



GENERAL SUPERIOR
CONGREGATION OF THE
PRIESTS OF THE SACRED HEART
Dehonians

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Rome, December 8, 2015

*To: Provincial/Regional/District Superiors
and all SCJs*

Christmas Letter 2015

The Meaning of Christmas

Christmas is the gift that God makes of himself because love leads to forgiveness and the splendor of truth prevails over all special interests. We await Christmas with expectation, greater even than we imagine, because the calls for mercy that issue from our world are so urgent and so strong. Despite all this, history resonates in some manner with God's own voice, God who calls down the Holy Spirit on us and reminds us of our responsibilities. Christmas allows us to experience the joy of life, as God was revealed to us in that first Christmas, and as God has been revealed us within the Congregation during this past year.

On that distant night 2,000 years ago, **“there were some shepherds that were keeping watch;”** filled with an attitude of expectation. They were waiting for Him and for fulfillment of the law with such celebration as their poverty would allow. Their lives were heading for an epilogue far too long awaited, like a magnetic tape that has gone on and on telling the tales that they were living. In the Congregation's life, there were the verifications and approvals of provincial chapter acts and directory changes. These are important because they are the mature development of contributions made by many people. Every change is capable of giving depth to expectation.

People had expectations of the general chapter and, perhaps, fears. **“An angel of the Lord appeared...and said to them: do not fear.”** At the general chapter the presence of the entity superiors and the delegates was empowered by the Holy Spirit. During the three-week period of work, qualified by effort and discernment, the Spirit descended on the assembly and led it toward its mission to be “merciful, in community, with the poor”. It elected a new general and general council. There was expectation by the entities in the first part of the year that lead to the chapter and the election of a new general administration. Two activities, one very human and the other more the work of the Spirit, joined together to allow the success and realization of a hundred different expectations.

These are beautiful signs, as is the central message of Christmas: **“you will find a child”**. His presence helps us grasp that goodness can never come to an end. It rekindles within us the fervor that fires us up when we remember an event that makes us jump for joy: the appointment of the vicar general and the general treasurer, our ten year presence in Angola, the renewal of so many provincial administrations, dehondocs — enriched by dehondocs international. These events have added gusto to our days, enlivened us with signs of new life and festivity, added and taken energy.

On that faraway night 2,000 years ago, **“a heavenly host praised God”**. We, as well, have been enlightened in our expectation at the meeting that Pope Francis gave to our congregation. Besides the “almost beatified Fr. Dehon” he wanted us to take on the task of being merciful: “The Lord asks of you gestures of mercy; even in the confessional be merciful”. The Pope gave us a lot at that meeting. Today, if we are looking forward to new things, it is because we have been enriched by hope. The fountains have not dried up. The desire for the new and the beautiful has grown and we eagerly look forward to those otherworldly promises that were confirmed by the blood of the God of the Covenant.

All who approach the crib find something or someone. The shepherds **“found Mary and Joseph and the child”**. We find so many persons in the Congregation who have completed a journey. A number of them have reached and achieved a goal. We realize with amazement that we had 77 novices this year, 31 newly professed, 11 ordained.

The God of mercy gave us the gift of a new bishop: Father José Ornelas Carvalho. Several days after the end of the general chapter and his mandate as superior general, he was named bishop of the diocese of Setúbal in Portugal. In his greeting to that church he recalled that in a meeting with the Holy Father he voiced some objections to this service and the Holy Father responded: “I don’t command you, but I ask you to go as bishop of Setúbal, go as a missionary.... Europe needs to rediscover its missionary character”. We are also grateful to the Lord for 37 religious who completed their life and service to the coming of the kingdom of God.

When what is lived and experienced is so intense and beautiful it cannot be hidden. The people around the crib and the shepherds **“were amazed at what was spoken about them”**. At the dawn of a new year, we don’t feel like children of twilight but prophets of the future; sentinels of daylight who feel in their hearts the passion of a new proclamation to take to the world. Let us take up lyre and harp to awake the dawn.

While all this activity was taking place **“Mary kept all these things in her heart”**. What we have recalled some have lived. Among such protagonists in the course of this year some have been experienced as confidants, as friends, but all as brothers. It is normal, then, to pray for the expectations of our young novices and professed, pray for those who have been called to duties and responsibilities that they may accept them with peace, and pray that we may lighten the sufferings of those who are ill and that those who are tired will be filled with a new enthusiasm.

Faced with changes that mark history, the baby Jesus allows us to shiver at new beginnings and to remind everyone that we need to shift gears. The signs from God beat on our doors; for this reason, we, as general administration, spent time to get to know each other

and to grow in friendship. We spent a week together to improve our ways of working and we came up with a planning letter: “**Mercy: In God’s footsteps**” which will be published on January 6, 2016. At this time of Christmas may He help us understand that it is not enough to welcome; we need to expect. Welcome is sometimes a sign of resignation. Expectation is always a sign of hope.

May the Lord who is coming take us by surprise and find us ready to walk in his footsteps. Best wishes to all for a Christmas filled with gratitude toward our God who continues to visit us.

Fr. Heinrich Wilmer, scj
Superior General
and his Council