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Christmas 2017



Dearest Sisters and Friends,

Once again we have come to this special time of the year when we celebrate a very natural yet astounding event. God has come to his people in the birth of a baby. The simple story of Christmas is that our God has come among us in Jesus, born of Mary at Bethlehem in Judea, and that, in Jesus, God-is-with-us.

The story of Christmas is that we are loved and our sins are forgiven; that a light has shone in our darkness – a light the darkness could not overcome. God has sent his Son to be born among us. It is so simple and yet so incredibly wonderful. Each year we make the journey back to Bethlehem in our hearts to rediscover our own roots in the gift of God wrapped in swaddling clothes. It is a journey home.

Our Christmas card has been chosen to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the presence of the Infant Jesus Sisters in Africa. The sisters in Cameroon are taking a year of preparation before the celebration of this great event in May next year. The journey to Africa in 1968, a new continent for the sisters, echoes many journeys taken by the



Infant Jesus sisters since our foundation more than three hundred and fifty years ago. It was a journey into the unknown, undertaken with the courage and daring that continues to mark the missionary endeavours we are currently involved in with our many friends and collaborators throughout the world.

The beautiful African scene is full of welcome, shared joy and wonder. The shepherds are the first to hear the good news that the long-awaited Messiah has been born in Bethlehem. They come from the fields, which you can see in the background, and are the first to visit Jesus. They

were the people on the fringes of society at the time, regarded as outcasts. These simple, humble people follow the instructions of the angel in spite of their initial fear and set out immediately to look for the child, “*wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger*” (Lk.2:12).

Each year we hear again the ancient yet timeless Christmas story. Each year we retell the astonishing entrance that God made into our broken world and we are moved in the depths of our being by the constant surprise of God’s immense love. Something brand-new had happened: something original and fresh and pristine had been revealed; nothing would ever be the same again. God made the crucial choice to break the silence of the ages to give himself away in a Word. The most important Word that God has ever spoken took flesh in the womb of a teenage girl and like all human flesh was born as a fragile bundle of new life.

*“...we are moved in the depths of our being by the constant surprise of God’s immense love...”*

The mystery of God’s love was made flesh in a child. The length, breadth, depth and height of God’s love was somehow expressed in this little one. God was choosing to visit his people, not through the dreams and words of the prophets but in human flesh and bone. The God who abided in the highest heavens chose to live among us.

The Christmas story we hear each year is the same but we are different. Our world is different. Joy and sorrow, laughter and tears, have wrought changes, for better or for worse, in all our lives. But no matter what changes we have undergone, what losses we have mourned, what gains we have celebrated, the Christmas story speaks to us again of new birth and the possibility of our own rebirth. In our celebration of the birth of Jesus this year a new adventure in faith begins. A new approach to God is opened up for us, a new way of relating to each other is asked of us. It may be an old story, but it is one that is always pregnant with new hope.

God's message at Christmas is very clear. God speaks to us of *hope* and *tenderness*, as Pope Francis tells us. Hope is so important as of ourselves we can easily lose heart. But God always opens doors for us, he never closes them. He opens the doors of compassion, mercy and forgiveness so that we can lift up our heads again and go forward in hope, in his unswerving love.



'Do not be afraid of tenderness', Pope Francis tells us. In the helplessness of the baby we see God very close to us, in precarious circumstances, asking us not only to trust ourselves to him but also to express ourselves to him with all the gentleness and tenderness that is in our hearts. This is the Lord of love who invites us into a relationship of love. And in all our loving, we show our own

vulnerability and joy in the tenderness we have for each other. So too it is with the Lord, as the Christmas story makes so clear.

Christmas is for marvelling at what once took place, but it is also for continuing to give God flesh in the world. Telling the story means living the story. We become the story of Christmas for those who have never heard it or no longer believe in it.

The theme of the forthcoming Council of the Institute, "*Stay Awake! New ways are opening before us!*" reminds us to '*wake up the world*' and celebrate the joy of Emmanuel, God-with-us! God's love, made flesh in Jesus, takes flesh in each one of us and makes anything possible. Let us pray for one another in preparation for this meeting in Malaysia, that we may remain awake and alert to possibilities that we may not yet have dreamt of!

In the light of the Christ-child, at Christmas we seek to open our hearts again to welcome Christ into our lives, not simply to console us in our difficulties, but to teach us how to live each day. As Paul said to the young Titus: '*God's grace has been revealed...and taught us that what we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God...to live good lives...while we are waiting in hope...having no ambition except to do good*' (Titus 2.11-14).

Who could have known what the birth of this child would mean for Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the Magi and for all the people down through the centuries, including each one of us, who prepare every year for this sign of hope?

Let Emmanuel, God-with-us come to meet us at Christmas. Let us not go missing. Let him enter. Let him lead. Then we shall indeed be full of the joy of the knowledge and love of the Lord. Then we shall be ready to speak to others of the gift and consolation of our faith, inviting them to share with us in this pathway of life. This is the way of Christmas joy.

As we fall to our knees before the newborn babe of Bethlehem, let us thank him for all the people and all the gifts in our lives. His outstretched arms welcome us, always, into the embrace of his love. Oh! Come let us adore him!



Together with Kimiko, Maria and Noreen, it is my pleasure to wish you and your families a very happy and holy Christmas,

Marie