



MESSAGE FROM THE BROTHER ANIMATOR GENERAL

***"The Word was the true light, which enlightens every man,
He came into the world, and the world knew him not.
He came to his own home, and his own received him not" (Jn 1:9-11).***

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

The time leading up to Christmas we call the season of Advent. It is the time of preparation for the Christmas festivities. Its aim is the immediate preparation of the heart to welcome the gift of God who visits us to stay with us. The reality we live in today is different, and the market with its advertising has invaded this space. Thus, long before the 24th of December, we are bombarded with an attractive offer of consumer products that lead us into a hectic rhythm of purchases and obligations.

In a moderately critical analysis, we can even say that the Child Jesus is losing visibility and significance to the popularity of Santa Claus, the Three Wise Men or other characters from the local tradition of these days that provide more commercial play. These are days that are filled with lights, presents, parties, food, traditions..., and we have to make a real effort to find a space in our lives where we can discover the true Christian meaning of Christmas. It would seem that to live these festivities is to comply with all the celebratory customs and that it does not matter what we celebrate but how and with whom we celebrate it.

From these premises, in congratulating this year's Christmas, I wish those of us who make up the Sa-Fa Family that we may find and follow the Christian path of Christmas. We can speak of an alternative Christmas, because it is difficult to combine frenetic consumption with silence, prayer, welcoming others, solidarity or attending religious celebrations. May it not happen to us as it did to the people of Israel to whom the Prophet Isaiah said in the name of the Lord: *"I have made myself found by those who did not ask for me; I have let myself be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am' to people who did not call on my name"* (Is 65:1). Or as St. John says in his Gospel: *"He came to his own home, and his own people did not receive him"* (Jn 1:11).

The need to make a journey

A glance at the Gospels that recount the birth of Jesus, it is striking that all the main characters set out on a journey, going from one place to another.

We see Mary who, when the Angel withdraws, after announcing that she is to be the Mother of the Saviour, sets out on a journey to the house of her cousin Elizabeth: *"Mary arose and went in haste to the hill country, to a city of Judah; she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth"* (Lk 1:39-40). Joseph and Mary, in order to fulfil the census decreed by Augustus, set out on their journey: *"Joseph also, being of the house and family of David, went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to the town of David, which is called Bethlehem in Judea, to register with his wife Mary, who was with child"* (Lk 2:4-5). It is in this coming and going, which seems normal and insignificant, that we see Mary and Joseph discover God's action in their lives, and it is at that moment that the extraordinary happens.

The shepherds, after the angel's announcement, *"said to one another, 'Let us go to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has told us.' And they ran and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger"* (Lk 2:15-16). Likewise, the Magi who had come to Jerusalem, *"When they had heard the king, they set out, and suddenly the star they had seen rising began to guide them until it came to rest above where the child was"* (Mt 2:9-11). Everyone makes a journey.

If we follow these main protagonists of Christmas, we learn to see with the eyes of God. It is in the everyday, the simple and the insignificant that a different story unfolds and is constructed, which fills these characters with joy, as the Gospels narrate. Christmas celebrates God's closeness to people, who, even without seeking him, can find him. We are before the God who makes a journey with us and on that journey shows us his love and the wisdom that will guide our steps. The question is whether we make the way with Him.

To enter into the true spirit of Christmas is to be attentive to the God who makes himself present in human realities, in joy and in pain, to be close to us. We must recover the personal Christmas, my Christmas, and not remain in today's social Christmas, so polluted and noisy.

Let us take the path of interiority, of silence... and let us see how God accompanies us. Jesus is the way and the goal. The shepherds, the kings, Mary and Joseph knew how to reach Him.

The incarnation of God is not a thing of the past

We see a great contrast between the popular Christmas songs and the stark reality of our world at the moment. We can ask ourselves how we can celebrate the Christmas that speaks to us of joy, love and peace when we see the dramatic situation that so many people are suffering. The list of armed conflicts, natural disasters, situations of hunger, displacement of migrants and refugees and the deprivation of human rights in so many peoples are the cry that cries out for a true Christmas.

God's commitment to man leads him to show solidarity with his destiny. Thus we see Jesus, the Son who becomes "flesh", as one more of this world. The path of his incarnation is one of "abasement", "submission", "humility". In the words of St. Paul: *"He emptied himself of his rank and took the form of a servant, becoming as one of many. And so, acting like a common man, he lowered himself even to the point of submitting to death"* (Phil 2:7.8).

From that first Christmas onwards, God does not keep his distance from the world, but accepts it in its total reality. He makes evil, suffering, anguish and sin his own in order to redeem, overcome, heal and liberate them. He shares his life with all forms of poverty. Jesus went so far as to say that whoever does evil or good to any man does it to Him. This is the great exchange that Christmas brings: He comes to us and accepts our misery so that we can take part in the divine life already in this world.

This way of acting of God and his Son Jesus leads us to see the love that moves them, to the point of becoming life in order to *"give life for all"*. The abasement is the concrete evidence of his love that becomes close to those who are the lowest and welcomes the most humble and the least of this world. Christmas leads us to contemplate the glory of God in the lowliness which is also beauty.

This is the mystery of which Jesus makes us participants: to teach us the wisdom of making us poor in order to enrich us with his richness, to make us supportive in order to show us human greatness, to make us love in order to savour the greatest gift of life. Thus, Christmas is the feast of love, a love that we receive, a love that we share and a love that we can offer.

Celebrating Christmas, a dangerous memory

Are there traces of a dangerous memory in our birth memory? It is Johann Baptist Metz who puts the question to us. The real Christmas questions us, tests us, challenges us. Metz claims that Christmas is not a fake memory or a pious and idyllic memory.

The memory of the birth of Jesus must be united with the memory of his life, which proclaims the Kingdom of God among men. It tells us that justice, peace, freedom, truth and love are possible. Jesus takes part for those who lack these values and for those who are open to seek this Kingdom. To live Christmas is to confront oneself with this proposal, to ask oneself about the acceptance of Jesus' project, to question oneself about one's personal contribution to this plan of God. This examination seems very necessary today.

I hope that those of us who make up the Sa-Fa Family know how to accept the profound message that Jesus brings us: He *"became flesh and dwelt among us"* so that we can participate in this divine life that leads us to joy, happiness and fulfilment by being brothers and sisters to one another. A utopia that must be remembered every Christmas, a necessary utopia, a dangerous memory.

Merry Christmas 2023 and Happy New Year 2024!!

Br. Francisco Javier Hernando de Frutos. GA