

“Hard times may come, when the cross casts its shadow, yet nothing can destroy the supernatural joy that always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved.”

**Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation
*Gaudete et Exsultate***

Christmas 2017 in Bashiqa, near Mosul, Iraq

MIRROR



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Dear Christ Child,

I hope our “dear friends” and readers of the Mirror newsletter will understand if I venture to address this year’s Christmas letter directly to You. I know that many children only send You Christmas letters in the hope of getting Christmas presents, and I confess that I also have some slight doubt as to my own motives in writing this letter. But this is not simply a childish game; and my doubts only show me how weak my own faith is. But the importance of Christmas, not to mention the times in which we now live, demand that I put aside my lack of faith. It is time to talk to You quite candidly, as to my dearest friend.

Dear Christ Child, there is so much darkness in families, in the world and even in Your own Church, which should be the Light of the world. We try to blind ourselves to our own darkness with our artificial Christmas lighting, and in doing so our vision is obscured even more. We can no longer see the heavens and the Star of Bethlehem, which shines there to show us the way. For in truth, Your birth in the stable in Bethlehem was the moment when the true

Light shone forth for mankind, yet the darkness could not comprehend it (cf Jn 1:5). And so I ask You to grant me just one thing: that great joy that filled the hearts of the Three Wise Men from the East when they saw the star that led them to You and Your Mother. I want to experience that overwhelming, childlike joy that the Angels announced to the shepherds and which is so hard for us to find today. That liberating



“Grant me just one thing – that great joy that filled the Three Wise Men when they saw the star that led them to You and Your Mother.”

joy which comes from knowing that You are close to us, that it is good to be a human being, a child of God. Without this joy everything remains in darkness. Without it, we merely numb our senses with all the mass-produced consumerism that the Christmas industry churns out.

Dear Christ Child, grant me the joyful certainty of knowing that the radiant constellation of Bethlehem still shines over my path as I journey through life. In asking You for this joy, I do not simply expect an easy, comfortable life without the daily struggle to over-

come my own selfishness, but rather the joyful certainty that You will drive away all darkness and transform my sins. It is only this kind of joy that we can truly share with others. This joy does not lessen if we share it, but returns to us greater than before. This is the true gift of Christmas. We can convey it in the simplest of ways – with a smile, a prayer, an expression of sympathy, a little help, an act of forgiveness.

Thank You, dear Jesus, for the gift of being part of this great family of ACN, which seeks to proclaim to the world the greatest joy of all – that God is good, that He loves us, He knows us, He became Man for us. We see

Your star, still shining over the house that is the Church, above all where she suffers, and we joyfully bring You our gifts and lay them there. Dear Christ Child, I ask You to bless all the benefactors and co-workers of ACN, together with their families and all whom they hold in their hearts, and fill them all with the Christmas grace of Your joy.

Your loving child,

P. Martin M. Barta

**Fr Martin Maria Barta
Ecclesiastical Assistant of ACN**



Rosaries for the world's youth

St Matthew's Gospel tells how Wise Men from the East came to Jerusalem. King Herod consulted his scribes who confirmed Micah's ancient prophecy: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." (Mt 2:6).

Ever since Herod's day, Bethlehem has gone through turbulent and bloody times – infanticide, war, oppression – right up to our own times. Bethlehem is emblematic of the situation of Christians in the region – of their continuing presence and survival in the place of Christ's birth. Without prayer this would hardly be possible. Saint Matthew goes on to describe how the Wise Men followed the star to "the place where the child was"... "And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him" (Mt 2:9ff). Adoring Jesus through the eyes of Mary – this is the Rosary. And these two things – adoration and survival in Bethlehem – are the basis of a project which also aims to encourage young people around the world to pray for peace. In practice this involves Christians in Bethlehem making Rosaries out of local olive wood, which will then be distributed to the young people at the World Youth Day in Panama next January.

At least half a million young people are expected in Panama, and the plan is to give each of them two Rosaries from Bethlehem – one for their personal use and another to give away to other young people in their own home country. Pope Francis has repeatedly urged us to pray the Rosary. Nothing is impossible if we use this form of prayer, he tells us, as "The prayer of the Rosary is, in many ways, the synthesis of the history of God's mercy."



Good wood. Rosary craftsman in his workshop in Bethlehem.



Praying for peace: with the Bethlehem Rosary.

For months now, Christians in Bethlehem have been working to produce the one million Rosaries needed. The cost of materials and labour together come to around one dollar per Rosary. This means that each of the 200 families in Bethlehem crafting these rosaries make enough to support themselves for a year. But what matters most to

them is the fact that hundreds of thousands of young people will be praying for peace and thereby fulfilling the Pope's personal request, and that they too are contributing to this with their work. So, although overshadowed by the wars in Syria and Iraq, they are not forgotten.

Bethlehem remains a city of hope. We are entrusting this hope, along with the Rosary, into the hands of these young people. We have promised **£87,600** towards the cost of this project. Will you join us in this great campaign, which stretches from Bethlehem to Panama, for peace in the world?



Celebration, prayer, contemplation: scenes from previous World Youth Days in Madrid, Rio and Krakow.



*The Holy Family also had to flee:
Refugees taking part in a Bible
course in the Bidi Bidi Camp.*

God still lives in South Sudan

“Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” So the disciples going to Emmaus ask themselves (Luke 24:32). It is the heart that burns, that suffers, that forgives.

It is also the heart that believes. “How slow are your hearts to believe”, Jesus tells the disciples (cf Luke 24:25). It is in our hearts that we decide to follow God, and that we decide to forgive. The Emmaus Centre in Katikamu, **Uganda**, seeks to speak to the hearts of the hundreds of thousands of refugees who have been forced to flee here as they escape the war in South Sudan; it seeks to draw them closer to God in their poverty and bewilderment; and open them to forgiveness and reconciliation once more. It does this by training priests and catechists for a special apostolate to the refugees. These missionaries then go out to the refugee camps and train other helpers. The two-week training course costs around **£100** for each of the 50 missionaries involved (£5,683) and around **£30** each for the 400 or so assistants (£12,874). The wounds these refugees have suffered are deep ones, the questions raised in the discussion groups are difficult ones: Where is God in South Sudan? Is he punishing us? Why have we been suffering ever since 1955? Why do other countries live in peace while we live in this hell? Why should I forgive those who

have killed my wife, abducted my children, stolen my cattle? Without God’s grace there is sometimes no answer to such questions. That is why the outreach team often simply goes with their group into the chapel, to pray before the Blessed Sacrament. Prayer heals: God’s presence alone can bring peace to troubled and wounded hearts.

There are thousands, tens of thousands, whose hearts still bleed with hatred and bitterness. This project is helping them. The Gospel message is having an effect. The pastoral outreach to the more than a quarter of a million refugees in the two largest camps, in Bidi Bidi and Palorinya, particularly focuses on the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, but also includes the area of sexual morality – which is especially important on account of AIDS – and marriage. Many people are traumatised and really need psychological counselling as well. The Emmaus centre is a spiritual first-aid centre, so to speak. But for many, this aid represents the beginning of a new life. So now, like the disciples at Emmaus, they too can set out and tell their brethren, “The Lord is truly risen!” (Luke 24:34). ●



What is marriage? Guidance for young women, with posters and pointers for a better future.



“.. and how they had recognised him in the breaking of the bread” (Lk 24:35). Being Christian also means sharing.



A Church of healing and hope



Fr Michael Shields has worked bringing reconciliation to the former gulag town of Magadan in Russia. ACN, which has supported his work, invited him to speak at August's World Meeting of Families in Dublin, Ireland. Here is the full text of his talk.

“Praise to Jesus Christ – now and forever”. This is the English translation of the Catholic greeting in Russia. One more time: “Praise to Jesus Christ – now and forever”. Marvellous! Let’s be enthusiastic for Jesus.

My name is Fr Michael Shields from Alaska. I have spent the last 25 years in Siberia, Russia in a city called Magadan, at the former prison camp of Stalin. I felt called to live the spirituality of Blessed Charles de Foucauld there, after a 40-day retreat where I heard “go pray in the camps”. I knew it meant going there freely for the rest of my life.

I have been praying for the healing of families for these 25 years torn apart by atheistic communism that promoted abortion, denied the reality of God and attacked the Church. We need this prayer of healing today more than ever in our western culture that promotes abortion and has forgotten God.

I have preached the gospel of hope in this dark place of history that sent people to suffer and die because they believed in God. We are in a dark place and

we need hope as we see attacks on the family, marriage, the sick, the elderly and on our religious freedom. We see culturally confusing teaching on human sexuality that denies the authority of God, His moral absolutes and the teaching of the Church. We need this gospel of hope more than ever today. What is the risk? Nothing less than the salvation of souls.

I have proclaimed the scandal of the cross in this place in Siberia, Russia, called the ‘Devil’s playground’. The scandal of the cross is God offering himself: **“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed”** (1 Peter 2:24).

We are in a time of scandals in the Church that need to be taken seriously to the scandal of the cross through deep

prayer, repentance and asking and giving forgiveness. There is no way out of the scandal of sin other than through the Cross of Christ: “We adore you Christ and we praise you, because by your cross you have redeemed the world”. Our world needs a humble Church, built on healing and hope with heads bowed and on our knees in repentance but our hearts soaring on eagles’ wings, proclaiming Jesus Christ is Lord. It is amazing to me that so many have such a low expectation of their faith and their relationship with Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, is this the best that the death of Jesus Christ the Son of God the saviour of the world can do for us? That we should just live in mediocrity, boredom, worldliness, and struggling with sinful habits and patterns, but seeing very little progress. Really? **“By his wounds you have been healed.”**



The memorial to gulag victims in Magadan, Russia, where Fr Shields ministers.

It is in Jesus that sin is put to death, that you really come alive, that sorrow, anxieties and fears give way to joy. Brothers and sisters the world needs Jesus. We need Jesus. A story of hope.

Ilita was five years old when she came to our Sunday Mass by herself in the middle of winter at 40 below zero. She was so small she could barely see over the pew when she knelt. She had no faith background. And no catechetical formation. Her family was not religious. Yet there she was concentrating every Sunday with an undivided attention watching me as I prayed at the altar. She would come up for a blessing at communion time. Then one Sunday after she had attended Mass for a few months she was blessed and she did not move. And I blessed her again and again she remained. She frowned when I asked her to go back to her seat. I knew after Mass I was going to get balled-out by a five-year-old but I didn't know why. After Mass Ilita with a hurtful look asked

me a question that changed the definition of my priesthood and defined the mission of the Church. She asked, "Fr Michael why didn't you give me Jesus. I wanted Jesus. Why didn't you give me Jesus." A five-year-old heart discerned what the world is blind to. Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and this five-year-old heart wanted him. And you know the world wants and needs him.

At that moment I envisioned men and women from all nations, races and times, huge crowds, behind Ilita with desperate and painful looks crying out to me as a priest and to us His Church: "Why don't you give us Jesus? We want Jesus." We are the broken body of Christ that needs healing and hope. We need Jesus. Why? Because we can only give away what we have. The world will judge us if we give away too little. We can give away our brokenness or give away the one who was broken for us. Jesus. The saviour of the world. Who died for our selfishness and sinfulness

so we could be set free to love like Jesus. What does it mean to love like Jesus? Look at the cross.

A young man came to me quite poor and broken. He was obnoxious and ungrateful and I didn't feel like I wanted to help him let alone love him. The Lord spoke to me these simple words as I prayed before the Blessed Sacrament "I died for him. Will you?" Love is the cross of Christ. My life for yours.

I have been 25 years in a former prison camp of Stalin. I have more hope than I can express. I have more joy in my heart that I can proclaim. Why? Because as St Paul, **"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord"** (Phil. 3:8). Yes, broken body of Christ, my dear brothers and sisters in faith, let's give the world what it seeks – Jesus. Mary, dear mother, lead us to your Son Jesus, so that the world can be saved. Now and forever. ●



Though only just discharged from hospital, and with strict instructions to spend no more than 20 minutes sitting at her computer, Sister Maria Aparecida has nonetheless written a long letter to ACN from **Brazil**, sending heartfelt thanks on behalf of all the Sisters for our support for their life and ministry. She recalls the deep bond of prayer which unites the missionaries, laity and contemplative religious. This bond was stressed by Pope Saint John Paul II on the 500th anniversary of Christianity in the Americas. She feels that this bond is still a living reality today. And ACN's support gives her community courage, despite their own poverty, to remember those who are poorer still. With this in mind, she asks us to send more copies of the Mirror, to encourage even more people to become benefactors. Well, if that is not a spirit of missionary devotion, then what is?

Need, love and thanks – your letters

A great opportunity

Thank you for the information you have sent me. I will continue to take advantage of the great opportunity of giving Mass stipends [via ACN]. In this way I can address both the spiritual and material need at the same time!

A benefactress in Austria

For suffering Christians in Iraq

Thank you for sending the Mirror. I enclose a small sum to help the suffering Christians in the ruined villages of the Niniveh Plains in Iraq.

A benefactor in Belgium

Irene's gift from heaven

I have six grandchildren. One of them is Irene who passed away at the age of 18. I give each of them a holiday donation. Irene doesn't have a bank account anymore because she is

in heaven, so I donated the money to ACN, as I'm sure it would be Irene's wish that the euros go to a good cause.

**Irene's grandfather
writing from the Netherlands**

Giving from beyond the grave

As a Catholic Christian, I have already asked my son not to stop giving to ACN, even after God has called me to himself. For I am quite certain that your charity is helping many needy people and I give thanks to God that I can still contribute towards it.

A benefactress in Brazil

United in prayer

Let us remain united in prayer, entrusting our plans and projects to God's divine providence and remaining firm in our faith in Christ.

A benefactor in Canada



**Thomas
Heine-Geldern,**
Executive President,
ACN (International)

Dear Friends,

Some time ago, while visiting a refugee camp in the Middle East, I observed how, despite all the difficulties and the hopelessness of their situation, the Christian refugees there were joyfully preparing for Christmas. I was profoundly moved. Here were people – elderly and infirm, solemn-faced children, harassed mothers – who had lost almost everything and yet, in the cold and unwelcoming conditions of a flimsy tent or a metal container, were nonetheless preparing for the birth of the Redeemer. And as they spoke to us about the coming feast, they even looked truly “redeemed”. Even in the midst of all that poverty... What faith, what trust!

These brothers and sisters are in my thoughts whenever I think about our campaign for the Christians in Syria. As well as being able to give them something – e.g. the chance to return to their homeland, to rebuild their houses and churches – we can also learn from them: e.g. about the things that really matter in this life.

And in saying this, I am not forgetting that all this giving and learning is possible only thanks to your generosity. I continue to trust in your kind hearts, and so I have more than one reason, dear benefactors, to thank you and wish you a joyful and holy Christmas season.

Yours gratefully,

Where to send your contribution for the Church in Need

Our address is Aid to the Church in Need, 12–14 Benhill Avenue, Sutton, Surrey SM1 4DA. Please use the Freepost envelope – it saves you money and helps us. If you give by standing order, or have sent a donation recently, please accept our sincere thanks. This Mirror is for your interest and information.

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