

## ADVENT LETTER 2010

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### *To all the Members of the Vincentian Family*

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

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

*“In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet on to the road to peace” (Luke 1:78-79).*

The images of darkness and light, night and day, despair and hope, death and life, hell and heaven are images that often come to mind in our reflection and prayer during the time of Advent that we are privileged to begin again. These contrasting images are ever present and surround us in the world in which we live. The prophet Habakkuk cries out at one point, *“Why do you let me see ruin: Why must I look at misery? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife and clamorous discord”* (Hb. 1:3). As I heard that text proclaimed some weeks ago in the Sunday Eucharist, it struck me that still today we are surrounded by the same violence and destruction, whether because of natural causes or human causes.

There is destruction of so much human life because of natural disasters. I think of the recent outbreak of cholera in Haiti; hundreds of people died of it after having survived the earthquake. They continue to suffer; they continue to pass through what literally we may call hell. In Pakistan, hundreds of thousands of people vanished recently in the typhoons that have hit the Asian areas; how many people have lost their lives, their health, their homes? Human causes include border violence that is experienced between Mexico and the United States, where since 2006 more than 30,000 people have been assassinated because of drug conflicts. So much violence before our eyes. Advent is a time to turn that darkness to light, that experience of hell to heaven, the despair to the hope that a decent life can be a reasonable goal.

I entitle my reflection this year, *Christmas: A Story of Living Without Frontiers*. As we read through the various Scripture passages that the Church presents for our reflection during this time of Advent, we encounter the theme of a God who is for all, a God of all nations.

In one sense it is ironic because Jesus, when He was born into this world, was born into a corner, a place where no one would live, a shelter for animals. And yet the contrast is that, even though being put into this limited place for survival, He has become for us, the God of life for all, a God who knows no boundaries, a God who came among us breaking down barriers that did not allow people to draw close to each other, whether they come from another nation, such as the barrier between the Samaritans and the Jews or because they were well-to-do and educated, never wanting to mingle with those who were considered outcasts of society; breaking down that barrier of the so-called unwanted people: lepers, beggars, blind, crippled.

In His birth into poverty Jesus, by his word and deed, filled people's lives with richness, peace, goodness, health, reconciliation and healing, leading them from darkness into light, from despair into hope, from death into new life. This past August I had the opportunity to visit Project Juan Diego, an apostolate of the Daughters of Charity on the US-Mexican border. It spoke to me of the gift of new life, the opportunity to be truly born that we receive at Christmas. The Daughters of Charity have trained a staff of lay people and volunteers and have become a dynamic community. They reach out to those who have lived in darkness, those who have known the depths of despair, giving them light and hope for new life. I experienced that personally when I visited some of the people whose lives have been touched by Project Juan Diego. They are people touched by the volunteers, the staff and the Sisters who have entered into their lives and given them the opportunity to live a new life.

I heard that from the witness of a man of my age who had literally closed himself off from the world, living only in the confines of his small room, unwilling even to step out to his yard to relate to others who might be passing by. After a gradual gentle yet firm process of accompaniment and presence, this gentleman came to discover his true self. Given the opportunity to live for the first time in his life, he now lives with the enthusiasm and desire to go out from the confines of his own home to meet with others and to encourage them to live a new kind of life that he himself discovered. The witness of this one gentleman is just one of many stories of people who have been given new life once they were able to pass beyond the limits that they had imposed on themselves. They have come to recognize the gift of life that God is for each and everyone. This gift has been deposited in us and is part and parcel of what Christmas is about: the gift of God Himself, the Incarnate Jesus entering into our lives, helping us to discover our own giftedness and encouraging and moving us beyond ourselves in order to give that gift, helping others discover it in themselves.

Not very far from this neighborhood where the Daughters of Charity have been a sign of new life and have shared that life with others, there is another group of Daughters of Charity who also give life, but in a very different way. You might say that they live in an experience of hell. This community of Daughters of Charity lives just the other side of the border in a town that is ravaged by violence and destruction because of drugs, poverty, greed, and ignorance. The Sisters crossed the frontier and joined with the Daughters of Charity of Project Juan Diego as we celebrated together the Eucharist which is the culmination of our life, the source of our strength and the very experience of God's gift of Himself among us.

In talking with the Sisters from the Mexican side, and listening to the stories of horror and suffering on a daily basis that they recounted, in the midst of suffering and violence that they experience, I was struck by the contrast of the presence of the Sisters on one side of the frontier as compared to the presence of the Sisters on the other side of the frontier. And yet, even though one might be considered an experience of heaven and the other an experience of hell, their graced presence among these poor brings forth the possibility of hope and new life.

It is in both experiences that I sense clearly what God says to us in Zacharias' canticle: *"In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet on the road to peace"* (Luke 1:78-79). That tender compassion of our God is the gift of Jesus Himself, the dawn from on high that has broken upon us, the gift of Jesus in his birth at Bethlehem who through his life, death, and resurrection continues to shine on those who dwell in experiences of darkness, despair, death and hell. And through His instruments of love they are guided on the road to peace.

As members of the Vincentian family, my brothers and sisters, in this time of Advent we are called to be close to those whom we call our lords and masters when they live in situations of darkness and despair, being for them instruments of hope and life. Together as a Vincentian Family, and with our lords and masters, we are called to be builders, builders of solidarity with love as its foundation, not builders of walls that divide humanity. We are called to live the life of Jesus, that life that came to us the day He was born. He invites us to go beyond the limits, the boundaries, the frontiers that many times we have constructed ourselves, or that have been constructed by the society in which we live. Oftentimes they are the traditions that we have learned, or prejudices that we have simply adopted.

I would like to share a prayer that I came across as part of a service composed by the Commission for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, of the Union of Superiors General for the celebration of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. The prayer, called *The Beatitudes for Social Engagement*; has been adapted for our situation as a Family.

- Happy are you when you remain available, sharing in simplicity what you possess.
- Happy are you when you weep over the absence of happiness around you and throughout the world.
- Happy are you when you opt for gentleness and dialogue even when this seems long and difficult.
- Happy are you when you creatively devise new ways of donating your time, your tenderness and gems of hope.
- Happy are you when you listen with your heart to detect what is gift in others.
- Happy are you when you strive to take the first step, the necessary one to attain peace with brothers and sisters throughout the world.
- Happy are you when you keep in your heart wonderment, openness and free questioning of life.
- Happy are you when you take seriously your faith in the Incarnate Christ.

I ask you throughout this time of Advent to pray this prayer individually and with those with whom you share your lives. We have many experiences in our own lives of living without frontiers. These are experiences of the Story of Christmas, experiences of the presence of Jesus among us. May our own witness in the world be a sign that helps people leave the night and enter the day, walk from their darkness into a new light, lift them from despair and fill them with hope, pass them from death unto new life and out of hell into heaven. We can do that if we truly live the gift of the Incarnate Christ, the gift of His life, the gift of His love, the gift of His peace. We can do so, not only for those who are close to us, but for those who are far from our reach.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "G. Gregory Gay, C.M." in a cursive script.

G. Gregory Gay, C.M.  
Superior General