

Conference of National Spiritual Assistants

Secular Franciscan Order

Fr Anthony Fox, OFM Conv.
PO Box 270 Springvale VIC 3171
Mobile Phone: 0400 404 129
Email: tony3171@yahoo.com

Fr Joe McKay OFM
21 Adele St Kedron Qld 4031
Mobile Phone: 0412 076 913
Email: jmkcay@franciscans.org.au

Fr John Cooper OFM Cap
198 Bay Tce. Wynnum Qld 4178
Mobile Phone: 0412 162 946
Email: johncap@ozemail.com.au

A Spiritual Message for January 2024

20 – C + M + B – 24

The European tradition¹ of blessing chalk that marks the lintel above the front door of Christian houses at the beginning of the New Year is almost unknown to English/Irish Catholicism. Still, you may notice that it is being introduced to Australia's Anglican and Catholic churches.

The traditional inscription stands for the three Kings: Caspar + Melchior + Balthasar. However, Scripture does not say how many kings there were; the clues come from the fact that they brought three gifts: Gold (for a King), Incense (for a God) and Myrrh (for his Death). So, the conclusion has been that there were only three Kings. In Catholic Spain, these “Tres Los Reys” (The three Kings) bring gifts to children at Christmas.

However, there is also a tradition declaring that C+M+B may refer to the Latin *Christus Mansionem Benedicat* /Christ Bless this Home,² which is an excellent idea.

The Dutch, however, chose to give the Three Kings a miss and decided that a bishop, St Nicholas, should provide Christmas presents for children. They brought their delightful Christmas custom to “New Amsterdam” in the New World. However, in 1664, the Dutch colony was taken over by the British and renamed “New York.”

There, in the USA, St Nicholas transformed into “Santa Claus” mainly through the process of commercialisation, which moved him to the North Pole, where he got himself a group of tiny elves to help pack presents for children who were not “naughty”, but “nice”, and a delivery system of a flying sleigh pulled by a set of eight equally gifted flying reindeer: Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner and Blitzen. Then the Red Nosed, Rudolph the Reindeer, turned up, and Santa married Mrs. Claus. The shops started selling “tinsel” and strings of lights as early as November.

This last Christmas 2023, we attempted, as Franciscans, backed by a Plenary Indulgence from the Pope, to remind the world that it was St Francis of Assisi, after some time in the Holy Land, who at Greccio in 1223, eight hundred years ago, built the first living Christmas Crib, and therefore made the Incarnation the primary focus of our faith.³ Yes, it's a fundamental Franciscan theological concept that the very first motive of Christ in becoming human was because he loved us so much he wished to be one with humanity through the Incarnation. He wanted primarily to show us just how extraordinary we are – to reveal to us the incredible potential of humanity. To show us the way of love and to be for us the pattern of integrity and the expression of heroic love -wholeness - holiness.⁴

¹ The Relics of the Three Kings are in a golden sarcophagus in the Cathedral of Cologne in Germany. Legend says that they were discovered and brought to St Helen in Constantinople. However, her son, the emperor Constantine, gave the relics to Bishop Eustorgius, the Bishop of Milan, who moved them to Milan in Italy, where they rested for over 700 years. In 1162, Emperor Frederick I, known as Barbarossa, besieged Milan along with Archbishop Rainald von Dassel of Cologne. The archbishop asked Frederick for the relics of the Three Kings to be transported to the Cathedral of Cologne in Germany, where they remain today. The tradition of chalking the lintels above the doors would seem to come from the popularity of this shrine.

² Web Reference: <https://dwightlongenecker.com/caspar-balthasar-and-melchior-where-did-that-come-from/>

³ “Wow! That has got to be a heresy! Is the Birth of Christ a Primary focus? What about Easter?” Answer: The Incarnation happened first, the infinite became finite – the immortal became mortal, an extraordinary act of compassion - then He saved us!

⁴ Oh yes, he saved us, but it was out of his infinite love for us that he did it. And his terrible death on the cross was the seal of his love for us. He showed us that even death was an opportunity – to love and not just a waste of a life.

THE DIALOGUE: *“That was a bit heavy. You went from Three Wise Men⁵ to salvation history.*

That is a good observation!

“Isn’t it odd that no one in Israel noticed this new star in the heavens?”

No, you must understand that God forbade the Jewish people to engage in astrology. In Isaiah 47:12, God condemns the astrologers and magicians, who seek to know the future by the stars. Then in verses 13-14 it goes on to say the following: “Where are all your astrologers, those stargazers who make predictions each month? Let them stand up and save you from what the future holds.”

The Jewish people were to live by faith and trust in God and the teachings of the prophets whom God sent to them when necessary.

Today, it would seem that we have forgotten this divine request because if in 2024, we are to believe FACEBOOK, YOUTUBE, and other forms of Media that have been trailing their hook through every sensational prophecy and prediction they can find, then this year 2024 will be a complete disaster and the END OF THE WORLD – or almost the end of the world!

The prophecies are so terrible that the greatest danger we will face is a LOSS OF HOPE, leading to an abiding sense of DESPAIR. This is very Tolkien, “Lord of the Rings” stuff. The odds were so great in that story even the young hobbit Frodo, whose task it was to carry the “Ring,” struggles against the hopelessness of it all:

Frodo: *“I wish the ring had never come to me! I wish none of this had happened!”*

Gandalf: *“So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.”*

So then, if:

Pandora’s box is open⁶
the gates of Janus, too⁷
and the furies have all escaped!⁸

Where do we stand?

If one paints history with a very broad brush, it has ever been so – a time of danger, death, and despair. Against this, we must stand firm and pray for the virtues of FAITH and HOPE and the grace to live each day with LOVE because Faith, Hope and Love will see us through it all. We shall walk in the footprints of Jesus and his beloved Mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

I wish you all, the blessings and graces you need for the New Year. May the Star of Bethlehem lead you to the “House of Bread”⁹ – to the Eucharist – in a manger.

See the baby now
by starlight and candle flame
God upon the straw!¹⁰

Fr John Cooper OFM Cap
Capuchin National Spiritual Assistant

⁵ The Scriptures do not say they were Kings. They were “wise men” (Matthew 2:1) who studied the stars.

⁶ In Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman. She was given a closed box and told not to open it, but curiosity got the better of her and she opened the box briefly, and all the plagues and illnesses flew out. She immediately slammed the lid closed, but it was too late, and everyone suffered. One small voice continued calling to her from the box, “Let me out!” Suffering greatly and seemingly with nothing left to lose, she opened the box again, and out flew one white-winged creature called “Hope.”

⁷ The gates of the building of the Roman God Janus (from whom we get the name January) were always left open during times of war and only closed when peace was declared. Janus is depicted with two faces, one looking to the past year and the other to the new year.

⁸ The Furies, in Greek mythology, are goddesses of vengeance who attack men who have sworn a false oath – liars.

⁹ Bethlehem means “House of Bread.”

¹⁰ Haiku Poem C4. 2016.