



+ Rome, December 17, 2008

Dear Sisters,

Only a few days still separate us from Christmas. There is hardly another feast which touches heart and mind so much as Christmas does. The Christmas decorations and the Christmas carols contribute to this atmosphere which touches our feelings and emotions. All of this can contribute to opening our hearts for the mystery of the incarnation. But in our society Christmas has often been materialized. It is rather a feast of consumption. Instead of a contemplative time, the Advent weeks before Christmas are often hectic and stressful. On the feast itself many feel themselves empty and burned out. Surveys confirm that a good number of people no longer know what Christmas is all about.

But God knows. He wants to revive his image in us. Therefore Jesus let himself be sent by the Father; he comes to us as a child in order to be very close to us. “Who can understand this mystery?”

we sing in one of the Christmas hymns. How much dynamism we can find in Luke’s narration of the birth of Jesus! “The time came for Mary to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:6,7) And St. John says unambiguously: “He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him.” (John 1:11) We did not accept him!

No place for God – except in a feeding trough! The Son of God enters into the world in a stable. The art of the Eastern rite locates the birth in a grotto. Both are right. The stables around Bethlehem were normally carved into a rock and looked more like a cave, and we can assume that the feeding trough was a simple alcove in such a cave. The picture from Annegert Fuchshuber which I chose for this letter, shows a stable-cave. Mary with the child and Joseph sit in the corner of the stable where a donkey gives them some warmth. Mild, warm light flows on the right side into the stable and makes the whole room light. At the same time it generates an obvious contrast to the dark figure of the shepherd. But this light does not penetrate him mercilessly “Near the divine Child all that is dirty and crushed, the outcast and the disdained lose their unsightliness. Christ gives them new dignity and will transform them by his love.” (P. Anselm Grün) The whole posture of the shepherd shows awe, adoration. The woman and the child remain with reverence outside the stable. Thus the poor and outcast, those at the margin of our society are the first ones who could see the glory of God because they opened their hearts for him. (Cf. John 1:14)

Mary, with the child, and Joseph are sitting together at the darker side of the stable; only some light is shed on them. In this way the artist expresses a profound theological truth: The Son of God left the heavenly glory. “Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness.” (Phil 2: 6,7) “The heart of God, during the Holy Night, stooped down to the stable: the humility of God is Heaven. And if we approach this humility, then we touch Heaven.” (Pope Benedict XVI.)

The Depth Psychologist Carl Gustav Jung said once that we never should forget that Christ was born in a stable! That is an indication that God can only be born in us when we look courageously at the “stable” in us: at all that is in disorder, at the chaos in us, the shady sides, at all that we try to suppress, the dark and unpleasant part of us. “God wants to be born just there where all the ‘dung’ is in us. We cannot offer him a clean room, but rather the dirty stable of our heart. That is embarrassing. But it frees

us from the illusion that we would have earned the birth of God. God wants to be born in us simply because he loves us, not because we can show him something that we had accomplished... You can trust that you may be a home for Christ just as you are.” (Fr. Anselm Grün) Christmas is the promise that God will let his divine life flourish in the midst of the chaos of our stable.

What is our stable? There is a story about St. Jerome. As a young man he decided to live in the desert. But after a short time he fell into depression. When he was at rock bottom in his depressed state Christ appeared to him and asked: ‘Jerome, what do you give me?’ Jerome enumerated everything that he wanted to give the Lord: the solitude of the desert, fasting, vigils and many things more. Each time the Lord thanked him, but time and again the Lord added: “And what else do you give me?” Finally Jerome could no longer answer; he had offered everything, and still Jesus was not content. Jerome was helpless and sad. But Jesus looked at him with love and said: “You forgot one thing, Jerome; give me also your sins so that I can forgive them.” That is what the Lord wanted: to enter into the “stable” of St. Jerome. In all his answers Jerome had presented himself, his achievements. But by experiencing forgiveness, the focus was on Jesus and his message, and Jerome became the receiver.

Which answer would we give to Jesus? God does not want our independent effort, with which we can in no way redeem ourselves. Let us therefore go into the stable with the humility of the shepherds. Let us touch the humility of God, God’s heart! And let us ask him that the “smell of the stable” – St. Paul calls it the aroma of Christ (cf. 2 Cor 2:15-17) – will remain noticeable in us. “When people perceive this smell they know where we come from, where we belong, from what and how we live, with what we live, with whom we are connected. The oneness with Christ should be so much a part of us that nothing can eliminate it. Maybe the healthy stable’s smell of the Son of Man and our personal faith in him which is not ashamed of the stable in which the author of our faith was born, is suited to minimize or even to stop our self made comfort and activity. May we be recognized as Christians by the distinctive Christian and ecclesiastical ‘smell’!” (Bishop Franz-Josef Bode)

I want to close with a short prayer of Mother Pauline, that in some way – in the language of her time – summarizes the above: “Jesus! Who could believe that he, who intended to bring the whole world and its teachings under subjection was born in a stable, in a manger!... Christ and the world will always be in opposition; what the world exalts, is nothing to him; what he esteems, the world scorns. Therefore, decide with whom you will stand.” (Retreat 1846)

Information:

- First of all I want to thank you for your prayers during my two-months stay in Uruguay and Chile. In Montevideo I could accompany the Sisters when the Motherhouse was handed over to the Bishop of the Diocese. Many friends participated in the last Mass. Afterwards Sr. María del Rosario handed over the key to the Bishop. It was a moving moment, marked by the pain of leaving and at the same time by deep gratitude to God for all the blessings which so many Sisters had experienced during the more than 80 years. The Sisters of the Motherhouse are now one community with the Sisters of the Colegio *Inmaculada Concepción* and *Betania*, the home for the elderly Sisters. They chose a new name: Convent *María Inmaculada*. The former Motherhouse shall serve, as the Bishop said during the homily, as a house of prayer, silence and adoration, for which the Sisters are very grateful.
- I also want to thank for the many congratulations for my Birthday, especially for all the prayers and Holy Masses. May God reward all of you abundantly.

In the joy that the coming of the Lord is near I greet you together with all the Sisters in Villa Paolina,

Your grateful *Sr. Adalberto*