

CONFERENCE OF NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS, OFS - OCEANIA

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Monthly Spiritual Message December 2013

Elements of a Secular Franciscan Christmas

This Christmas spiritual letter is late, very late. It might not get to you on time, before the last meeting of the year for your local fraternity. I apologise. I should have seen the signs they were so blatant really, in retrospect. In early November the secular world began putting out tinsel here and there tentatively like the first buds of Advent, confused by the weather.

Then in the shops and shopping centres during the following weeks, just before the Feast of Christ the King images of Santa started to appear, not so surprising I guess when you consider that St Nicholas' feast is early December.¹ Then Advent arrived dressed in purple, lit the first candle and began a new liturgical year and we, being secular time people, did not wish each other Happy New Year, but passed that by for the latter two faced month of January.² But we had caught up with the secular world that had jumped the gun in its preparation for Christmas.

Then the secular world moved into second gear and began to pull out all the stops, with Christmas Carols playing "I'll be Home for Christmas, just you wait and see!"³ Either some sort of wonderful threat about bringing all the grand-children home to eat you out of house and home or evoking the lament of soldiers far away who certainly will not be home for Christmas, but some will, just because this song could melt the heart of the most be-medalled and toughest General of the Army or Admiral of the fleet.

I should have seen it then, that I needed to begin writing this Christmas letter, but I did not. I guess I was caught up in the pressing needs around me, the funerals that sap your energy, especially that funeral of the 5 months old preemie baby with the bereft parents laying their little one to rest with only six people in all there, utterly wrapped in grief. I really did not want to think about babies for a while, but a very small child snuck up on me in the supermarket and hugged my leg. In complete bewilderment I looked down into this little angelic face and she said, "pup-py!" Her mother, no longer distracted by Christmas goodies, turned and scooped her up all in one movement. I said, "*She thinks I am her "poppy". "No, no said the mother, she thinks you are Santa. She wants a puppy for Christmas!"* As the mother took off, clutching her sparkle eyed little cherub, I began to think that Nelson Mandella was right in saying that children are colour blind, we have to teach them to see red.

¹ The 6th of December to be exact.

² Janus, the two faced pagan god of Rome from which January takes its name was the "door keeper" with two faces one looking into the past and one looking into the future.

³ The words are actually: "You can count on me!" Just testing you!

Saint Francis taught his followers to look at the secular world in a very positive way. He most probably would have rejoiced in the early hints of Christmas in our shops. He took religious life out of the monastery cloister and declared the whole world to be redeemed. This is beautifully expressed in the **Sacrum Commercium** No 63 where Lady Poverty asks the friars to show her their cloister. *“Taking her to a certain hill, they showed her the whole world, as far as the eye could see, and said: ‘This, Lady, is our cloister.’”* The author of the *Sacrum Commercium* proclaimed in that gesture that the followers of Saint Francis were the friars of the whole world, the **Secular Franciscan Friars**.⁴

So I want to say to you: If the secular world wants to begin Advent early, let us not get ourselves in a Gordian knot,⁵ but rather rejoice in paper snow, silver and gold stars, Christmas stockings, striped candy, cards and carols. In a world of bad news, simply awful news, truly dreadful news and utterly shocking news, let us fill ourselves with some hope and rejoice in this secular outpouring of the happiness that Christmas brings.

But of course, let us not stop there, looking somewhat ludicrous with blinking, battery powered earrings, plastic reindeer antlers and paper crowns on our heads, but rather pause a moment and enter into the deeper reasons for all this frivolity and cosy-ness. Indeed let us not lose sight of the fact, the incredible truth that God came down into our gloomy reality 2000 years ago and lay his little head upon that golden straw in a manger in Bethlehem and each day still he comes down upon the altar, utterly stripped of glory, to be food for our journey home to heaven. Was it any wonder that Saint Francis was over whelmed: *“What stupendous condescension! O sublime humility! That the Lord of the whole universe, God and the Son of God, should humble Himself like this under the form of a little bread, for our salvation!”*⁶

And Saint Bonaventure urging the friars to learn the art of contemplation prays, *“O My God, good Jesus, although I am in every way without merit and unworthy, grant to me, who did not merit to be present at these events in the body, that I may ponder them faithfully in my mind, and experience towards you, ... that feeling of compassion ...that your innocent mother ... experienced ...”*⁷

Then gathering together all the spiritual energies of our soul let our attention focus⁸ on this Christ Child and with Saint Bonaventure let us say to ourselves: *“Now then, my soul, embrace that divine manger; and press your lips upon and kiss the boy’s feet. Then in your mind keep the shepherd’s watch, marvel at the assembling hosts of angels, join in the heavenly melody, singing with your voice and heart: Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace to men of good will.”*⁹

Br John Cooper OFM Cap (*Capuchin National Spiritual Assistant*)

Regional Assistants are requested to distribute this Monthly Spiritual Message to all local Assistants of our Order in the Regional Fraternity.

⁴ This is a secret lost in the dusty volumes of Franciscanism; do not tell the friars!

⁵ The Gordian Knot was proclaimed untieable until Alexander the Great cut it to bits with a sword.

⁶ Letter to the Entire Order 27ff

⁷ The Tree of Life, Eighth Fruit. No 32 Bonaventure. Classics of Western Spirituality (adapted)

⁸ Ignatius Larranaga OFM Cap [Sensing his hidden Presence](#) *“My attention, the integration of all my spiritual energies, that is my soul, reaches out... in the words... I...Love...You!”*

⁹ Bonaventure. Tree of Life. First Fruit.