

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

After having meditated over the years on the cast of characters that Matthew and Luke place on the Advent stage, last year we reflected on a rather subtle New Testament account of the coming of Jesus into the world, an early Christian hymn about Jesus' "self-emptying" that Paul used in his letter to the Philippians. The New Testament offers us other, even subtler, accounts of the birth of Jesus. Perhaps the most striking of these stands at the beginning of John's gospel. It too is probably an adaptation of an early hymn. It is very different from the other gospel descriptions of the coming of the Lord. The Christology found in this passage is much more "exalted," so to speak, than that of Matthew and Luke in the infancy narratives. John presents Jesus as the Word of God, existing before the whole created universe and active from the beginning with his Father in bringing the world into being. The hymn summarizes Jesus' pre-existence, his birth, his history, his mission, even his death in remarkably few words:

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came to be through him,
and without him nothing came to be.
What came to be through him was life,
and this life was the light of the human race;
the light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it....
He was in the world,
and the world came to be through him,
but the world did not know him.
He came to his own,
but his own did not accept him....
And the Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory as of the Father's only Begotten,
full of merciful love and fidelity. (1:1-5, 10-11, 14)*

Let me offer you two brief reflections on this wonderful passage.

1. There is a remarkable tension in John's Christology. On the one hand, it soars off to transcendent heights. Jesus, as the Word, is with the Father before the created world came into existence; he and the Father are one. On the other hand, the Word became *flesh* and made his dwelling place among us. John will not tolerate the slightest doubt about Jesus' full humanity. He consistently combats a tendency that would plague Christianity throughout the centuries: because we believe that Jesus is more than fully human, we will be tempted to think of him as less than fully human. No, says John, when we contact the person of Jesus, we really meet God *in the flesh*. Jesus is one of us.

Notice one thing especially about John's theological perspective. Just as our own lives are a created gift, so also God's enfleshment in Jesus is a gift of gratuitous love. Advent symbolizes God's free, self-giving embrace of humanity – nothing can separate us from him.

St. Vincent loved this mystery of the incarnation. He turned to it again and again as the theological source sustaining our vows and our community virtues. He believed deeply that Jesus was God's ultimate word, his revelation, his offer of himself to us in the flesh. This faith in the enfleshment of God also lies at the heart of Vincent's ministry to the poor. He believed that Jesus in a different, but still intimate, way identified himself with the person of the poor. Knowing the daily, difficult, at times discouraging service we engage in, where appearances may sometimes fool us, Vincent encourages us: "Turn the medal and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, whose will it was to be poor, is represented to you by these..." (SV XI, 32). Do we have a fully incarnational faith? Do we see God in Jesus' flesh? Are we convinced of his intimate union with the poor?

Vincent believed at the same time that, to serve the poor well, we too must be "clothed with Christ" (Rom 13:14), thinking his thoughts, loving with his heart, seeing with his eyes. A great Advent challenge is that the Lord might be more fully enfleshed in us.

2. As he wrote, John drew heavily on an important Old Testament theme. He presents Jesus to us as the Wisdom of God. You recall the lovely passage in Proverbs:

*When he established the heavens I was there,
when he marked out the vault over the face of the deep;
When he made firm the skies above,
when he fixed fast the foundations of the earth;
When he set for the sea its limit,
so that the waters should not transgress his command;
Then was I beside him as his craftsman,
and I was his delight day by day,*

*Playing before him all the while,
playing on the surface of his earth;
and I found delight in the children of the human race. (8:27-31)*

I encourage you this Advent to pray that God's wisdom might be born anew in your heart. Wisdom is crucial in life, especially in our own lives as proclaimers of the good news. Have you ever noticed how the Book of Proverbs presents wisdom as a missionary? She is a street preacher crying out a message of reproach and promise in the market place and at the city gates (1:20-33). The first readers of the Johannine hymn were certainly very aware of the stirring words of Proverbs "The beginning of wisdom is: get wisdom.... Hold fast to instruction, never let her go; keep her, for she is your life" (4:7, 13).

Jesus is the wisdom of God, "what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched" (1 Jn 1:1). The wisdom he reveals to us is, of course, "foolishness" to some. It involves identifying with the poor, being peacemakers, suffering for justice sake, sharing what we have with those who have less, being faithful to our word, giving perseveringly even to death. Sometimes we too may be tempted to exchange this wisdom, enfleshed in Jesus, for the wisdom of the "world," that today often extols individual liberty at the expense of the freedom of others and allures us with material things which unfortunately sometimes wall us off from deeper values. I urge you, my brothers, to ask the Lord during Advent for evangelical wisdom. The means for obtaining it, St. Vincent was convinced, are twofold: 1) meditation on the humanity of Jesus, God's Word, the Wisdom of God revealed in the flesh and 2) live contact with the sufferings of the poor, the privileged meeting place with God in the world.

I was very encouraged recently when I participated with one million young people at World Youth Day in Paris. As I flew into France, the newspapers predicted that the gathering would be a great disappointment. With the summer heat and vacations, they stated, perhaps only 250,000 would show up. An overflowing million came (including 2,400 from our own Vincentian Marian Youth Groups); another 200,000 or 300,000 had to be turned back. As I looked out on so many young people that day, I sensed their hunger and thirst. They were seeking meaning in life, something that would lead them beyond the everyday routines that ultimately remain unsatisfying. They longed for wisdom. Can we offer it to them? Can we present them with a compelling life-vision? When they approach us do they find people who are truly wise?

As we move closer to the advent of the third millennium and as we prepare in our upcoming General Assembly to meet the challenges of a new era, I pray that the Lord will enrich our Vincentian Family with his wisdom, so that in all creation, and especially in the person of the poor, we may see "his glory... full of merciful love and fidelity."

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General