

Christmas - State of emergency - then and now!

How distant and unreal may Mary and Joseph, the Emperor Augustus have appeared in Rome in their everyday work as a craftsman in Nazareth. But: They have to go out, they have to take the arduous journey to Bethlehem, a journey a heavily pregnant woman would certainly never take voluntarily, and then look for accommodation in a completely strange, overcrowded city.

So far and unreal may have appeared to many of us in 2020 (you could call it an ANNUS Horribilis like the Queen of England) the threat of a virus from far- away China. And then: how much was our life changed within days in spring and especially now with the second wave!? Home office, short-time work, unemployment, looking after the children at home because the school is closed, bitter loneliness in hospitals, nursing homes and probably also at home!

Distance, distance, distance..... as different as the effects were and still are, for everyone it meant giving up familiar habits, trying new paths - also in pastoral care - keeping distance, enduring uncertainties.

GOD LOOKS CLOSE

Now we're going to celebrate Christmas, not yet knowing how? We hear the message: In the midst of such a mess JESUS was born in Bethlehem. All security, everything familiar, all human closeness has broken away for Mary and Joseph. AND: The birth of God's child took place in it. This is where the moment of greatest closeness between God and man occurs! This is the MESSAGE of Christmas: God loves people so much that he cannot stand distance from them. He seeks the greatest possible closeness by becoming human himself.

We are now celebrating this festival of GOD'S PROXIMITY at a time when we have learned to avoid closeness: Keeping your distance, hygiene and masks has been the trend for months. Many people have sorely missed closeness, the joyful hug, the loving handshake. Distance is the order of day, which unfortunately also applies to everyday church life and, above all, worship services, including Sundays.

In this situation, the Christmas message is now spoken to us. God seeks closeness to people. He will not let himself be stopped by circumstances like then in Bethlehem and today in the pandemic time! This commitment is valid, and we need it more than ever this year. God is close to us, not only at Christmas and not only when people are close to us. What a treasure in your heart if you can live in this consecrated faith right now.

So, it is worth asking: How can I keep this message in my heart and my thoughts, even if after the appearance of the Lord – the Three Kings – everyday life is again? Perhaps a candle, consciously lit in the Christmas days, can accompany you through the year and remind you again and again that CHRIST, the light, is near and present? As Christians we proclaim a God who is nearby. Especially when people are in loneliness, need and sadness, we can testify to them. HE is close to YOU, HE is your HOPE and your LIGHT! They will do that for us if we combine this message with affection, with human closeness – even if it could only be a letter, SMS or telephone. This demands our creativity and our love!

Christmas tells us: GOD didn't wait for it to be over. He did not wait for Mary and Joseph to return to the familiar Nazareth. God became man where his closeness was most urgently needed. And we who follow this child, should act then and there where people need us most urgently; even if it is tedious and has to be overcome. Even if it's far from perfect. If we act, it can still arrive, the message of the angels: Today is to you, today the Saviour is born to YOU, it is CHRIST, the LORD! And: HE IS CLOSE TO YOU!

I sincerely wish all this tangible closeness, joy and hope, but also the courage to live this message!

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CHRISTMAS MESSAGE 2020

Dear Friends,

It is not an understatement to say that the year 2020 has been difficult and eventful. It is one year in recent memory that will be remembered for a long time by people of all walks of life in this world.

The year will be remembered for many things but particularly for the Covid-19 pandemic that has wreaked havoc in millions of homes, workplaces and communities throughout the world. Deaths have occurred, national and personal economies have suffered, jobs lost, and worst of all families distanced from each other breaking social relationships. Personally, a most painful period for me during the pandemic was when I could not go near any of my grandchildren, an episode that I am sure many of you also experienced. Covid-19, a leveller of all peoples, has exposed our vulnerabilities as humans and the false and superfluous certainties around which we have lived our lives. Thankfully the search for vaccines and possible distribution has revealed in great measure our awareness to the fact that we are all brothers and sisters.

Apart from Covid-19, the world also witnessed in the year, a manifestation of what Pope Francis describes in his latest Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (FT14) as “the dark shadows of an ever more tightly closed world, where precious words like democracy, freedom, justice, and unity are manipulated and emptied of meaning”. And that is what appears to be the reality of our world today. For whoever thought the world would witness what is going on in the United States of America today? What is happening in that country as has happened many times in the so-called developing countries, is a microcosm of a globalized world which though appear to have brought humanity closer, has failed to unite its people; a globalized world which instead of experiencing greater openness and proximity is rather torn between international trade tensions, and safeguarding the environment. Our world is wounded by divisions along racial, tribal, gender and age lines, by broken relationships, economic deprivation and the winner takes all politics of nations. Rather than being an agent of development and respect for human dignity, politics has become a bane to the achievement of precisely the same goals. Under many political regimes, people continue to be exploited, the elderly no longer considered productive are discounted (FT18). Women and children continue to be trafficked into prostitution and sale of their organs while many migrants and refugees suffer indignities in receiving countries.

Friends, we all share in these realities of our world today. The good thing though is that as Christians we have hope in the God we serve, the God who continues to assure us that nothing can separate us from His love (Romans 8:35). So in spite of whatever challenges, we may have experienced during the year, we still look to the future with expectation to the joy and hope that the Gospel of Christ and His person brings. The scripture readings of Advent even as they call us to repentance of whatever our own actions and inactions may have contributed to the present situation in the world, point to this hope and joy that we can expect when Christ is “born” to us this Christmas. Let therefore our spiritual preparation for Christmas help to galvanize our faith into action such that we can be like the wise man who built his house on the rock and so was unshaken by the presence of adversities when they occurred (Mt 7:24-25).

And see how good the Lord is. It is in this year of gloom that the Holy Father, Pope Francis, continuing his teaching on practical Christian living, issued his powerful and vitalising encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, to urgently remind us of the universal brotherhood of man and therefore the need to live together as Brothers and Sisters, respecting the rights and dignity of all and being empathetic to our neighbours’ situations. In doing this and without ignoring any of the Covid-19 protocols, let this Christmas be a time to manifest our Christian identity to seek and find those forgotten by society, those needing consoling from deaths in their families, the excluded, the sick, imprisoned, the hungry and thirsty (Mat 25: 31-46) and bring whatever comfort we can afford to them.

Finally, I wish you and all your families Merry Christmas and a very happy and prosperous New Year. May the souls of all in our organization or their families who have been called home to God during this year, rest in peace. Amen

EDDIE PRAH KSG

PRESIDENT- UNUM OMNES