

LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO BISHOPS ON THE FEAST OF THE HOLY INNOCENTS

Dear Brother,

Today, on the feast of the Holy Innocents, as the words of the angel to the shepherds still resound in our hearts – “I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour” (Lk 2: 10-11) – I feel the need to write to you. We do well to listen to that proclamation again and again; to hear over and over again that God is present in the midst of our people. This certainty, which we renew each year, is the source of our joy and hope.

In these days we experience how the liturgy leads us to the heart of Christmas, into the Mystery which gradually draws us to the source of Christian joy.

As pastors, we are called to help foster this joy among the faithful. We are charged with protecting this joy. I ask you once again that we not let ourselves be robbed of this joy, for we can be disillusioned at times, not unreasonably, with the world around us, with the Church, or even with ourselves, and feel tempted to indulge in a certain melancholy, lacking in hope, which can lay hold of our hearts (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium* 83).

Christmas is also accompanied, whether we like it or not, by tears. The Evangelists did not disguise reality to make it more credible or attractive. They did not indulge in words that were comforting but unrelated to reality. For them, Christmas was not a flight to fantasy, a way of hiding from the challenges and injustices of their day. On the contrary, they relate the birth of the Son of God as an event fraught with tragedy and grief. Quoting the prophet Jeremiah, Matthew presents it in the bluntest of terms: “A voice is heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children” (2:18). It is the sobbing of mothers bewailing the death of their children in the face of Herod’s tyranny and unbridled thirst for power.

Today too, we hear this heart-rending cry of pain, which we neither desire nor are able to ignore or to silence. In our world – I write this with a heavy heart – we continue to hear the lamentation of so many mothers, of so many families, for the death of their children, their innocent children.

To contemplate the manger also means to contemplate this cry of pain, to open our eyes and ears to what is going on around us, and to let our hearts be attentive and open to the pain of our neighbours, especially where children are involved. It also means realizing that that sad chapter in history is still being written today. To contemplate the manger in isolation from the world around us would make Christmas into a lovely story that inspires warm feelings but robs us of the creative power of the Good News that the Incarnate Word wants to give us. The temptation is real.

Can we truly experience Christian joy if we turn our backs on these realities? Can Christian joy even exist if we ignore the cry of our brothers and sisters, the cry of the children?

Saint Joseph was the first to be charged with protecting the joy of salvation. Faced with the atrocious crimes that were taking place, Saint Joseph – the model of an obedient and loyal

man – was capable of recognizing God’s voice and the mission entrusted to him by the Father. Because he was able to hear God’s voice, and was docile to his will, Joseph became more conscious of what was going on around him and was able to interpret these events realistically.

The same thing is asked of us pastors today: to be men attentive, and not deaf, to the voice of God, and hence more sensitive to what is happening all around us. Today, with Saint Joseph as our model, we are asked not to let ourselves be robbed of joy. We are asked to protect this joy from the Herods of our own time. Like Joseph, we need the courage to respond to this reality, to arise and take it firmly in hand (cf. *Mt 2:20*). The courage to guard this joy from the new Herods of our time, who devour the innocence of our children. An innocence robbed from them by the oppression of illegal slave labour, prostitution and exploitation. An innocence shattered by wars and forced immigration, with the great loss that this entails. Thousands of our children have fallen into the hands of gangs, criminal organizations and merchants of death, who only devour and exploit their neediness.

To illustrate this point, there are at present 75 million children who, due to prolonged situations of emergency and crisis, have had to interrupt their education. In 2015, 68% of all persons who were victims of sexual exploitation were children. At the same time, a third of all children who have to live outside their homelands do so because forcibly displaced. We live in a world where almost half of the children who die under the age of five do so because of malnutrition. It is estimated that in 2016 there were 150 million child labourers, many of whom live in conditions of slavery. According to the most recent report presented by UNICEF, unless the world situation changes, in 2030 there will be 167 million children living in extreme poverty, 69 million children under the age of five will die between 2016 and 2030, and 16 million children will not receive basic schooling.

We hear these children and their cries of pain; we also hear the cry of the Church our Mother, who weeps not only for the pain caused to her youngest sons and daughters, but also because she recognizes the sins of some of her members: the sufferings, the experiences and the pain of minors who were abused sexually by priests. It is a sin that shames us. Persons responsible for the protection of those children destroyed their dignity. We regret this deeply and we beg forgiveness. We join in the pain of the victims and weep for this sin. The sin of what happened, the sin of failing to help, the sin of covering up and denial, the sin of the abuse of power. The Church also weeps bitterly over this sin of her sons and she asks forgiveness. Today, as we commemorate the feast of the Holy Innocents, I would like us to renew our complete commitment to ensuring that these atrocities will no longer take place in our midst. Let us find the courage needed to take all necessary measures and to protect in every way the lives of our children, so that such crimes may never be repeated. In this area, let us adhere, clearly and faithfully, to “zero tolerance”.

Christian joy does not arise on the fringes of reality, by ignoring it or acting as if it did not exist. Christian joy is born from a call – the same call that Saint Joseph received – to embrace and protect human life, especially that of the holy innocents of our own day. Christmas is a time that challenges us to protect life, to help it be born and grow. It is a time that challenges us as bishops to find new courage. The courage that generates processes capable of acknowledging the reality that many of our children are experiencing today, and working to ensure them the bare minimum needed so that their dignity as God’s children will not only be respected but, above all, defended.

Let us not allow them to be robbed of joy. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of joy, but guard it and nourish its growth.

May we do this with the paternal fidelity of Saint Joseph and guided by Mary, Mother of tender love, so that our own hearts may never grow hard.

With fraternal affection,

FRANCIS

*From the Vatican, 28 December 2016
Feast of the Holy Innocents, Martyrs*

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