



Christmas Message 2003 by the Master of the Order



Dear brothers and sisters

As Christmas and New Year approach, one also feels a desire to send a message of Peace to all the Family and, as Family of St. Dominic, to the whole Church and the world. Together with so many other reasons we have for thanking God, on December 22 we will celebrate a new anniversary of the confirmation of the Order by Honorius III in 1216.

Many and beautiful Christmas cards arrive at Santa Sabina every year. I would like to use this space also to send you some "cards for Christmas". In each one of them I would like to describe scenes that are full of life. Like radiant buds they have emerged during this year 2003, which was at the same time tragic and full of the shadows of death.

>>>> Many of you have been able to read the chronicles of my journeys in the pages of IDI. It is true these chronicles have their limitations. We do not have enough space in which to share things more profoundly, to meditate longer on the challenges, conclusions and teachings on "that which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have contemplated and our hands have touched concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it" (1 John 1, 1-2).

I would like to take gifts of love together with you to the crib where the Word incarnate was born. These "cards", simple images of Dominican life around the world, certainly do not cover all our life and mission, but surely they signal it. Each gift, every message expresses a desire, a grace, a petition: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5, 7). As I am writing these things I remember images from this past year and entrust to the Child God the life and mission of the Order, that these small gifts symbolize.

In February, in "Caleruega" (Philippines), I could say that a style of collaboration for the Dominican Family in the region, representing all the branches, was confirmed. The Guidelines of the Dominican Leadership Conference of Asia-Pacific were approved there. We know that in our tradition what is "charismatic" does not oppose what is "institutional or juridical", on the contrary, they meet and animate one another. Mission needs space for dialogue, communication, analysis, and encouragement! Let us look fearlessly, then, for these spaces and try to give them a juridical frame in order to ensure and consolidate a greater collaboration in the mission. May the New Year confirm us in the decision to strengthen our bonds for a renewed presence of the Order in the Asia-Pacific region.

This same month I went to Vietnam together with Bro Quirico Pedregosa. How many memories! Perhaps a gift we can offer the Child God is the life and mission of the Dominican Laity in this country. They are about 70,000. They are heirs of centuries old fraternities that were also confirmed by the shedding of blood. May Christmas encourage us to discover the power of the Good News even where evangelization is very difficult.

In March we met in Warsaw, a large group of brothers (some sisters also attended). Among those present were: the pro-Vicar of the Vicariate General of the Baltic countries and the councillors of the Vicariate; The Prior Provincial of the Province of Poland, the members of the Provincial Council and the Vicar Provincial of Belarus; the Prior Provincial of France, a member of his Council and the Vicar of the Vicariate of Dacia; the Vicar General of Russia and the Ukraine and the Council of the Vicariate; the Socius for Central and Eastern Europe and the Socius for Western Europe. Our assignment? To study the life and mission of the Order in the countries that formed part of the former Soviet Union and the challenges that arise. We wanted, in particular, to evaluate together the future of the Vicariate General of the Baltic countries. Differences of opinion, a fecund and sincere dialogue ... all of us were enriched, and the life and mission of this Vicariate was confirmed and strengthened! It is just over two years that I am at the service of the Order as Master, and I can understand better why Bro Damian and Bro Timothy insisted so much on finding and identifying processes and spaces for dialogue and mutual collaboration between the different entities of the Order. Sometimes one may think that it would be easier to give "instructions", multiplying orders and precepts "in virtue of obedience"... Wouldn't this help us to save time and effort? No! First appearances are deceptive. We have to guarantee a contemplative rhythm in our discussions even though sometimes these are postponed for some time. The words of Humbert of Romans keep resounding in the Order, written in fire in the Constitutions of the nuns and the friars: "what is accepted by all is quickly and easily accomplished" (LCO 6 and LCM 7). May these feasts inspire us to find new ways of collaboration between the brothers so that we may strengthen the presence of the Order in Eastern Europe.

Our visit to Jerusalem, accompanied by Bro Dominique Renouard, besides bringing us into contact with the sad results of the growing spiral of violence in the Holy Land, drew us nearer to the daily life of the community of our Biblical and Archaeological School for some days. Even though they live in the midst of so many inconveniences caused by the situation, I was surprised by the enthusiasm of our brothers for their work, the study and teaching of the Bible in the footsteps of Bro Marie-Joseph Lagrange. What a great joy it is to find that they still have the ability to imagine new projects without bemoaning better times and getting paralysed when facing the uncertain and violent reality that surrounds them! Our prayer in the Basilica at Bethlehem, a city that is practically under siege, becomes real and fervent as a new Christmas approaches. My best wishes to the community of St. Stephen Protomartyr! Your presence in the land that saw the birth of Jesus inspires in us all a love for the Word studied, contemplated, professed and preached.

On April 5 Bro Dominique Renouard, Bro Philippe Le Blanc, Bro Guy Musy and myself visited the palace of the United Nations in Geneva. The beauty of the impressive "Fr. Francisco de Vitoria" Hall, a symbol acknowledging the famous friar who is considered to be the "father of International Law", impressed us. On that same day we met for nearly an hour with Mr Sergio Vieira de Mello, then High Commissioner of the United Nations for Human Rights. Sergio had studied philosophy in Fribourg. He shared with us some memories of his Dominican professors. A central theme we spoke about, one we couldn't avoid, was the situation in Iraq and the dangers that could have been foreseen and avoided (dangers that later became a harsh reality). He shared our fears and told us about his projects and expectations. We could not imagine then that some time later, on May 23, Mr De Mello would be named special Envoy of the Secretary of the United Nations to Iraq. On August 19 he was killed in the bomb attack against the offices of the UN in Baghdad. Jesus, our Peace, receive Sergio Vieira de Mello in the Feast of Life.

During the visit to the Province of England, accompanied by Bro Dominique, we shared intense, fraternal moments in every community. The brethren work with joy and dedication in different kinds of apostolate. Let our visit to the Leicester prison on April 8 be just a simple Christmas symbol. Bro Tony Rattigan accompanied us. I was impressed, not so much by the difficult and sad atmosphere one can imagine in any prison institution ... but by the proximity and the affability many of the interns showed towards Tony, the prison chaplain... This close relationship is a clear sign of the work this our brother is doing there, following in the compassionate footsteps of Dominic of Caleruega and Catherine of Siena. I will remember Bro Tony and the detainees in Leicester during these feasts. "Go back and report ... what you hear and see ... the good news is preached to the poor" (Matthew 11, 4-5).

The visit to the Province of Australia, in the company of Bro Quirico Pedregosa, included five different countries: Australia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and New Zealand. I carry in my heart every meeting, every dialogue we had during a month of canonical visitation (June 8 – July 6). On the island of Loga (Solomon Islands, diocese of Gizo) the auxiliary bishop - our brother Chris Cardone -, a community of the Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia and Solomon, and our friars live in different houses. On Sunday evening, June 29, we had a very intense and profound meeting with the sisters of the community and others from other missionary posts. The sisters showed their sincerity and transparency when they dialogued with us about very delicate, difficult and very concrete themes. We were greatly impressed by the trust these sisters showed when, without hiding their suffering because of certain situations but with fraternal maturity, they found the courage to ask questions! How much wisdom can be offered in a question! Sometimes much more than in many answers! Thank you, again, my sisters! May Christmas help us look ahead because He is about to do something new in Oceania, and it is already happening (cf Isaiah 43, 19).

The presence of the Order in Korea has the warmth and the colour of youth. The Missionary Sisters of St. Dominic arrived in 1984 followed by the other branches. A special Christmas card? On July 12 we shared a whole day with the Korean Dominican Family in the Mother of God monastery. We celebrated the Eucharist in the morning and a festive meeting during the afternoon in the bright and simple chapel of the monastery "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!" (Psalm 133, 1). May the beautiful and martial rhythms the nuns drew from their Korean drums during the liturgy and the fraternal meeting resound during these feasts. Let us adore the King that is coming, the Lord that is approaching!

I visited the Province of Portugal together with Bro Pedro Luis Gonzáles during the first days of September. We came to know all the communities of the friars and the three monasteries of the contemplative nuns. The visit to the Sanctuary of Fatima on September 4 is unforgettable. The meeting of the Dominican Family was held in Lisbon on September 6. A large group of Dominican brothers and sisters took part. During a beautiful and very well prepared Eucharistic liturgy, two sisters belonging to the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena professed their obedience in the hands of their Prioress General. During Christmas "Let us have the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus. Though he was

truly God, he emptied himself and came in human likeness, becoming obedient to death (cf Philippians 2, 5-8).

From the 10th to the 19th of September the retreat for our contemplative nuns of Spain was held in Caleruega. Bro Pedro Luis and Bro Manuel Merten accompanied me. In IDI (n° 415 – October 2003) you could read about these days. Perhaps I only need to share with you something about my own experience. Everything is kept in the heart. Let me tell you something: echoing an old regal document given to the Prioress of this Monastery, I used to address the nuns who were taking part calling them “Señoras de Caleruega” extending to all of them this privilege for, indeed, for ten days, they were the “Señoras y Dueñas de Caleruega”! I would like to send “Christmas cards” with my sincere gratitude to each and every one of the nuns taking part in the retreat, to their communities, to the Monastery of St. Dominic. In particular I send a Christmas card to Sr. Maria Luz Franco Payo, Sr. Maria Inmaculada Franco and Sr. Guadalupe Jiménez, Prioresses of the three Federations of Nuns in Spain. Their presence during the retreat encouraged and confirmed me in this initiative that is so rich in fruits of fraternal friendship. Lastly, my greetings go to all the contemplative communities of the Order. May the mystery of the Birth of Jesus inspire all the monasteries and the nuns of St. Dominic to discover their roots in the hidden simplicity of Bethlehem!

During the canonical visitation in Chile, in October, I could observe how certain projects, conceived as priorities, can give life to a province (in this case the General Vicariate). There are thirteen friars from different communities who travel 400 kilometres weekly (between Chillán and Santiago) in order to offer their personal contribution by giving lectures in the course of “Diplomado de Teología” in turns. These are given at the same time in both cities. May the Child God, our Peace, keep encouraging us to walk in joy while thinking on the mysteries of Salvation!

While writing these Christmas “messages”, I receive news of the friars who form the new community in Addis Abeba, capital city of Ethiopia. They have kindly answered the invitation that this country’s Bishop’s Conference made to the Order to found a Catholic University. The community, at first under the immediate jurisdiction of the Master of the Order, is made up of five friars belonging to the Province of the Philippines. May the Lord help us during these new times to build the Church and the Order as Family. In fact, this image emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust. (cf. Ecclesia in Africa n. 63).

My dear brothers and sisters: when you receive these greetings I am sending from Rome and “from so many parts of the world” ... I will be in Peru, together with Bro João Xerri and Bro Quirico Pedregosa. We will remember you all in the presence of our saints and blessed: Martin de Porres, Juan Macías, Rose of Lima, Ana de los Ángeles

When you receive these “Christmas Cards” give thanks to God with me for these signs of life that shine like the Star of Bethlehem in the midst of so much darkness.

Happy Christmas! May 2004 bring us many true things, good and beautiful, things coming from God! Let us all, sons and daughters of Saint Dominic, be builders of peace, so that we may be called God’s children, blessed.

Bro Carlos A. Azpiroz Costa OP



Master of the Order

Sunday, 30 November, I Sunday in Advent