

ORDO FRATRUM MINORUM



Letter from the Minister general Christmas 2023



Serafico incanto, Carmelo Ciaramitaro

«This is the day the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad! For the most holy beloved child was given to us, and was born for us along the way, and placed in a manger since there was no room in the inn»

Office of the Passion XV, 6-7

To all the Friars Minor of the Order
To the Contemplative Sisters of the Franciscan Family
To the TOR Sisters, and our sisters and brothers attached to the Order.

«This is the day the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad! For the most holy beloved child was given to us, and was born for us along the way, and placed in a manger since there was no room in the inn »¹.

These are the words used by St Francis when he prayed with his brothers on Christmas Day.

During this Advent and Christmas 2023, I wish to do the same with you, dear Brothers and Sisters, in a world marred by darkness and the lightning flashes of war and violence. We think especially of the Holy Land where the Lord desired to be born poor and die poor, and where his agony still continues.

The above psalm, composed by Francis, begins with an invitation to joy, something that seems more difficult than ever today. Indeed, how can we be happy in the midst of so many signs of death and in the face of such an uncertain future? Do we even have the right to joy when so many are deprived of peace, and of life itself?

At this time, then, how can we experience and proclaim the joy of Advent and Christmas?

I believe that we are being asked to learn to recognise those things within us that prevent us from truly experiencing this joy and peace.

That is why I'd like to draw our attention to the presence within us of what our spiritual tradition calls eight evil thoughts – those attitudes that spoil our joy and peace.

Gluttony distorts our relationship with food, as if we could satisfy ourselves and find happiness by excessive eating and drinking. Not only that, but gluttony also stirs up *lust*, which warps our relationship with our bodies and with our sexuality, which is no longer experienced as a means of encounter, but of possession.

Wrath deforms our relationship with others, because it ties us to our own ideas and opinions, which we then defend at any cost. This reveals *vainglory* and *pride* in us, distorting our relationship with God and with everything we do, because we ourselves occupy all the available space.

¹ Office of the Passion XV, 6-7.

Our fear of death can make us want to hoard things, resulting in *avarice*, which is a distorted relationship with possessions and money. And another thought that warps our relationship with time and space is *acedia*, the dark evil that assails us at the noon-day of our lives, making us believe that some other place and different occupation will be better for us, and that no one understands this – *acedia*, too, puts us at the centre of everything. There is no joy if we live like this, and that is why *sadness* also besets us, damaging our relationship with time, and we tolerate it only because we have an aching feeling that everything passes.

I wanted to return to these roots of ancient evil within us, because the violence of terrorism and war, with all that it unleashes, brings us into contact with that deep well of thoughts and feelings that corrode peace and joy within us.

It is from this standpoint that we realise that we too bear responsibility for the world's evil, with its claim of taking the place of God. Evil is no joke. St Paul says that *something* is holding back the full revelation of the Lord «in the splendour of his coming»² and we do not know what or who it is. However, we do know that we are *strangers and pilgrims* in this struggle, and that we need to stay alert as we await the Lord's coming. That is why we are not frightened by the signs of the times in which we live, however tragic they may be. As we wait for the Lord, we take care to interpret them through faith, so that his love may transform our hearts and our actions, «that God may be all in all»³.

Let us therefore allow the Lord who is coming to illuminate this dark area in us and to open us up to the virtues that the Spirit instils in us. As St. Francis reminds us, these are *joy and simplicity, poverty, humility, charity and obedience*; it is these virtues that defeat evil thoughts and direct us towards the Lord⁴, so that the joy of faith and of following Christ bursts forth, giving rise to a life that is filled with light rather than being defeatist and sad.

This journey is possible by following the footsteps of Francis, who in Greccio welcomes the coming of the Lord in the Eucharist; «Behold, each day He humbles Himself as when He came from the royal throne into the Virgin's womb; each day He Himself comes to us, appearing humbly; each day He comes down from the bosom of the Father upon the altar»⁵.

It is the self-emptying of the Lord that opens up our way to the sources of peace and joy in union with all creatures. Indeed, in the Eucharist – in Christ and by the power of the Spirit – we can return to the Father a Creation that «groans in labour pains until now»⁶.

2 Cf. 2 Thess. 2:3-8b.

3 1 Cor. 15:28.

4 Cf. A Salutation to the Virtues, 10-15.

5 Admonition 1, 16-18.

6 Rom. 8:22

Peace, joy, and the groaning of creation constitute not a cheap joy, but the *perfect joy* that matured in Francis from his experience of Christmas at Greccio to the encounter with the Lord that he underwent at La Verna.

May this joy remain with us, and with so many people of goodwill at this time, as we approach the delight revealed to us in a Child born along the way, just like so many who are fleeing wars and hunger and injustice today.

This is a simple and true joy, which gives us a foretaste of what we will experience at the Lord's return, for which we pray:

Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus! We long for you and we ache because of your silence today.

Or is it that you actually come to us in the anguish of your absence? You are not far from us, but you allow yourself to be recognised. Give us Mary's faith, she who knew how to wait!

With my best wishes for an Advent and Christmas filled with the Lord's peace for all.

Rome, November 29th, 2023
8th Centenary of the approval of the Regola bollata

Your brother and servant,

Fr. Massimo Fusarelli, ofm



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Minister General

Prot. 112739/MG-98