

# The longed-for Church of the Manger

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INFO SSCC Brothers No 139 – 8 January 2020



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**I**n the last few days here in Rome of 2019 good wishes were exchanged for Christmas and the New Year. The amazing contemplation of the Word made Flesh, manifested in a child wrapped in swaddling clothes, has revived our hope.

The hope that Jesus brings is stronger than our weaknesses and failures.

In the lead up to Christmas we took time as a General Government to share on what our first year of service has meant for each of us, our experience of the congregation and the impact it is having on our "inner-self".

Our conviction and our desire for the congregation to be able to embrace the gospel of weakness, that is, to discover and name our personal and institutional weaknesses and know how to place them, with simplicity and courage, at the feet of Jesus was reinforced. When we do this, a grace of conversion takes place and our inner self, that is, the presence of Christ through his Spirit in us, is renewed.

We are also conscious of a desire that prevails through most of the Catholic Church and in our societies for the structural transformation of our institutions. The words we have used to express this desire for change, for the missionary and pastoral transformation of the Church are **"searching for new ways of being and serving in the Church"**.

The discovery and acceptance of the gospel of weakness and the longed-for search for new ways of being and serving in the Church have their epiphany in the manger. The great hope of God comes to us in a fragile child, entrusted in the first place to the care of Mary and Joseph, and subsequently entrusted to our care. It is a hope that is both strong

and vulnerable. Strong because it is, above all, God's initiative relying on the loving cooperation of Mary and Joseph. Vulnerable, because from the beginning it is exposed to the cruel decisions that result in the killing of the innocents.

And after God-with-us is revealed as hope, God enters into a prolonged period of ardent waiting, like those who accompany the growth of a child, or the maturing of projects, or who walk the tiring paths of peace and justice for peoples.

At this time when we are relishing the feast of Christmas with wonder, I invite you to take time to contemplate the lessons we can learn from the crib. Let us dialogue with Jesus, with the shepherds, with Mary and Joseph, even with the animals, and let us ask them: How can we accept the gospel of weakness? And let us ask them to give us the creativity and courage to set out resolutely on the road to new ways of being and serving in the Church.

### **"I follow a man named Jesus"**

A Chilean brother of our congregation, Esteban Gumucio (1914-2001), whose process of canonization is underway, made this meditation before the manger and expressed it in a prayer called *"I follow a man called Jesus"*.

Looking at the crib I would like to be able to shout:  
"Look, we Christians follow a man  
who did not have a king's cradle, but the arms of a carpenter."

I follow a man who is not of my race, nor of my age.  
I follow one Jesus of Nazareth who did not write books  
nor did he command armies.  
Everything he has said is my word and my food.  
Everything he has done is what I most desire.  
And his way is my way.  
And his Father is my Father; and his cause is mine.  
My Mother, like his, is also called Mary.  
The lesson I am always learning little by little from him  
is "Gentleness," and the task he teaches me is "Freedom."  
His example is "Justice" shot through with Humility.

I follow a man who seized me at the center of my life,  
at my deepest inner source, where I am my best self.  
I follow a man who wants me to be free, without chains.  
I follow a man who, while being my Lord, is my best friend.

I recognize him by the warmth of his truth,  
by his wounded, sacrificed, opened heart,  
that makes me live as everyone's brother.  
I follow a man along this little, narrow and fragile pathway.  
His footsteps are so special that those of both  
the greatest saints and children fit into them.

If you have heard his voice or his whisper:

his song, his difficult and gentle truth...  
If you have glimpsed the expression of his face  
or have seen something of the way he has of doing great things  
but so that the little ones can appreciate them...  
If you have asked forgiveness and have received peace in  
torrents in his invisible embrace...  
If you have caught a scent of a gentle odor of hope,  
and have enjoyed bread that tastes of the work  
and weariness of the poor...  
If you have caught sight of him  
in the long line of those who weep...  
If you have encountered him  
among the persecuted, the forgotten,  
the unappreciated, the exiled, the marginalized...  
If you have touched hands wounded and pierced  
by nails yet full of the strength of the Spirit...  
Let me tell you: that is Jesus, the Master, who calls us.

And now to take the risk of turning everything upside down...  
The great to serve the little one...  
The rich made poor to clothe the naked...  
Bread to be shared...  
And let no one be stuck in where they have been...  
So that everyone can be much better than what they have been...  
And my boat and yours, keel toward the sky, mast in the water...  
And the world become home for everyone...  
And brothers you and me and all of you.

May this prayer inspire us during this year to seek and bring about the new ways of  
being and serving the Church that we so long for.

Fraternally,

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