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Dearest Sisters and Friends,

Once again our celebration of Christmas unites us from all parts of the world, with our many different backgrounds, cultures and experiences, in the joy of a simple happening in a little town called Bethlehem. We rejoice at the birth of a child who is *Emmanuel – God with us*.

In the wonder of the first Christmas night God and humanity, the sacred and the ordinary, come face to face in the radiant beauty of a newborn child. God and humanity embrace and bring warmth to a manger, where poor shepherds and rich kings find themselves as friends. People are transformed by the power of God's grace, just as the world on that most holy night was transformed by wonder and joy. God has found a new home here: humanity with all its complications has become God's dwelling place.

"Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given" (Is 9:6). God gets closer and closer to us, touchable in a newborn child. This child comes to rule the world with justice. This child is what God looks like in human flesh, in our flesh. Christmas is about giving the world a glimpse of what the Christ child would really look like if we ever allowed him to be born among us.

"Mary wrapped her child in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn" (Lk 2:7) Jesus came into the world as a baby, helpless and poor but very much loved – an uncomfortable reminder of other children, who are not nearly so well loved or cared for. Perhaps never before in our lives have we had to live with the knowledge of so much violence to children: children beaten, children abandoned, children violated sexually, children unwanted, children starving, children murdered. We recoil at the very thought of it. We draw back, change the television channel, turn the conversation in other directions. It is simply too much to think about.



Nicolas Barré reminds us that Jesus himself "placed a child in the centre, the place of honour, among the apostles" (SR 1:2). At the Council of the Institute in Japan we renewed our firm commitment as an Institute to do all we can to ensure the care and safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults, as expressed in the document that you received recently or will soon receive. Christmas is a time to remember that every newborn child gives us another chance to make the world a better place for children and those who are most vulnerable.

As we kneel before the crib let us reflect on how many there are in this world for whom, like Jesus, "there is no room in the inn". Then we have to ask "why?", and 'why' is the most dangerous question of them all. *What does the question "Why?" bring to my mind?*



The stables of the world still house children whom the Christ child came to raise to life. At this time they stand at our door and beg for shelter. We are the people being asked to take

them into our minds, hearts and souls. *Who are the "little ones" in my life today, who are seeking comfort and warmth?*

If only we could really listen to God's word: "how beautiful on the mountain are the feet of one who brings Good News...heralds peace...bringing happiness!" (Is 52:7) Isaiah's promise of peace and happiness leads us to the crib, where we learn that God is with us from the first moment of life. That is the central message of the Incarnation – that God is with us. No amount of guilt or hesitation or laziness will cause God to turn away; no failing in the past will ever quell God's love for us. The miracle of the manger, the silence of the stable, speaks to our hearts of a God whose love we cannot earn – a love that is pure, freely offered and unconditional.

The simplicity and loving acceptance portrayed by the crib scene confronts us with the challenge to be vulnerable, open, willing and trusting as we face new things. It is a challenge to do our part to bring goodness to life, to nurture the impossible, to believe in the fragile and small things that make life worth living for everyone. The heart of the Christmas message is that God comes to us in small things and asks us to believe in our own smallness.

Often in our world today we are aware that, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "the people walk in darkness" (Is.9:1). Sometimes it is the darkness of an unknown future and sometimes it is the darkness of vulnerability, uncertainty and insignificance. However, through the miracle of Jesus' birth among us we have the assurance of the life and hope within us that springs up and flows outwards towards others.

We have all experienced vulnerability at some stage in our lives. It can be the most painful of experiences and yet the most fruitful. Sometimes our vulnerability can paralyse us and deprive us of our personal resources, even our self-esteem, making it almost impossible to cope with our limitations and physical or mental diminishment.

And yet, in hindsight, the experience of vulnerability is often very beneficial because it reveals the need to relate to others, recognizing the support and solidarity we need to move forward together in life. It reveals the joy of friendship and the truth that Jesus promised would set us free. *How have I lived through the moments of vulnerability in my life?*

Our vulnerability can also deepen our commitment to do something in our own lives that makes life better for others, whatever our smallness, however remote we feel from the problem. Commitment has nothing to do with our power. It has to do with our willingness. We know that God very often chooses the little ones – the shepherds, Joseph, Mary – to carry out life's great tasks.

Mary is a woman of faith; Joseph, a man of hope; Jesus, the child of Love itself. May we welcome them into our hearts this Christmas so as to make room for a deeper faith that God is with us; a firmer hope that we can rely on God's presence; a love inspired by knowing God's love for us.

Marie Agnès and Masako join me  
in wishing each one of you  
a very happy and peaceful Christmas,

*Marie*

