

1 January 2020

LETTER FROM THE GENERAL RESPONSIBLE TO THE BROTHERS ALL OVER THE WORLD

“A child is born for us, and a Son is given to us...” (Isaiah 9:5)

Beloved brothers,

I am so sorry that this Christmas letter comes to you as a new year's message. It's just that in our diocese at the moment, I am asked to do a couple of sensitive ministries that many at times, I lose my balance. **Wresting** with evil and all its complex shadows that damage persons, relationships and institutions like the church, I repeatedly struggled to fall into the hands of a loving God for light, inner peace and love. But at times, I feel sad, angry and helpless. And so, by the grace of God, I am here, better late than never. Allow me to embrace you with warm greetings of joy in your local fraternities, dioceses, country and continental fraternities. Though many of you are still without faces to me but I continue to whisper each of your names before the Beloved. (Thanks to our directory but it needs updating). Last year, I was privileged to have met brothers from Haiti, Dominican Republic, Southeast USA, South Korea and Myanmar. In a special way, the Haiti meeting of the Association of the Spiritual Family of Charles de Foucauld last April has both grounded and expanded my knowledge of the Spirituality and Tradition. Thank you, sisters and brothers for the hospitable welcome, brotherly exchanges and humble witness.

I would like to start with the first question that Yahweh asked Adam in Genesis: where are you? I ask this question periodically just to check how grounded am I with my reality. Reality is not really mine but God's reality in me and in the world and how free or unfree am I in responding to it. Adam was unfree, afraid of his nakedness, hiding from God, guilty of his sin. Without his knowing it, he operated from a distortion that alienated him from God and from his truth. From Adam came forth a whole “cracked” humanity. Yet, the prophet Isaiah prophesied about the coming of the new Adam: “a shoot springs from the stump of Jesse, a scion thrusts from his roots: on him the spirit of the Lord rests...” (Isaiah 11:1). There is a new humanity that is born from a tree that is cut from its roots - a humanity not hostages by evil but “divinized,” restored to its original goodness. The crack is still there not anymore as a block but as the only opening for the flow of God's grace to come in. And so, we pray, “O God... grant that we may share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” (Christmas, Collect).

Pope Francis has enabled us to look again at the nativity scene with his apostolic letter, *Admirabilis Signum*. The most admirable sign is that a humble infant God entrusted himself into the hands of a broken humanity. While most of humanity was not ready, the shepherds, animals, the manger were ready. They represent humanity receiving God in its lowest poverty, brokenness, imperfection, filthiness and by this radical act of self-donation, we become what we receive. This is pure divine initiative. The “manger” of our hearts, hardened and torn by evil in all its forms, both structural and personal when held before God becomes a humble yet prophetic space for encounter, dialogue, healing and hospitality with the many **disguised** faces of the Emmanuel today.

Allow me to bring into the picture Bro Charles, his wild life, excessive behavior, restless energy, passionate letters. He spent all his life trying to ground himself on the Mystery of the Incarnation. “Lord, if you exist, let me know you.” His was a cry for an experiential knowledge of God. He **wrestled** with the Mystery. **And in God's gentle and patient ways, he led him into a liberated response to the forgiving love**

of God. "Now that I know that there is a God, I cannot but give my whole life to him." A further growing down into the Mystery made him say these words, "my way is always to seek the lowest place, to be as little as my Master, to walk with him step by step as a faithful disciple. My life is to live with my God who lived this way all his life and who has given me such an example from his very birth." Jesus did nothing other than to go down and this marked Bro Charles permanently. The radical littleness of God at the Incarnation bore fruit to a life of further growing down into the radical humility of God in Nazareth. From Bethlehem to Nazareth, two foundational mysteries of God revealed in the life of Jesus and when we get this right, in the footsteps of Bro Charles, our lives, our way of doing mission as diocesan priests and the way we see the world is changed forever.

Before the Mystery, may I invite you to hold the complex realities of our local, country, regional and international fraternities, our dioceses, our church and our world. We have already seen some of these in Cebu but there is a need to see them with new eyes and respond with new enthusiasm and hope. The unassuming humble God of Nazareth may have subtle invitations for us in these realities.

In the April gathering of some 20 members of the Association, we learned of Haiti as a poor country but rich in faith. Our Little Brothers and Little Sisters of the Incarnation have a very prophetic and concrete presence in the lives of the Haitians in agriculture, education, livelihood programs, social services. Yet, corruption in the political system is making the country still in a dark tunnel of poverty, uncertainty and unrest. (As of the moment, the situation is even getting worse). Frs. Jonas Cenor and Charles Louis Jean, former little brothers of the Incarnation started the fraternity with 3 brothers in 2015. Fr. Fernando Tapia has visited and invited them to the Pan-American Meeting in 2017. With occasional visits from Fr. Abraham Apolinario, they continue to look for possibilities to meet regularly. The problem is not only distance but more so, the political climate is making travel dangerous. Where is God inviting us?

Our membership in the Association is a gift. I am in awe at how Bro Charles has inspired so many charisms and missionary work in the Church and some are still coming in. We could not set aside, however the tensions that this diversity brings. But these tensions could be life-giving when they are seen in the bigger agenda of the Kingdom. We all are invited to drink again and again from the same Spirit so that we can all walk together in harmony. The Association, though is asking for our more active involvement in terms of correspondence and attending meetings. I am handicapped in the French language and so I have invited Fr. Matthias Keil to represent us.

The fraternity in Santo Domingo and Santiago is very alive yet getting older. Pioneer member and retired Bishop, Rafael Felipe, his presence and life-witness is like a lighthouse to both clergy and seminarians of the diocese of Beni. He has been introducing the fraternity to the seminarians and had preached a couple of priest retreats on the Fraternity. Fr. Lorenzo, a very dynamic priest of a small parish lives in a semi-monastic community of priests, sisters and seminarians. Fr. Angel Marcano, however, asks the question that still seeks for answers: why after 30 years, we have not grown? Where is God inviting us?

I was privileged to have attended the 40th anniversary of Fr. Jerry Reagan in Toybee Island, Georgia, USA in May. His rectory is a fraternity house where priests could come and spend the night. He drives for 2 hours every month to Augusta to meet with the brothers, including Fr. Peter Clarke who is already 91. Starting with adoration, then review of life and ending with an agape, their meeting has been very regular and intimate that when a brother decides to leave, it leaves the fraternity fragile. With no new member, the fraternity is even more vulnerable.

The fraternity in South Korea is young and vibrant. Fr. Paul, who has lived in Tamanrasset for some time, started the fraternity in 1994 with Fr. Philip Yoon and is joined in by mostly young pastors. Christianity in Korea is very unique because it is laid on the foundation of the blood of thousands of martyrs who are mostly lay people. The brothers contribute from their personal money in order to put up a house where they could meet for the monthly meeting. Just like many, they struggle with desert day, review of life and the English language.

Seeing Frs. Eugene and Matthew and how they live, the fraternity in Myanmar has an ascetic face. The majority Buddhist religion made prominent by the presence of pagodas everywhere and the wearing of slippers (not shoes) make living in Myanmar naturally simple. Asking a non-JC priest, however, about his perception of the fraternity, his answer has disturbed me, "I cannot be honest with my answer in front of them." **What is the underlying face of the fraternity? Where is God inviting us?** The brothers, though, struggle with finding regular time for meeting, desert day and review of life.

Cardinal Benjamin Stella, the prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy in Rome has written me a letter through Fr. Aurelio, expressing his deep closeness with us and that we may "live afresh and with joy our mission according to the guiding principles" of the Holy Father. He, however, spelled out some concrete challenges - that we may take seriously the Nazareth month; that our fidelity to the means of spiritual growth ad intra is a necessary requirement for authentic mission ad extra; that our going out to the peripheries needs to be accompanied by our on-going conversion in order to bear fruit. The international team is scheduled to meet with the Cardinal in Rome in July this year.

In our team meeting last October, we, your brothers in the international team have discerned a major path that we need to take. We train a team of itinerant priests who will introduce the Fraternity Week (modeled after Brazil) to 4th year-theology seminarians, young priests and even make it available as annual retreat for priests. We need to write to the local ordinaries and we are starting this venture in Asia.

Finally, my gratitude to the financial acumen and hard work of our two Matthiases – Fr. Matthias Keil of Austria, our general treasurer and Fr. Matthias Fobe of Germany, our financial consultant. We have now a new bank account under 2 signatories – Fr. Matthias Keil and myself. Speaking of finances, the international team has agreed that brothers who need assistance to attend the Month or meetings abroad they need to be first supported by the local and country fraternities and only then will the international fund be asked to help out after due consultation with continental responsible. This is to put a stop to a **sub-culture of entitlement and** using the fraternity as a passport to travel abroad.

Brothers, Christmas is the opportune time for us to give birth. We move forward to the new year by looking back at the Father who gave us Jesus. We too need to give birth to our simplicity of life, joy of being, humility, loving compassion to poor. Side by side, together as brothers and friends, we walk by faith not by sight for our on-going configuration into Jesus' life and ministry as inspired by Brother Charles and for our life-giving mission work with God's beloved people.

Kindly offer a prayer for me, your inefficient brother-responsible.

With my fraternal embrace, Eric Lozada