



Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Servite Family!

Within a few weeks, both in the church and in our families, we will once again celebrate Christmas with great solemnity, Christmas gifts and all that is customary for a fitting Christmas. Through experience, we know that the feast will pass just as quickly as it approaches. In this annual cycle, I always ask myself a question: What will remain for me after the feast; what will remain after Christmas for my life of faith?

I remember, while still in my youth, that I found an answer to my question in the words of the Christmas reading:¹ “The grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly and devoutly in this age” (*Tit* 2, 11-12). What remains of Christmas is the grace of God, appearing in the infant Jesus, who saves us and teaches us to reject worldly desires and to live temperately, justly and devoutly! I was able to accept this response and tried to implement in my life. With the experience I have accumulated over the years however, today I must confess that I greatly misunderstood these words back then according to the mistaken doctrine of *Pelagianism*. I believed that I could come to a temperate, just and devout life through my own efforts alone.

At the same time it occurred to me, as if by gift, that my juvenile ignorance could be corrected. It was on the occasion of a spiritual retreat during high school, that the retreat master interpreted for us the Christmas message of Angelus Silesius:² “If Christ were born a thousand times in Bethlehem and not in you: you would be lost for all eternity.” Even to this day I recall his interpretation of the words “If Christ were born a thousand times in Bethlehem and not in you”. The words “in you” mean that something will happen “in us” at Christmas, that we should allow Jesus to be born “in us”. In summary, this concerns grace and our willingness to let God work in us and not simply our own volition! I understood this on the occasion of that retreat.

One must honestly admit that “tolerating or allowing another to act upon me” is not a customary model of behavior that would spontaneously excite people in our modern age. This is because we want to be active, not passive. We want to be seen by others as active people. Therefore, even as members and representatives of the Church, we concentrate our energies above all, and far too often, on the intellectual problems of faith in God and the organizational challenges of the Church and the need to act in response to these. At the same time, we continually risk reducing God and our relationship with God to a mere puzzle and the duty to organize and instruct accordingly. Our relationship with God, however, is neither a puzzle nor a problem of organization. To be in relationship with God means to always open our hearts with care, to enter into dialogue, to listen to Jesus Christ, the God “in us”!

¹ Second reading from the Mass of Christmas During the Night.

² Angelus Silesius: The Latin name assumed by the German poet Johann Scheffler (Breslavia 1624 – ivi 1677) at the time of his baptism as a Catholic. He studied at the Universities of Strasbourg, Leida and Padua where he received a degree in medicine in 1640. He converted to Catholicism in 1653 and was ordained a priest in 1661.

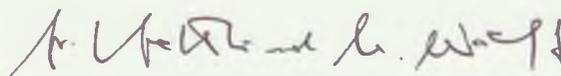
As testimony to the beauty and importance of the risky work of entering into relationship with God, which too often today is considered “old fashioned”, I want to cite a text from Fra Giovanni Vannucci,³ one of the eminent spiritual writers of our Order:

“It is not the philosophers who reveal to us the profound mystery of God, but Jesus Christ, the incarnate and crucified Son of God whom God raised up after death. Jesus Christ is the book of God, he is the treatise *De incarnatione Verbi*⁴ written in the flesh and blood of Man, who was the Son of Man and the Son of God. God always speaks to us through concrete things. He has never defined what He is in himself, but in Christ, the Saints and the Virgin we see what God is. Thus God does not ask of us words or sentiment, but the total consecration of our lives. And through our consecration and incarnation of the divine mystery, God wants to communicate his truth and the truth of humanity to us.

Think about it: the serene and smiling face of a friar, a friar’s deep humanity, reveals God to others. And revealing God, he also reveals to all what all people can be when they live out their full mystery, which is both an earthly and a heavenly mystery, human and divine, visible and invisible: the revelation of God in our flesh, in our human dimension, in our human profile. God must reveal himself in a new light, through new thoughts, new emotions, a different way of doing things, a radiance which only a completely religious person can possess. And this radiance is the humanity of God come to full fruition in a creature who believes in God and who fully and completely fulfills the mission to which s/he is called: to consecrate him/herself to God in the religious life.”⁵

Dear sisters and brothers, this is my Christmas wish for you: that we might once again allow Jesus, the Son of God, to be born in us: the Son of God who wants to reveal himself through new light, new thoughts, new feelings, a different way of doing things and the shining face of every believing and religious person!

From my heart, I wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, also on behalf of the brothers in our General Curia community of San Marcello, Rome!



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

Rome, 27 November 2016
First Sunday of Advent
Prot. 400/2016

³ Giovanni M. Vannucci (1913 – 1984): Friar Servant of Mary and Italian theologian. In 1967 he founded a new community dedicated to work, hospitality and prayer at the Hermitage of St. Peter at Le Stinche, in Chianti. His activities and teachings were of particular inspiration for the community of Servants of Mary at Le Stinche and Montefano (*Giovanni Vannucci Center of Biblical Studies*) and for the friar Servant of Mary and Italian theologian Ermes M. Ronchi.

⁴ Theological treatise *On the Incarnation*.

⁵ Giovanni Vannucci, *Esercizi Spirituali*, (Fraternità di Romena) Pratovecchio (AR), 18.