



MESSAGE FROM THE BROTHER GENERAL ANIMATOR

*"She gave birth to her firstborn son,
and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger,
because there was no room for them in the inn". " (Lk 2,7).*

Dear Brothers, members of the Nazarene Fraternities, Aspirants, Educational Communities, Christian Communities, Catechists and friends of the Sa-Fa Family:

Christmas is a big feast that needs a time of preparation. For example, Christians in India start Christmas a few days before with the custom of going around the houses singing songs to make known or remember the meaning of Christmas. In Latin America the Novenas del Niño are very popular in churches and homes to prepare for the Christmas celebration with prayers. In many places it is also customary to prepare for Christmas by making a gesture of solidarity with the sick or the needy.

The liturgical calendar proposes the time of Advent as a preparation for the great celebration of the birth of Jesus. This time seeks to give Christmas the true meaning of welcoming the God of love who is coming. Alongside spiritual preparation, it is becoming more and more common to follow commercial and environmental patterns that become insistent and demanding, drawing us into a frenetic dynamic of consumerism. Excessive materialistic attraction can easily lead us to lose the Christian meaning of Christmas.

Christmas festivities have both material and spiritual components, one without the other is incomplete. The full celebration comprises both aspects, spiritual and material, but finding the right balance in this time of materialism and hedonism is not easy. The spiritual aspect can be reduced to something irrelevant. Through this message I would like to share with you some reflections that will prepare us inwardly to live a special Christmas.

There was no place for them in the inn

"It came to pass in those days that a decree was issued by Caesar Augustus that everyone should be registered. And they went every man to his own city. And Joseph went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be listed with Mary his wife, who was betrothed to him and was with child" (Lk 2:1-5). We can imagine the town of Bethlehem with more people than usual, and Joseph and Mary arriving there too, perhaps on their first journey as a family.

The text quoted from Luke's Gospel suggests that no one was expecting them, and, like any stranger, they looked for a public place to stay. After knocking on several doors and not being answered, they found a place where people lived with the animals. There, they settled and in this poor environment the extraordinary happened: And *'she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn'* (Lk 2,7). God is welcomed into a small and fragile community, in the darkness of the night and in a stable, a place unsuitable for giving birth.

From a human point of view, it seems that neither the place nor what happened there is worthy of what we are celebrating. This is God's way of doing things. It had already happened in Bethlehem a thousand years before, that God chose the youngest son of Jesse to be anointed king of Israel by Samuel. Jesse brought his 7 sons before Samuel to see which one was chosen, but Samuel did not choose any of them and asked for the youngest, the one who was away from home tending the sheep. Finally Samuel anointed David, the youngest of the sons, the least strong, as king (1 Sm 16,1-13). What seems to be rejected by human criteria is chosen by God. God is inclusive, giving value to what does not seem to count.

Following the story of that night, in Bethlehem we meet other protagonists from the periphery. They are the shepherds, who received the announcement of the angel, who invited them to come and meet the Savior. The shepherds were nomads, socially unrecognized and even rejected, and to them the announcement was entrusted. This is God's strange way of doing things. He does not seek success or accommodate marketing. His predilection for the little ones and the poor is part of his message of love. It is the attitude of the father who takes special care of his weakest children.

To enter into the spirit of Christmas is to contemplate this way of acting of God and to understand this message in our lives. It is to see God in what does not seem good to us or what is not politically correct. Another story is possible, and it starts from smallness, from weakness. God does things from where we are, from the reality in which we live, even if it is not ideal; and he lowers himself to enter into the house of our life, so often poor and with a certain disorder. The name of Jesus is 'Emmanuel', God with us. God is not man's enemy as some people think, but He walks beside us and this means giving Him room in our hearts as a new manger to lie down in.

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those who are loved by him.

The angel's message to the shepherds reveals the profound content of Christmas. It is a sequence '*in crescendo*' that begins with reassurance: '*Do not be afraid*'. It then goes on to give the news: I bring you '*great joy to all the people*', that the child born '*is the Messiah, the Lord*' (Lk 2:10-11) and culminates in the song of the angelic choir: '*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those whom he loves*' (Lk 2:13-14).

Something new is offered that must be welcomed. We can remain like Herod, closed in on the established, afraid of change and looking out for our own interests. On the contrary, we can think that the future is accompanied by God, who recreates his love for mankind every day and wishes that the message he revealed through his Son can become reality. This is still his dream.

And this is the reason for our hope, which we have to maintain despite the fact that the general world picture is a challenge to this utopia of God. We live in a dramatic situation as a human family. Wars never seem to cease in different parts of the world, leaving thousands of dead, suffering and poverty. Likewise, terrorism, human, drug and arms trafficking mafias cause death, violence, fear and hunger. In spite of everything, we must sing or shout with the angels: '*peace to those whom the Lord loves*'. The peace of the angels is still a goal to be achieved.

Unfortunately, the situation that Joseph and Mary experienced when they could not find a place in the inn is still happening. Millions of people do not find a place in this world and are displaced from their land because of war and terrorism. We can also speak of injustices, which favor one privileged class and marginalize another part of the population.

The spirit of Christmas should lead us to work together to make the world more just, through education, pastoral care, awareness raising and solidarity. The Holy Family left the security of their home and took risks to welcome Jesus. In the same way, we too can open ourselves to welcome Jesus as a child, which means: welcoming the weakness of so many men and women, listening to the pain of so many victims, giving opportunities through our help in solidarity, being instruments of peace in all types of conflict, condemning wars, educating new generations in non-violence..... Our life, united to that of Jesus, must be a hymn to peace and love.

The Pope invites us to educate in fraternity and to make people feel like a human family. Our Nazarene and Taborinian charism asks us to heed the Pope's call. Living fraternity is a way of living the spirit of Christmas in everyday life. '*Solidarity and fraternity are elements that make our civilization truly human*' (Pope Francis).

The New Year 2025 brings us a Jubilee Year with the motto '*Pilgrims of Hope*'. And it reminds us that '*our whole existence is a pilgrimage of transformation in love*'. I therefore invite the whole Sa-Fa Family to make this pilgrimage of hope. The Church and the media will help us on this journey. It is up to us whether we want to go on the journey or whether we want to stay still, closed, alone.

May peace be the star that illuminates and guide to world destinations of the whole earth (Cardinal Parolin).

Merry Christmas 2024 and Happy New Year 2025!

Bro. Francisco Javier Hernando de Frutos. AG