

The letter

Pope Francis' lesson on the meaning of Christmas Julián Carrón

Dear Editor,

Under the daily pressure of living that we all share and that seems to quash our hope, does Christmas still have something to say to us? Is it just a remembrance that evokes good sentiments, or is it the news of a fact that can affect our real life?

“The reason for our hope is this: God is with us. However, there is something even more surprising. The presence of God among men did not take place in a perfect, idyllic world but rather in this real world. He chose to live in our history as it is, with all the weight of its limitations and of its tragedies [...] to save us, to raise us from the dust of our misery, from our difficulty, from our sins” (Pope Francis, General Audience, December 18, 2013). These days, to prepare for this great event of Christmas, I often repeat to myself these words of the Holy Father.

The Mystery likes to constantly challenge us “in this real world,” without hemming or hawing in the things He does! This is why God chooses circumstances that best put before our eyes who He is and what extraordinary newness He can generate in the world. This should gladden each of us, because it means that there is no situation, moment of life, or story that can keep God from generating something new. How does He challenge us?

As we await Christmas, the Church re-reads the great vicissitudes of the people of Israel and shows us how God intervenes in history. For example, she sets before our eyes two sterile women, incapable of giving birth: a woman of Zorah and Elisabeth (the first would become the mother of Samson, the defender of the Hebrew people, and the second, the mother of John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for Christ; cf. Judges 13:2-7, 24-25a and Luke 1:5-25), two women who could not “fix” things in any way; no brilliance of their own could make them mothers. It was impossible. It was something impossible for humans. In this way, the Lord wants to make us understand that, for Him, everything is possible, and that thus it is possible not to despair, that nobody can say they are abandoned, forgotten, or condemned to their own situation, finding in it the justification for ceasing to hope. Nothing is impossible for One who does things like making two sterile women become mothers. Their unexpected maternity represents the greatest challenge to the reason and freedom of each of us. There is no situation, no relationship or human coexistence that cannot change. If we have become resigned, thinking of our own story, today the Lord again challenges our lack of hope.

“Your prayer has been heard,” the angel tells Zechariah. “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John.” The Gospel defines this as “good news” because we are not condemned to skepticism and we are not annihilated by the failure of all our attempts. There is not just the promise, but also its fulfillment, because she will truly have a son! These facts announce to those who retain at least a shred of tenderness for themselves that it is possible to change, because for God everything is possible; He just needs to find in us the openness of heart.

If we allow this power of God to enter, our life, like that of Zechariah, will be filled with joy: “You will have joy and gladness.” It is not for us alone, but is given for others as well: “Many will rejoice at his birth.” This joy demonstrates who God is, who is at work in our midst. John “will be filled with the Holy Spirit” and will begin to change what he touches.

In this way, the Liturgy of the Church introduces us to look at another woman, this time a virgin named Mary, to whom something happened which is no less mysterious than what happened to the two sterile women: the event of the Incarnation by the work of the Holy Spirit, to which Mary simply consented, saying *yes*. With Christmas, the Lord brings us these glad tidings. Embracing them is up to us, to our simple openness to being surprised by He who, with His initiative, constantly reaches us here and now, “in this real world.”

If we ask for it and open ourselves to what the Lord is about to do in our midst with Christmas, many around us will rejoice in “our” re-birth. Only this newness can convince every person of the credibility of the Christian announcement that has reached us. Just consider how many people of every culture rejoice today, and feel challenged as never before, by the existence of someone like Pope Francis, in whom the Mystery has found this openness of heart.

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