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Monthly Spiritual Message

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PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS

Friends, as Franciscans we follow intimately the liturgical year of the Church, through our frequent participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Liturgy of the Hours. Also, our devotional life as brothers and sisters of St. Francis should reflect this reality. During December, as we come to celebrate the Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ, we follow the prophets of Israel, such as Micah and Isaiah, in the expectation of the Saviour. We join in prayer, in company with St. John the Baptist, St. Joseph and Our Blessed Lady. The Franciscan Lent intensifies during these days of Advent. (The Franciscan Lent begins after all Saints Day, November 1st).

Franciscan religious mark these days with prayer and penance, but also as Secular Franciscans, there is a communion with the whole Church during the season of Advent to prepare for the coming of Christ, in preparing our hearts to welcome the Prince of Peace, the Babe of Bethlehem. We know that St. Francis had such great devotion to Our Lord in the Crib, as seen at Greccio, so how beautiful it is for us to prepare ourselves to celebrate Our Lord's birth. We can do this by our extra prayers and penances offered to Jesus out of love who offered Himself in love for us, in total humility, to be laid in straw in the presence of an ox and a donkey.

What can we do as Franciscans in our own lives to celebrate the Saviour's birth? Are there persons we need to forgive in our lives, to make peace with? Are there bad habits we need to overcome, too much indulgence in food, alcohol, entertainment? Has materialism overtaken our lives? Do we neglect to reach out to the suffering brothers and sisters and the poor in our own community and in our world? Our fasting during this season helps us to remember that the Kingdom of Christ must be first in our lives. Sacrificing an afternoon tea or dessert can draw us closer to the Sacred Heart, in reparation for our own failings and indulgences, but also to remember the hungry in our world.

Are we going to make a good confession? We remember the words of the Third Order Saint John Vianney, "the confessional is the hospital of the soul." In the sacrament of Reconciliation, we experience the fullness of the Divine Mercy of Christ as we are cleansed in His Precious Blood and strengthened to live the Gospel.

What can we do in our family to make Advent a time of expectant joy? Maybe we can place an advent wreath on the dinner table. Lighting the candle before grace, we can recall that Christ is the Light that has come into the darkness of our world. Saying a decade of the Rosary, particularly the joyful mysteries, or the Franciscan Crown, can be part of our weekly prayer as we come to prepare for the great Solemnity of Christmas! How our Father Francis loved Our Lord as the little child in the crib. This was so strongly a part of his love for the mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Devotion to the infant Jesus reminds us of some beautiful truths as

mentioned by our Holy Father at the “*Church of Our Lady Victorious*”, Prague Saturday, 26th September 2009:

“The image of the Child Jesus calls to mind the mystery of the Incarnation, of the all-powerful God who became man and who lived for thirty years in the lowly family of Nazareth, entrusted by Providence to the watchful care of Mary and Joseph. My thoughts turn to your own families and to all the families in the world, in their joys and difficulties. Our reflections should lead us to prayer, as we call upon the Child Jesus for the gift of unity and harmony for all families. We think especially of young families who have to work so hard to offer their children security and a decent future. We pray for families in difficulty, struggling with illness and suffering, for those in crisis, divided or torn apart by strife or infidelity. The figure of the Child Jesus, the tender infant, brings home to us God’s closeness and His love. We come to understand how precious we are in His eyes, because it is through Him that we in our turn have become children of God. Every human being is a child of God and therefore our brother or sister, to be welcomed and respected. May our society grasp this truth! Every human person would then be appreciated not for what he has, but for who he is, since in the face of every human being, without distinction of race or culture, God’s image shines forth.

“This is especially true of children. In the Holy Infant there is the beauty of childhood and the fondness that Jesus Christ has always shown for little ones, as we read in the Gospel (cf. Mk 10:13-16). Yet how many children are neither loved, nor welcomed nor respected! How many of them suffer violence and every kind of exploitation by the unscrupulous! May children always be accorded the respect and attention that are due to them: they are the future and the hope of humanity”

The Vicar of Christ gives us some beautiful thoughts and reminders! During the month of December we also remember the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady who is the Patroness and Queen of our Franciscan Family! St. Maximilian Kolbe calls the defence of the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception the golden thread of our Franciscan tradition. We know that essentially this doctrine is concerned with a singular grace, accomplished by the merits of Christ’s redemption, whereby Mary was preserved from Original Sin from the first moment of Her conception. But the Immaculate Conception is so much more. Through the sacraments we have the opportunity to receive the fullness of grace as our Lady (although not in Her unique way). Mary Immaculate is the model for us, for receiving and co-operating with God’s saving Grace that was given to us in Baptism, and renewed in confession and especially in the Holy Eucharist. St. Francis honoured Our Lady with titles that point to Her Immaculate Conception. May we honour the Mother of God as our Immaculate Mother and unite with Her to advance the Kingdom of Her Son – the Kingdom of Christ’s truth, love, peace and Justice; a kingdom found in the crib! A Kingdom that we are called to bring in as we proclaim “Joy to the world, the Lord has come!”

God love you and may you have a Blessed Christmas.

Br Louis Mary OFM Conv.
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**Regional Assistants are requested to distribute this Monthly Message
to all local Assistants of our Order in the Regional Fraternity.**