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Ave Maria

Dear sisters and brothers!

Why do we leave our comfortable homes on the night of 24 December to go to church and celebrate the solemn liturgy of Christmas, the Mass during the night? Certainly, many of us will say: *This is not really a question. We do this every year. It's always been so!* Indeed, it does seem to have always been so. It seems that we're simply doing the obvious. Nevertheless, we might ask ourselves: *Is it really obvious that one should leave the house in the late evening, at night, and go out into the dark?*

It's not obvious, just as it was not obvious on that first Christmas night, which we remember and celebrate, that the shepherds should have roamed about in the dark of night, across the fields on their way to Bethlehem. The shepherds, who collectively were not well thought of at the time, only went because they had heard the Messenger of God relate a truly grand and incredible message: "Today in the city of David a Savior has been born for you, who is Messiah and Lord." (Lk 2, 11) – *There is a savior for you! Understand well: There is a savior for you!*

For us who are restless and defenseless, who don't know where we come from or where we are going, why we were born and when we must leave this world in the mysterious obscurity of death, this really is a great message: *There is a Savior for you; someone who is willing and able to heal you; a Lord to whom you can turn: Lord, listen to me; Lord, have mercy! He is a fortress of refuge in whom you can find salvation; he is the anchor of your life; a fixed point which shines like a star to which you can look for direction in life; a Savior, who warms like the sun, loves like a father and mother, and heals like a good doctor. Men and women, there is a Savior for you: Christ the Lord who is born in Bethlehem, the city of David!*

This message that the shepherds heard is the same message that we have heard. We have heard it from the messengers God has sent into our lives: our parents, who recounted to us from the time that we were children the very things that they had heard from their parents in their own time, the same message which was passed down from one generation to the next throughout the ages. It is the same message which the apostles proclaimed as great and good news upon leaving the Upper Room: *Hear and understand well: There is a Savior for you, he is Christ the Lord, who died on the cross and whom God raised from the dead; Jesus, born of Mary at the inn of Bethlehem!*

The Savior whom we honor as Christians is a Savior who has experienced human suffering and death, and whom the Father called to himself in the resurrection. The happiness of Christmas does not exist without the cross on which our Savior suffered. It is certainly true: for we believe that our celebration at Christmas is not about the birth of just any baby, but the birth of a baby who is truly God and truly human, and has shared and sustained our weaknesses, sufferings and sorrows. For this reason we leave our homes on this night and go to church. We are looking for our Savior, we are seeking our God!

And we are not the only ones who are seeking him. Everyone, even if they are not aware of it, is seeking him: those who search for truth are seeking him; those who hunger for happiness are seeking him; those who are deprived of love are seeking him; those who are homeless or without a country are seeking him; the good and the bad are seeking him, believers and atheists alike. All who carry in their hearts any kind of restlessness are seeking him. As long as we breathe, we seek him. If we

have eyes that are open, we are seeking him. As far as we are able to go, we seek him. To the extent of our ability to think, we are seeking him. All men and women are seeking him!

But not all find him. As the angels said: "This will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." (Lk 2, 12) – *You will find only a small, poor baby, wrapped with care like all babies, but lying in a manger!*

All people seek the God who saves, the Savior and Lord of all life. But only those will find him who are prepared to look for him where he may be found: for instance, in a new born baby, with ordinary parents, in a stable. No doubt, even the shepherds were disappointed at first when, after their long journey through the fields, they found only Mary, Joseph and the baby, and no one else. Even so, Scripture says: "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen and heard" (Lk 2, 20). *Groping along in faith, the shepherds began to believe that our great God, whom even the heavens cannot contain, came among them in the person of a poor baby!*

We too, when we go to church again on Christmas seeking the God of our life, will be able to find him only if we look for him where he may be found: He can be found in the poor stable of his church, in the sagging house of a divided Christianity; in his church, which is a church of sinners and thus often makes little progress in restructuring its stable. God can be found in the poor appearance of bread and wine. The child in the manger and the Lord of the cross both share the lot of the poor and despised. Our Savior extends his arms towards all who are without hope, who are bitter and unloved. Our Lord extends his hands toward the wars of our world, towards the offices of the powerful, the emptiness of the well-nourished, the desperation of humanity – towards our coldness, our world, our church, our time!

Therefore, my Christmas wish for all of us is that we might accept, as the shepherds did, the poor sign and recognize God in the stable, God in our small, sinful, defective and often pedantic church, God who suffered and died on the cross, God who lives alongside us, God in the appearance of bread and wine. I wish for us all to recognize the love of God who made himself so small that the poorest shepherd, the youngest baby, the worst sinner and swindler could entrust themselves to him, hearing and believing that wonderful message: "Do not be afraid, for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all people" (Lk 2, 10) – *Today, in the city of David a Savior has been born for you, who is Messiah and Lord. Whoever has ears will hear; whoever has eyes will be amazed; whoever has a heart will rejoice!*

I wish all of you, also in the name of all the friars of our General Curia community at San Marcello, a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Bengaluru (India), 30 November 2014,
First Sunday of Advent, Opening of the Year of Consecrated Life
Prot. 400/2014



fra Gottfried M. Wolff, O.S.M.
Prior General