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(Letter n° 71)

“I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages;
saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out’,
to those who are in darkness, ‘Show yourselves’.”
(Is 49:8-9)

We invite you to read the homily preached by Pope Francis on Christmas Night 2024, just after he opened the Holy Door and inaugurated the Jubilee Year.

An angel of the Lord, bathed in light, illumines the night and brings glad tidings to the shepherds: “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:10-11). Heaven breaks forth upon earth amid the wonder of the poor and the singing of angels. God has become one of us to make us like himself; he has come down to us to lift us up and restore us to the embrace of the Father.

Sisters and brothers, this is our hope. God is Emmanuel, God-with-us. The infinitely great has made himself tiny; divine light has shone amid the darkness of our world; the glory of heaven has appeared on earth. And how? As a little child. If God can visit us, even when our hearts seem like a lowly manger, we can truly say: Hope is not dead; hope is alive and it embraces our lives forever. Hope does not disappoint!

Brothers and sisters, with the opening of the Holy Door we have inaugurated a new Jubilee, and each of us can enter into the mystery of this extraordinary event. Tonight, the door of hope has opened wide to the world. Tonight, God speaks to each of us and says: there is hope also for you! There is hope for each of us. And do not forget, sisters and brothers, that God forgives everything, God always forgives. Do not forget this, which is a way of understanding hope in the Lord.

To receive this gift, we are called to set out with the marvel of the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem. The Gospel tells us that, having heard the message of the angel, they “went with haste” (Lk 2:16). In this same way, “with haste”, we too are called to recover lost hope, to renew that hope in our hearts, and to sow seeds of hope amid the bleakness of our time and our world. And there is so much desolation at this time. We think of wars, of children being shot at, bombs on schools and hospitals. Do not delay, do not hesitate, but allow yourselves to be drawn along by the Good News.

With haste, then, let us set out to behold the Lord who is born for us, our hearts joyful and attentive, ready to meet him and then to bring hope to the way we live our daily lives. And this is our task: to bring hope into the different situations of life. For Christian hope is not a cinematic “happy ending” which we passively await, but rather, a promise, the Lord’s promise, to be welcomed here and now in our world of suffering and sighs. It is a summons not to tarry, to be kept back by our old habits, or to wallow in mediocrity or laziness. Hope calls us – as Saint Augustine would say – to be upset with things that are wrong and to find the courage to change them. Hope calls us to become

pilgrims in search of truth, dreamers who never tire, women and men open to being challenged by God's dream, which is of a new world where peace and justice reign.

Let us learn a lesson from the shepherds. The hope born this night does not tolerate the indifference of the complacent or the lethargy of those content with their own comforts – and so many of us are in danger of becoming too comfortable; hope does not accept the faux prudence of those who refuse to get involved for fear of making mistakes, or of those who think only of themselves. Hope is incompatible with the detachment of those who refuse to speak out against evil and the injustices perpetrated at the expense of the poor. Christian hope, on the other hand, while inviting us to wait patiently for the Kingdom to grow and spread, also requires of us, even now, to be bold, responsible, and not only that but also compassionate, in our anticipation of the fulfilment of the Lord's promise. And here perhaps it will do us good to ask ourselves about compassion: do I have compassion? Am I able to suffer-with? Let us reflect on this.

On reflecting on how often we accommodate ourselves to the world and conform to its way of thinking, a fine priest and writer prayed for a Blessed Christmas in these words: "Lord, I ask you for a little annoyance, a touch of restlessness, a twinge of regret. At Christmas, I would like to find myself dissatisfied. Happy, but not satisfied. Happy because of what you do, dissatisfied by my lack of response. Please, take away our complacency and hide a few thorns beneath the hay of our all-too-full 'manger'. Fill us with the desire for something greater" (A. Pronzato, *La novena di Natale*). The desire for something greater. Do not stand still. Let us not forget that still water is the first to become stagnant.

Christian hope is precisely this "something greater", which should spur us to set out "with haste". As disciples of the Lord, we are called to find our greater hope in him, and then, without delay, carry that hope with us, as pilgrims of light amid the darkness of this world.

Sisters and brothers, this is the Jubilee. This is the season of hope in which we are invited to rediscover the joy of meeting the Lord. The Jubilee calls us to spiritual renewal and commits us to the transformation of our world, so that this year may truly become a time of jubilation. A jubilee for our mother Earth, disfigured by profiteering; a time of jubilee for the poorer countries burdened beneath unfair debts; a time of jubilee for all those who are in bondage to forms of slavery old and new.

All of us have received the gift and task of bringing hope wherever hope has been lost, lives broken, promises unkept, dreams shattered and hearts overwhelmed by adversity. We are called to bring hope to the weary who have no strength to carry on, the lonely oppressed by the bitterness of failure, and all those who are broken-hearted. To bring hope to the interminable, dreary days of prisoners, to the cold and dismal lodgings of the poor, and to all those places desecrated by war and violence. To bring hope there, to sow hope there.

The Jubilee has now opened so that all people may receive hope, the hope of the Gospel, the hope of love and hope of forgiveness.

As we contemplate the manger, as we gaze upon it and see God's tender love in the face of the Child Jesus, let us ask ourselves: "Are our hearts full of expectation? Does this hope find a place there? ... As we contemplate the loving kindness of God who overcomes our doubts and fears, let us also contemplate the grandeur of the hope that awaits us. ... May this vision of hope illumine our path each day" (C. M. Martini, *Christmas Homily*, 1980).

Dear sister, dear brother, on this night the "holy door" of God's heart lies open before you. Jesus, God-with-us, is born for you, for me, for us, for every man and woman. And remember that with him, joy flourishes; with him, life changes; with him, hope does not disappoint.



In recent months several of us have visited their families: from 15 to 25 July, Bro. Benoît was in Aix-en-Provence; from 21 July to 1 August, Bro. David-Joseph was in Colmar; from 28 July to 8 August, Bro. Thierry was in France; from 28 August to 6 September, Bro. Ildefonso was in Italy;

from 29 August to 6 September, Bro. Éric was in France; from 16 to 26 September, Bro. Gregory was in the United States; and from 9 to 22 November, Bro. Joshua was in Mexico.



- ✠ On 10 August, our Sunday Mass was broadcast live on BBC Northern Ireland.
- ✠ On 28 September, Raph O'Connor began his novitiate as secular oblate.
- ✠ On 29, the parish of Keady (Co. Louth) organised a triduum to commemorate the centenary of the canonisation of St Thérèse of Lisieux. Abbot Mark-Ephrem opened the triduum by presiding at the Eucharist and preaching.
- ✠ On 3 October, the theological reflection group of the Catholic Church and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, of which Abbot Mark-Ephrem is a member, met at the Abbey.
- ✠ On 5, Abbot Mark-Ephrem occupied his canon's stall at the Anglican cathedral of Armagh for the installation Service of two new canons.
- ✠ On 8 and 9, Abbot Mark-Ephrem and Bro. Thierry visited Bro. John and the Sisters of Turvey Monastery (England).
- ✠ From 14 to 20, Fr. Robert Igo, Abbot of Ampleforth Benedictine Abbey (England), preached our community retreat.
- ✠ From 18 to 29, we had the joy of welcoming Dom Benedetto Vichi, of the Archabbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore and Chancellor of our Congregation.
- ✠ From 23 to 26, Bro. Thierry was in Rome with three other members of the diocesan synodal team to take part in the Jubilee of the Synodal Teams.
- ✠ From 6 to 15 November, Sr Anne-Emmanuelle, Prioress of the Community of Grandchamp (Switzerland), was on retreat among us.
- ✠ From 11 to 16, we welcomed Bishop Toby Howarth, Anglican bishop of Bradford (area bishop in the Diocese of Leeds in England) for his annual retreat.
- ✠ On 13 and 14, Abbot Mark-Ephrem was in Dromantine for a meeting of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting, the ecumenical gathering of all the Churches in Ireland. The theme of the meeting was the Council of Nicaea. On the evening of the 13, Fr. Éric joined Abbot Mark-Ephrem for a liturgy based on the O Antiphons (antiphons sung during the week before Christmas, all of which begin with the letter O in Latin).
- ✠ From 17 to 20, Abbot Mark-Ephrem was in London. On 17 he concelebrated at the funeral Mass of Peggy Marmion (1928–2025). That same day, Dom Andrea Santus, Bursar General of our Congregation, also arrived in London, and together they went to Turvey Monastery to meet Bro. John.



On 11 November, on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of the dedication of the Basilica of Sant'Anselmo in Rome, Pope Leo XIV presided there at the Eucharist. The Abbey of Sant'Anselmo is the seat of the Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Order and of a university. At the end of the celebration, Dom Jeremias Schröder, Abbot Primate, read the following message:

Holy Father,

I hope you can feel how much your presence today means to us Benedictines – those here at Sant'Anselmo, but also our world-wide family of monks and nuns across the globe. We are very aware that we owe it to Pope Leo XIII that we have this place here in Rome. And we are deeply joyful that we can thank his successor and namesake today.

From the fullness of the heart the mouth wants to speak, and lots! The prefect of your household has warned me to be brief, however, and I perfectly understand why. So I will only say three things.

1. Our Benedictine mission: when Pope Leo XIII established this house, he had great hopes for the role which the Benedictines can play for the promotion of Christian Unity. Many of our monasteries have committed themselves to ecumenical dialogue, with a special emphasis on the Eastern Churches. Pope Pius XI repeated this request and our order reinforced its commitment. Even today, we are willing to engage in this. Monks and Nuns of our Benedictine tradition, with our roots in a time of an undivided church, and our practice of hospitality, can be bridge-builders with other Christian churches and especially monastic communities. Many monasteries have become important places of ecumenical encounter. *Mi casa es su casa*, or rather: Our houses are your houses: do not hesitate to make use of us.

2. When Leo XIII established our Collegio 140 years ago, his concern was for monks, their education and their academic contribution to the universal church. The Benedictine order today comprises twice as many women as men. For four decades we have been working and sometimes struggling to set up a Collegio for nuns and sisters who come to Rome as students and professors. We have had some serious setbacks, some very recently. I want to be bold and suggest that the work of Leo XIII in this field still needs to be completed. The symbolic presence of the Benedictine nun St Hildegard, doctor of the church, here at Sant' Anselmo today is a token of our hope.

3. In four years, we will celebrate the foundation of Montecassino by St Benedict in the years 529, 1500 years ago. The significance of this goes far beyond a local jubilee. St Benedict has inspired a way of life and legislated for it which has transformed this continent, as acknowledged by Pope Paul VI who made him principal patron of Europe. The Benedictine heritage is not just for us monks and nuns. It is something for the entire church, and for the world at large. In the sixth century, the foundation of a monastery on a hilltop in Southern Italy became a prophetic gesture for a world in turmoil. We want to explore how this tradition of St Benedict and St Scholastica can become meaningful for a world that is once again on the brink of transformation and disruption. We hope and pray that the successor of Peter will help our reflection, discernment and action, for us monastics as well as for the church and the world at large.

We now ask for your blessing, on us assembled here, our university family, on all members of our order, and on the Hundreds of Thousands of faithful who are connected with our monasteries, families, oblates, students, employees, friends and benefactors.



*We wish all of you a very Happy Christmas
and a Blessed New Year 2026.*