

GENERAL CURIA

Advent 2007

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 for Advent Reflection in 2007

As in previous years I would like to begin the Advent Reflection with a story from my past history as a missionary. Reflection on this story has helped me to grasp more fully the understanding of Advent as the great mystery which leads us to the celebration of the Incarnation of Christ at Christmas. One of our Panamanian confreres along with two lay collaborators in our parish in Puerto Armuelles developed a program, called Anni, for children that was celebrated annually on Christmas day. I had the opportunity to be involved in the planning, the preparation and the execution of the Christmas Program one year when I returned to this parish in Puerto Armuelles as part of my on-going formation as Director of the Internal Seminary. Let me explain.

After my first three years in mission work in Panama serving in the parish in Puerto Armuelles, which was comprised of 25 villages and the main city of San Vicente, I was later called by my superiors to participate in formation which I did for two years in our philosophy residence and for two years in our theology residence. Then I was called to be the Director of the internal seminary after participating in a program of on-going formation for a period of four months. Returning from that program, my superiors asked what more I might like to do to prepare myself for this role. I had approximately seven months to do that.

I thought and prayed and discerned and I felt that the best way to prepare myself to work in the internal seminary was to return to the missions. So I volunteered to return to the parish where I had my beginnings as a missionary in Panama. It was there that I was given the opportunity to serve once more the people for a period of seven

months. Towards the end of that time of preparation was the participation in the celebration of Anni. Anni was conceived by its founders as the opportunity for children to gather to celebrate with joy as only children can, the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day.

There was a large gathering of children from the area called St. Vincent's. The events of the day included playing games, singing songs, running and laughing and being free. We began the day by asking the children to reflect that Jesus had been born and it was reason to be joyful because it was a sign that God has brought his love to us, a love and a joy that we are called to share one with another. At the end of the day a brown paper bag of goodies was given to the children that included fruits and nutritional bars. A healthy day was concluded by giving a healthy treat.

I like to reflect on this Anni experience first and foremost as an alternative way of celebrating Christmas, very different from other ways that I have experienced in my past. In a simple way, I learned that Christmas is not about what I get but, in part, it is about what I can do to help others appreciate and celebrate with joy God's goodness towards us which is best expressed in God coming among us in the person of His Son Jesus Christ on the day that we now celebrate in many parts of the world on the 25th of December or the 6th of January. The focus is not so much on things but on attitudes and being able to celebrate those attitudes.

Another thing that struck me with the program Anni was the seriousness with which the team members worked on the program as well as the involvement of other people from the area who wanted to contribute so that the day would be successful. How clearly adults have a desire to help children who normally would not have much opportunity to celebrate. They want to bring a bit of joy into their lives.

In the event, there was joy in seeing all the energy, the joyfulness being expressed by the children. This was a way of touching the hearts of us adults who were accompanying them, the opportunity perhaps, for us to get in touch with the child within that oftentimes is not able to celebrate life. It gets smothered by the seriousness with which we are called to carry out our responsibilities and duties which when done on a continual basis has a tendency to dry up our spontaneity, our child-likeness, our joyful expressions, and yes, our playful attitudes. At the end of the day I remember feeling that it is good to be a child again.

As we reflect on Advent, the joyfulness of children and alternative ways of celebrating Christmas, I am wondering how we might help others live Christmas in an alternative way, especially those who seem not to have alternatives. I am thinking of the people to whom you minister: migrants, prisoners, people enslaved by drugs,

young people who have alternative ways of living shoved in their faces and yet these alternatives drain life rather than give it. What can we do to celebrate with them God's life and love among us? How can we bring the joyfulness, the playfulness of children to them so they too can celebrate the new life that is Jesus, come to live among us at Christmas.

Perhaps we can do this by seeking alternatives with and for the poor whom we serve. Might our doing this also move us into a deeper way of relating with those whom we are called to serve as well as those with whom we share and live our lives? As we work together with our local community or with the Vincentian Family we may break our own chains of stagnation in doing the same thing each year and so renew within ourselves the spirit of Christmas as we help to renew that spirit in those to whom and with whom we minister.

In our local communities, associations or with the Vincentian Family, we might reflect at the same time on how we work in teams as we prepare not only for Christmas, but in our ministry, our service of the poor throughout the year. Is our ministry done in an attitude of what we get out of it or of what we are able to do for others in order that they might know God's love more fully? In other words, what can we do for others to celebrate with them God's life and love among us. Within the local community, association or Vincentian Family, what do we do to help keep our inner child alive and joyful and happy? How do we play together in order to be recreated and renewed in God's love? Certainly we can learn something from children about how to do that. Christmas is not all about children. But it is all about joy and new life and celebrating that new life among us, the new life that is Jesus Christ continually present to us.

Advent is upon us. A time preparing us for the incarnation of Christ which we celebrate at Christmas in our local communities, or in the different associations of the Vincentian Family. How do we live this Christmas experience? Maybe Advent can be a time when we look for alternative ways of celebrating, ways different from what we are accustomed to, ways that may help us to get deeper in touch with the reality of what Christmas is all about. It can be a time of joy in knowing that God loves us and that God is among us. And that joy becomes more complete when we share it one with another.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

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Superior General