

## Christmas Letter 2023 to the Brothers Around the World

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***“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel” (which means, God-with-us). (Matthew 1:23)***

**“Christmas has always been about this: contemplating the visit of God to his people.” (Pope Francis)**

***“I was born, born for you, born in a cave, in December, in the cold, on a wintry night, in poverty and in solitude, unknown even to the poorest. Why was I born in this way? So that you may believe in my love, since my love for you knows no limit. As I have loved you so much, put all your hope in me. I teach you to love me... Ever since my birth I have shown myself to you and have put myself entirely into your hands. ... you have been able to see me, hold me, hear me, serve me, console me.... I did not give myself to you just at my birth for a few days or years, but I gave myself into your hands for ever, till the end of time.” (Brother Charles’ meditation on the nativity scene)***

Dear brothers,

Christmas greetings to you all!

How are you and your community celebrating Christmas this year? Are there new and creative ways in your celebration from last year’s? Is Christmas still the gentle, quiet and humble presence of the Emmanuel in our busy and loud world? Or do we give the market, tourism and entertainment industries the license to plan our Christmas celebrations? It would be good to take a look at our Christmas celebrations this year vis-à-vis the reality of our world today with all its lights and shadows. I wonder how do families in Gaza, Ukraine, Haiti or any place and people suffering from social unrest, extreme poverty and displacement celebrate Christmas this year? Is the reality of suffering more close to them than that of Christmas joy? We take a reflective look at our world and in interpreting the signs, we celebrate Christmas in a more responsive and appropriate way.

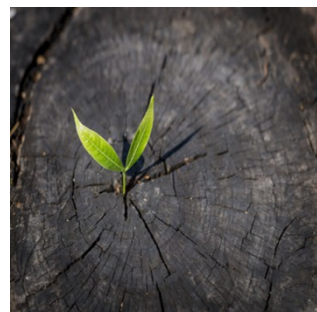
And what about mother earth? Christmas is not only for the human world but for the whole universe, including the ecological environment which is radically altered by the mystery of God-in-the-flesh. I wonder how are sister water, brother wind, sister bird, brother forest celebrating the season? Are the complaints about pollution, climate change, imbalance of the ecosystem depriving them of Christmas joy? For us who may be in the brighter side of the world, what would be our response to the invitation to celebrate the Emmanuel amidst the thundering noise of violence, greed, apathy towards life in all forms of our world today?



The virgin birth is not only a person but a path. Right in the very ground of our barrenness, vulnerability, helplessness as people and environment, traces of new life appear in the horizon, little manifestations of the Emmanuel break open our consciousness to give birth to new initiatives and shared dreams. As people of hope, we take a long, loving look at the world as the Father sees it when He gave the world its Messiah at the first Christmas. The world was not ready. He has to be born in the poverty of the manger, in the periphery of the village. This is not some sentimental or wishful thinking or a deus ex machina but a call to a radical, paradigmatic shift for the birthing of a new heaven and a new earth.

Christmas is a call to solitude of the heart. True solitude is recognizing, naming and claiming our poverty, our emptiness which is also our unlimited space for others. At the very core of our solitude, we encounter the Emmanuel in all men and women as brothers and sisters not only our friends but also those who kill, lie, torture, rape, and wage wars. They become our flesh and blood. When our hearts are full of the goodness of the Emmanuel and empty of fear, anger, indifference, greed, “we become a welcoming home for God and for our whole human family on earth.” (Henri JM Nouwen)

Ours is to wait, not passively though but actively. When we wait, we know that what we are waiting for is growing from the ground on which we are standing. We wait in the conviction that a seed has been planted two thousand years ago and that something has already begun. We are called to be present to the Kairos of Christmas with the certainty that something is happening where we are and that we want to be present to this moment minus the external features of the season. God has planted generously the seed of divinity in every human heart and in our world and we wait with firm conviction and joyful hope with Mary who sang, “the Almighty has done great things and holy is His name.” Blessed are we when we see what God wants us to see in this great season of Christmas.



Some Announcements:

There is a Month of Nazareth organized in the Philippines on July 1-26, 2024 for English speakers. Registration fee is \$400/participant.

Preparations are on the way for our World Assembly in Lulunta, Argentina in January 2025. In the coming weeks, you would be receiving letters from the international team so that we see, reflect, discern and walk together the direction, content and process of the Assembly.

Brothers, I thank you very much for your beautiful witness and firm resolve to follow Jesus more closely in the footsteps of Brother Charles. May our faithful

practice of the spirituality so free our hearts that the Emmanuel could give birth in us and in our ministry new and fervent ways of encountering the many faces of the poor today.

With my fraternal affection,

Eric