory, OFM
Custody of the Holy Land

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Anno Santo
2025