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Letter of the Superior General: Advent 1999

Robert P. Maloney C.M.

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To the Members of the Congregation of the Mission

My very dear Brothers,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

Last year we followed Matthew's Magi as they journeyed to worship the newborn king. On the Lucan stage no Magi appear. The journeyers who arrive at the manger at Christmas are shepherds. Their story unfolds in three acts, all of which foreshadow significant future events.

In the first act (2:8-12), an angel, from whom the glory of God shines out, appears suddenly and recites what seem to be the words of a royal proclamation: "I announce to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today, in the city of David, a savior has been born to you who is Messiah and Lord." This is Luke's first mention of the good news, a theme he loves. But the proclamation is filled with irony. The whole world is in movement because Caesar Augustus has decreed that a census should be taken. Yet Luke proclaims that Jesus, not Augustus, is the savior of the world and the source of peace. Even more ironic, the angel announces his message not to the powerful Augustus, not to Quirinius, the governor of Syria, but to shepherds keeping a night watch over their flock. Luke will return to this theme again and again: the poor have the good news preached to them (4:18; 7:22).

The second act (2:13-14) involves a sharp change in music, lighting, and casting. Suddenly countless angels appear singing a resounding song of praise: "Glory to God in the highest heavens, and on earth peace to those on whom God's favor rests." The irony this time is tragic. Luke's readers would surely have recognized the similarity between this refrain of the angelic choir in the infancy narratives and the praise of the fickle crowd as it welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem where he will die (19:38): "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest." From the beginning of Luke's account, the shadow of violent death falls over the Prince of Peace.

In the third act (2:15-19), the shepherds set off in haste, find Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, and begin to repeat the angelic message to all. Luke is, of course, emphasizing that the poor themselves are now proclaiming the good news. But one suspects some Lucan irony here too. People's reaction to the shepherds' startling message is amazement (2:18): "All who heard it were amazed," but were they fickle and was their joy fleeting? Luke mentions only Mary as "keeping all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (2:19).

Finally, in a Lucan postscript (2:20), the shepherds, who were first hearers and then proclaimers, become pray-ers. They return home praising and glorifying God for all that

they have heard and seen. Few themes are dearer to Luke than grateful prayer. In fact, he ends his gospel with a similar refrain: “They returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple praising God” (24:53).

As we celebrate this final Advent of the second millennium, let me propose to you three Vincentian reflections.

- The angel makes it very clear that the news he is proclaiming is joyful. To reinforce the point, Luke brings a whole heavenly chorus on stage to sing glory to God. As evangelizers, are we bearers of joy? Is our presence among the poor “good news”? Do we know how to *celebrate* the Lord’s coming? Is it clear that we are happy, like the shepherds, to make known the message we have been “told about this child” (2:17)? Advent and Christmas are seasons of profound joy. Do we know how to share in the joy of the poor in these days and add our own to theirs?
- The choir of angels prays for peace. The century now ending has had a very bad record in that regard. It has witnessed two world wars and the invention of weapons capable of destroying the human race. The final decade of the millennium has seen renewed genocide on several continents, culminating this year with the tragedies in Kosovo and East Timor. Of course it is the poor who suffer most from war. As a Vincentian Family, we will surely be praying for peace as a new millennium dawns. May I also ask you to teach and preach peace. Reconciliation played a key role in St. Vincent’s mission to the poor. This took the form not only of the sacrament of penance, but also of healing rifts among families or within villages. Knowing the price that the poor were paying for war within France, Vincent also went to the Queen, to Richelieu, and later to Mazarin to appeal for peace. I hope that we his followers will have the courage to make similar appeals as the proliferation of arms continues to rob the poor of much needed resources and puts their lives and ours in peril.
- Having played their important role, the shepherds disappear. Like the Magi, they never return in the gospels. In fact, Luke subtly tell us within the shepherds’ story that only one figure bridges the gap between the infancy narratives and Jesus’ public ministry, Mary his mother. It is she who “kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart” (2:19). So that we do not miss the point (!), Luke repeats it almost verbatim later in the same chapter: “His mother kept all these things in her heart” (2:51). One of my profoundest hopes for our Vincentian Family, at the dawn of the third millennium, is that we, like Mary, be profound meditators. That is the way Luke describes the mother of Jesus not only in this shepherds’ story but elsewhere too. St. Vincent talks again and again of the importance of meditating, of listening to the word of God, of pondering the meaning of events, of discerning what God is asking of us through the cries of the poor. My sincere Advent prayer is that we, whose charism so clearly emphasizes active, effective, practical service of the poor, will also be faith-filled “meditators,” men and women who are always grappling to know what God is saying in word, events, and persons.

Those are my thoughts this Advent. With you, and with the choir of angels, I sing: “Glory to God in the highest heavens,” and I join you in praying for peace for his people on earth.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General