
BEST WISHES OF PEACE AND JOY!



GLORY TO GOD

I have often dreamt that one day I would be spending the night in Bethlehem, in the shepherds' field where choirs of angels sang for the first time *"Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth!"* I did manage a pilgrimage there fifteen years ago, in March of 1980; over the entire region, that year, had fallen over 30 centimetres of snow, a phenomenon that happens only every 10 or 15 years. At that time, it was out of the question to consider walking from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, or even to spend the night out of doors. I therefore opted for public transport, in this instance an old Palestinian bus. In the Basilica of the Nativity and the Chapel of the Angels was to be found the same message: *Glory to God in the highest. Gloria in excelsis Deo*. This is the central message of Bethlehem: the glory of God, and peace on earth. If the glory of God is man and woman fully alive, peace on earth consists in the proclamation of God's eternal glory. When we talk of 'glory' we generally refer to a person's fame, his or her high social position, power and influence. The glory of God refers to God Himself as He reveals Himself to humankind and to the whole universe: He reveals His power, the greatness of His holiness, the force of His being. The glory of God is therefore an epiphany, a divine manifestation. God shows forth His glory through His extraordinary interventions, His judgements, signs, and miracles. At Christmas, God shows Himself by coming to us in the child of the Virgin Mary; He shows forth His glory in the small child named Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-Us.

PEACE ON EARTH

It is no longer in thunder and lightning that God manifests Himself, but in the humble manger at Bethlehem, in the person of Jesus, the newborn whom the shepherds find with Mary and Joseph... And this child brings to everyone peace, *Shalom*. Peace, Paix, Pax... The peace promised by the angels isn't only a pact allowing for a life of tranquillity, nor is it a peace that is the opposite of war. The peace announced by the angels refers to the well-being of daily life, the state of man and woman living in harmony with nature, with oneself, and with God. Specifically, it is blessing, rest, glory, richness, salvation, life. The Jewish people sometimes referred to being in good health and being in peace with nearly identical expressions, because peace refers to both spiritual and material goods. Peace is what is good as opposed to what is bad. It is not possible to have peace without seeking justice. Peace is even considered as the sum of goods that flow from justice. Far from being an absence of war, peace according to the Bible is fullness of happiness: a fruitful land, abundant food, a secure home, triumph over one's enemies, an extraordinary family. Peace is the sign of justice, it is a gift of God. Peace is built on truth, freedom, and charity. Peace respects the rights of individuals and of peoples.

PEACE TO ALL FAMILIES

As I contemplate the Holy Family I think of all of our families, to whom I wish a lasting peace. Several families are experiencing difficulties of all kinds: poverty, mourning, distance from one's family, separation, divorce. For many families, the holiday season is a difficult one to go through. I am reminded of my father: for him, Christmas and New Year's Day were probably the most difficult days of the year, even if on those days he saw all his children and grandchildren; he couldn't help thinking of all those who were missing, those he had known at one time or

another. it was painful not to be with these loved ones. Besides, it was the day after Christmas, in 1986, that he died. But today as before, he continues to gather us together. The memory of our dear departed motivates us to carry on their task of peace and joy, to continue to live the values by which they lived: unity, forgiveness, simplicity, mutual aid, tenacity, faith, and especially charity. I hope that all these holiday homecomings be for all of you a period of fellowship, friendship, and even reconciliation.

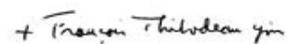
PEACE TO THOSE WHO HURT THE MOST

I cannot help but think of the destitute, of those in our milieu who are suffering the most, the sick, the handicapped, those suffering from loneliness and despair: May this Christmas season bring them hope. Pope John Paul II stated, in New York, last October, "*I cannot help witnessing to the fact that my hope and trust are founded on Jesus Christ, on him whose second millennium we shall soon celebrate. Christians, we believe that in the death and resurrection of the Lord, the love of God and His tender care for all of creation have been manifested. To us, Jesus Christ is God-become-Man in the history of humankind... That is why Christian hope regarding humankind and its future concerns the entire human person. I stand here before you as a witness to human dignity, to hope, to the conviction that the destiny of all nations is in the hands of a merciful Providence.*"

FOLLOWING THE FIFTIETH

More and more, in the wake of the Fiftieth Anniversary festivities, must we repeat that *the love of God is from age to age*. We must believe in this love and witness to it in our lives. Where there is love there is no room for fear, doubt, or despair. We must not fear the future: Emmanuel shall always be with us. We must not fear our brother or sister: God Himself became one of us. Everyone was created in the image and likeness of Him who is the origin of all that exists. "We are capable of wisdom and virtue. With these gifts and with God's help, we can build upon the century that is fast approaching us a civilisation worthy of the human person, a true culture of freedom. We can and must do it, and in doing so, we shall be able to see for ourselves that the tears of this century have prepared the way for a new springtime of the human spirit" (Pope John Paul II).

Merry Christmas!



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