



A MORE AUTHENTIC CHRISTMAS

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This Christmas will certainly be remembered as different from the others. A Christmas in which, despite the most optimistic forecasts, we were obliged to limit in some way the traditional customs and gatherings. This will be a Christmas unlike others, but even without these traditions, that inner joy of Christmas cannot be taken away, paradoxically, even if we were to find ourselves at the centre of this pandemic storm.

Saint Francis taught us this in that description he gave to Brother Leone on what perfect joy consists: "If, when we shall arrive at St. Mary of the Angels, all drenched with rain and trembling with cold, all covered with mud and exhausted from hunger; if, when we knock at the friary-gate, the porter should come angrily and ask us who we are; if, after we have told him, 'We are two of the brethren', he should answer angrily, 'What you say is not the truth; you are but two impostors going about to deceive the world, and take away the alms of the poor; begone I say'; if then he refuse to open to us, and leave us outside, exposed to the snow and rain, suffering from cold and hunger till nightfall - then, if we accept such injustice, such cruelty and such contempt with patience, without being ruffled and without murmuring, believing with humility and charity that the porter really knows us, and that it is God who makes him to speak thus against us, write

down, O Brother Leo, that this is perfect joy."

This is how the inventor of the Christmas crib invites and conveys to us the way to discover the more hidden and authentic aspects of the feast of Christmas that, more than any other, speaks to us about the joy of a new beginning. The Church, in fact, at this time of year, invites us to meditate on the mystery of the Incarnation, an event in which He who is Life, in the fullness of time, took on human form, in order to partake in our lives. If we pause to think about this sublime humility of the Creator who, for love of us, became a creature, all words fail us in trying to describe our sentiments and gratitude.

If we were not distracted by so many desires and worldly interests, we would be able to see and open ourselves to the authentic meaning that comes from that manger in Bethlehem, from that Child shivering with cold, surrounded by poverty but warmed by love. By that God who, taking on human form, did not spare Himself in anything, even the most atrocious suffering, "becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross" (Ph 2,8), and always and only for love.

Christmas would not be "perfect joy" if we were to separate the manger from the cross. The manger being the beginning and the cross the completion of this single sublime mystery of our redemption. The mystery by which Almighty God taking on human

life, gives divine life to man.

This is the message that comes from the mosaic depiction of the nativity by Father Marko Ivan Rupnik, in our church dedicated to Saint Pio, that shows the Child Jesus with His arms outstretched as if extended on the cross.

This is what Pope Francis wished to indicate to us in the Angelus of 26 December 2013: "The liturgy brings us back to the authentic meaning of the Incarnation, by linking Bethlehem to Calvary and by reminding us that the divine salvation involved the battle against sin, it passes through the narrow door of the Cross."

We should listen to the wisdom of our holy fellow friar Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, who urges us to follow the way of the Gospel that leads to eternal happiness: "This heavenly Child, so meek and docile, wishes to instil in our hearts, through His example, these sublime virtues, so that a time of peace and love may spread in this lost and confused world. From the moment of His birth, He teaches us our mission that is to despise what the world loves and seeks" (Letters IV).

This Christmas let us free ourselves from the unessential. Let us give to ourselves and all those dear to us the greatest gift of all and which is to give first place to Almighty God, that God who chose to win our hearts by the tender gaze of a newly born child.



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