

**PASTORAL LETTER FOR ADVENT 2008
BY THE ARCHBISHOP OF MALTA
AND THE BISHOP OF GOZO**

HE CAME TO US AND WE WELCOMED HIM

Dear brethren in the Ministerial Priesthood, in Consecrated Life, and in Baptism.

This is the first time we are writing a Letter to you for Advent, because we feel that this is a period during the year which is very important for the Christian community. It is a time of preparation and vigil, but it is also a time when it is easier for the Word of God to end up being lost in the many activities that celebrations bring about with them. For us Christians, Christmas remains a unique event. We believe that the birth of the Lord Jesus changed the history of humanity because in Bethlehem God showed us how much he invested in us and how much he believes in the human being.

Christmas always brings joy, as well as a sense of altruism in many who, during this period, give to others from their time and money. It also brings along a sense of solidarity especially to those living alone, the suffering, the sick, the unloved, those who are hurt and emarginated. Joy, as well as suffering, are experiences that may create space for God in our hearts and lives. The human being has always felt the need of salvation. Although life has today changed a lot for the better, there will nonetheless always be things that hurt and destroy us, that create obstacles and rob our peace, and we will continue suffering from different forms of slavery that we experience through our own doings, that we are pushed into by others, or that we have to face without having brought them about ourselves.

The story of Bethlehem is not a story for children. Nor is it a story of two thousand years ago and no more. It is a story that happened and continues to happen. It is a story that today has so much to tell us about ourselves. From this story we wish to select three truths that we feel could shed much light on the way we are living today.

1. The first is the word St. John says in his Gospel concerning the reality of his time that God: "Came to his own domain and his own people did not accept him";
2. The second truth is that which the family of Nazareth went through, not only up to the time when Christ was born, but also after his birth to save him from every threat;
3. The third is the truth about the Magi, which shows how much in every human person's heart there is the Spirit of God and a big desire for the truth.

An invitation and an encouragement

"He came to his own domain and his own people did not accept him" (Jn 1,11). God is no longer relevant in many people's lives. We would like to invite those who say they do not believe to avoid being afraid of the risk of faith and to walk together with the Christian community in the Church.

On the other hand, we like to encourage those who profess that they still believe to give witness of their faith in God in a way that is seen, felt, and also brings change around them. It is easy, in a culture like ours, that we put our minds at rest with various forms of religiosity that is cut off from faith. By doing this, we would continue building on that which does not lead us to recognise God in our lives and truly feel the need of the Lord.

A year ago, Pope Benedict XVI, in his Encyclical '*Spe Salvi*', about the Christian Hope, wrote on how, in modern times, the human being used reason and freedom only to carry out his material projects.

As in the time of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11), also today, the human being continues to dream that he can reach heaven and save himself. However, we are seeing the consequences that this pride can bring on our lives and on society in general. Today, we are experiencing how the ideology of progress that excludes God can work against the human being himself. We saw this recently when, due to exaggerated greed, the world entered an economic crisis whose effects can still be seen especially on the vulnerable and the poor. Christmas reminds us anew that God became a human being and lived among us so as to be part of our history, as otherwise without him we would lose our way.

The culture that we built

Sometime after the birth of Jesus, an angel appeared to Joseph and said to him: **"Get up, take the child and his mother with you, and escape into Egypt, and stay there until I tell you, because Herod intends to search for the child and do away with him"** (Mt. 2,13). Even the family of Nazareth, in its own time, had to face threats. All this is not a past story for us. There are a lot of similarities between that which the family of Nazareth had to face and that which is happening today. The culture which was built and is sustained by ourselves is threatening the harmony amongst us, and is clouding the relationships which once used to sustain the family.

Advent is a time when, living in a world which does not make it very easy for us to search for God, we discover that the Word of God is powerful enough to show us the emptiness and the darkness that can grasp our lives also without realising it. At this time we encourage you to see that the wisdom of the Word of God is not blown away with the wind. Isaiah is the Prophet of the Old Testament who understood that as things stood at his time, the people were walking in the dark and needed a powerful light. Isaiah is the prophet who accompanies us during this time of Advent so that we too, in the troubles and difficulties of today, can manage to come out of the dark. The culture which we are part of continues to mislead the human being because it promises him various forms of salvation that in effect result as insufficient as they do not fulfil his spirit.

At Christmas, when God became a human being like us and was born of the Virgin Mary, God wanted to place the human being at the centre of everything and enrich humanity with a great dignity. However, today we turned this truth into a fable. In the name of progress and freedom, the dignity of the human being is very often easily vilified in a culture where everything is measured according to efficiency and utility. The concept of unrestrained individual freedom is turning ever more into violence in society, also in domestic violence. The search for satisfaction is leading to an emptiness which many are trying to fill by resorting to drugs, alcohol and gambling.

The wonderful achievements made in the area of information technology also came to the point of creating problems for the respect of the person, and to the degradation, especially of women, through pornography. These are all symptoms that, together with the good that exists in our society, there is also serious trouble. Many parents are worried and alarmed because all this presents a threat to the future of their children. We share their preoccupation. However, we are convinced that the country expects direction in this area and also cooperation from those of good will before it is too late.

An internal journey

History has always shown that the human being needs a kind of salvation that cannot come from himself. No one can save himself. The human being possesses profound desires that cannot be satisfied solely by material things. St. Matthew also recounts in his Gospel the visit by the Magi and says that **“going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage”** (Mt. 2,11). The Magi came from the Orient and their voyage led them to where they wanted to go. However, for them another voyage had begun, an internal journey that changed their lives.

Like the star of the Magi, the Church in Malta would like to be present, through the Word of God, in the lives of many to accompany and help them so that, in their lives, they sincerely search God, find Him, and adore Him as the Lord that is capable of changing their lives. Most probably, the Magi imagined that they would find a different reality. However, their sincere and perseverant search led them to discover that which they truly needed and which filled their hearts and lives.

This is what we wish to augur to you from our hearts, with this Letter, for this Christmas: That through this great mystery of Bethlehem, we discover God anew in our personal lives and around us. The child of Bethlehem, in his weakness, shows us how Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was capable of lowering himself to enter our hearts. Let us not end up searching for God only when we are with our back against the wall during suffering or in the face of death. In all our situations, whoever we are, all of us need to search for this God because it is only He who can give us true freedom and full dignity to be able to plan our future with the decisions of everyday life.

We impart to you our pastoral blessing as a pledge of every heavenly good.

Today, 23 November 2008, Feast of Christ the King.

✘ **Paul Cremona O.P.**
Archbishop of Malta

✘ **Mario Grech**
Bishop of Gozo