

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

Dear brothers,

May the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your hearts now and forever!

A Christmas Story

I love to read stories and I love to tell them. When I am home visiting my family, my nieces and nephews always are anxious to hear some of the stories that I invent to entertain them. I try to tell a story that has a good moral message, taking something that might ordinarily be a source of fear and converting it into a story that has a happy, peaceful ending. That is how I would like to speak about our preparation this year for Advent, by telling a story.

My story is about my first Christmas in the mountains of Panama in 1986. I will never forget the experience. It began with a celebration of the Eucharist in a one-room school building on the top of a mountain. There were no decorations. The altar was a teacher's desk. The pews were the pupils' benches. Despite the fact that there were no decorations or flowers to speak of the joy of Christmas or lights to brighten the environment, that joy and that light were ever present on the faces of the people who participated in the Eucharist. It was simple, because I could barely speak and understand Spanish. Yet I remember clearly trying to communicate that we celebrate the fact that God is among us now in a special way, that the Word of God, Jesus Christ, has become flesh and that we have to make that an everyday reality, especially in our ways of dealing with one another in family and in the community.

After Mass I went down the mountain and off into the darkness, conducted by the village lay leader, not knowing where I was headed, guided only by the dim light of a flashlight, across streams, through brush, up hills, down hills, until we finally came upon a little village hut. We went around the back of the house and there was a makeshift lean-to with bamboo benches around the border and a big table off to the side, filled with food for sharing. We ate a simple meal, rice with chicken. We drank a homemade corn drink and we listened to typical Panamanian music on a transistor radio. People chatted. People were excited. They asked me questions. They laughed as I attempted to speak and answer their queries and their requests. After we had finished sharing the meal, the music began. And so we danced. I returned to the house later that night, again through the

woods, across the streams, up and down hills, in the pitch dark, guided by the dim light of a flashlight. The next day, I woke up and remembered: "It is Christmas Day." On this occasion there were no toys for the children, no exchange of gifts. In one sense, it was just another day like every other day, except that the people did not have to work. They just sat and enjoyed one another's presence. After sharing breakfast with them — a bowl of rice with a precious egg on top — I rode off on my horse to the next village to celebrate with the people there the Christmas Eucharist.

In all honesty I have to say that it was the best Christmas I have ever spent in my life. I have had other good ones — and I hope to share them in coming years — but this was the best. It spoke to me a great deal of what Advent is really all about: a time of joy, a time of walking in the darkness led by the light of God's Word, a time of deepening our sense of community, a time of being family with our friends and neighbors, a time of sharing around the table: both the Eucharistic table and the table where the best of our meals are set before us in all simplicity. It is a time to laugh and a time to question. It is a time to respond to questions that come from the depths of our heart, through the Word of God that we hear, through the experience of the suffering of the poor, where God speaks to us with loud shouts. It is a time to celebrate. It is a time to dance, a time to be free, a time to let go. It is a time to return home. It is a time to be quiet, a time to slow down, a time to be alone. It is even a time to be lonely without fearing that loneliness, but learning to love more deeply our own self and the God who meets us in the quiet moments of our life, in the depths of our heart. It is a time to listen. It is a time to pray.

Advent is also a time to reflect, above all, on the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. We sing Emmanuel: God is with us, choosing to be like us in order that we might be like him, assuming our humanness in order that we might assume the divine. The incarnation was a theme very dear to the heart of St. Vincent. It is a time to recover the true meaning of Christmas by looking for alternate ways of celebrating, by moving away from materialism. There is really no need for physical gifts, nor even toys for the children. We already have the most important gift: the Word made flesh, the gift of the Eucharist, God with us in his body and blood. We also have the gift of one another, the gift of the music we make together and the laughter we share, the gift of nature we contemplate. There is the gift of darkness too that blends into light, the gift of loneliness that leads us to intimacy with the God who dwells within the deepest part of our soul. Advent is the time to prepare ourselves for the joy of celebrating God eternally with us.

I offer this Christmas story for your own personal reflection in this wonderful, mysterious time in which God desires to speak to

our hearts, to change our lives, to unite himself with us, to meet us and heal us of all our weakness, to shed light on our strengths, to bind us together that we might have the strength and courage to walk forward together in the midst of darkness guided by his ever-present light.

Reflect on your own Christmas stories and share them in community. Recall the most memorable moments: those times that touched your heart, those times that lifted you up to praise God, those times that strengthened your own desire to serve more deeply those who show us the true meaning of life. For it is among those who know what true religion is all about, our brothers and sisters, the poor, as St. Vincent so clearly states, that we come to know God, we come to live God, we come to love God and our neighbor and ourselves.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.
Superior General