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Letter of the Superior General: Advent 2000

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To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

Over the last several years, we have meditated together on the striking cast of characters that walk across the Advent stage: Mary the Mother of Jesus, listening attentively to the word of God and responding to it; Joseph her husband, peering into the transcendent darkness with faith; John the Baptist, crying out with a herald's voice and preparing the way of the Lord; the Magi, seeking life's ultimate meaning and following their star; the shepherds, symbolizing the poor, receiving and proclaiming the good news of the coming of the Lord. But, as in most great dramas, there are other elements besides the cast that enliven the scene. This year, let me highlight two: song and silence.

1. The Advent Songs

Luke provides us with four canticles which have become a daily part of Christian liturgical prayer: the Magnificat (1:39-56); the Benedictus (1:67-79), the Gloria in Excelsis (2:13-14), and the Nunc Dimittis (2:28-32). We sing these songs from the infancy narratives so often that it is easy to forget their origin. They are Advent songs, proclamations of liberation, hymns of praise for the wonderful works of God.

For lack of space, let me comment briefly only on the first of the canticles, the Magnificat. It is really a duet. In a vividly colorful scene, Luke brings Mary and Elizabeth together for the event that we call "the Visitation." Filled with the language and faith of the prophets and conscious of the dawn of a new era, they occupy center-stage like sopranos in an opera by Verdi and sing the praises of God, while John the Baptist leaps with joy in his mother's womb (Luke uses the verb for sheep leaping in a field). The evangelist tells us that both singers are filled with the Holy Spirit, so they sing!

Mary's canticle is much more famous than her cousin's, but Elizabeth's song too is of great importance, since it highlights a fundamental theme in Luke's gospel, repeated again and again: "Blessed is she who believed that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled." Luke states this same thesis in other places: Mary, the ideal disciple, listens to the word of God, meditates on it, and puts it into practice (cf. 1:38, 8:21, 11:27-28).

The Magnificat is a mosaic of Old Testament passages. It proclaims God's greatness with exuberant joy and confidence, and, in poetic language, capsulizes Luke's point of view. It expresses his radical faith that God turns the world upside-down. This song, so popular among the oppressed today, is a freedom cry. It gives voice to the piety of the poor of Israel, the lowly, the sick, the downtrodden, the widows, the orphans, those who cannot trust in their own strength and have come to rely in utter confidence on God. Mary's canticle is like an overture, introducing in musical language right at the beginning of the gospel the fundamental themes that underlie the faith of the humble, now focused on Jesus. For Luke, Jesus comes blessing the outcasts, the famished, the marginalized, the persecuted (6:20-22); he himself is persecuted and slain (23:32-49); yet he entrusts himself into God's hands (23:46) and God, faithful to his servant, raises him up and exalts him as savior (Acts 5:31), coming, as promised, from David's posterity (Acts 13:23). One can imagine the abandoned, the refugees, the captives, the slaves, the hungry of Luke's day — and surely of our own day too — identifying their sufferings with those of their slain but risen Lord and singing a song of hopeful liberation: "God has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty."

It is my own experience — Advent always reminds me of this — that we carry our faith and hope "in earthen vessels" (2 Cor 4:7). We sing our liberation songs at times with confidence but often with doubts and fears. St. Augustine, in a wonderful reading that the Church has placed in the liturgy of the hours, encourages us:

Let us sing alleluia here on earth, while we still live in anxiety, so that we may sing it one day in heaven in full security.... God's praises are sung both there and here, but here they are sung in anxiety, there in security; here they are sung by those destined to die, there by those destined to live forever; here they are sung in hope, there in hope's fulfillment; here, they are sung by wayfarers, there, by those living in their own country. So then ... let us sing now ... sing as wayfarers do — sing, but continue your journey.... Sing then, but keep going.

I encourage you to sing the Magnificat, the Benedictus, the Gloria in Excelsis, and the Nunc Dimittis humbly, gratefully, and with exuberant hope this Advent. Sing these canticles too with the poor.

2. Silence

In the Lucan infancy narrative, it is remarkable how little is said apart from the hymns. At the birth of the Lord, Mary and Joseph are silent. They contemplate this great mystery in quiet awe while the angels sing God's praises.

Our contemporary world is hardly a tranquil one. In fact, there is often so much noise that it is difficult to hear. Radio, television, computer games, cell phones and beepers can easily rob of us of the peace we need to listen to the word of God. Many

confreres, especially those living in third world countries, tell me that they long for quiet moments, often in vain, in the midst of the deafening din that surrounds them daily.

Silence is a creative medium, a quality of heart, an inner space where genuine listening can take place and where the Word can take root. Most founders of communities sought to create quiet oases where their members could open their hearts to the mystery of God. St. Vincent was no exception. He urged us to carve out silent time together each morning so that in meditative prayer we might open our ears to the heartbeat of God and to the groans of the poor, both of which are often muffled by the noise of daily living. He asked us to create quiet space in the evenings — in the chapel, in our rooms, anywhere where the whispered urgings of God’s word and the inner gnawing of his presence can find peaceful receptivity.

In a missionary community it is easy to fall into the trap of being constantly in movement, always busy and trying rather desperately to respond to the countless needs of those we serve. But when that is the constant rhythm of our lives, we easily become deaf to the deepest voices of reality, to the more radical issues that the poor are raising, or to the inescapable questions churning around within ourselves. In fact, sometimes frantic activity is an unconscious escape from such challenges.

This Advent I encourage you to re-invent times of creative silence. Do not be afraid to be alone with God or with yourself. Do not hesitate even to step back from the poor — perhaps this is the harder task for a missionary — in order to hear their unarticulated pleas, to contemplate the mysterious advent of God in human history precisely on behalf of the most abandoned, and to return to serve them enriched and renewed. Christianity, as well as other great religious traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism, have always given great importance to the practice of silent meditation. It is one of the key elements in the spirituality that St. Vincent has handed down to us. I encourage you to support one another in being faith-filled meditators, like Mary and Joseph in the accounts of the birth of Jesus.

This Advent I pray that the silence of the infancy narratives will teach us, in the words of Paul VI, “inwardness, the disposition to listen to good inspirations and the teaching of good masters ... the value of preparation, of study, of meditation, of personal inner life, of the prayer which God alone sees in secret.”

And out of the richness of meditative silence may we, like Mary, sing songs of liberation at the side of the poor.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General