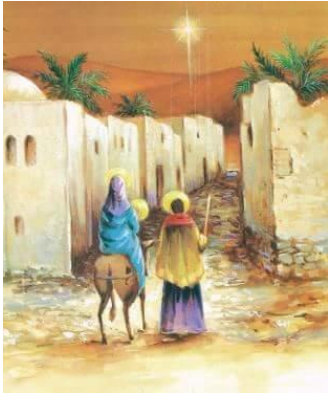


Dear Brothers and Sisters:



Gratitude...As you read this, we are deep into Advent -- much closer to Christmas than our busy lives would like us to be. I pause to pray and find that amid all this hustle and bustle, gratitude is very much on my mind.

I am grateful for all of you...for your prayers and your kindness, for your hospitality when I visit your fraternities. I am grateful for your cooperation and collaboration with what we are doing in our region and in what you are doing in your fraternities. Our Order can only flourish through the willingness of each member to reach out to one another in fraternity.

And yet, the warmth and light of the gratitude that I feel for you pales in comparison to the gratitude that I feel for the One Gift that shapes all of our lives as Catholics and Franciscans, the gift of the Incarnation. During the Advent season, we await this gift with great anticipation; we look forward to commemorating the birth of our Lord and Savior. We wonder, "Are we ready?" We say, "Let's get ready! The big day is coming!" And then, after all the waiting and hoping, there it is – *Christmas*. Jesus is born into our hearts and into our world. What joy! The "sublime humility" of our Lord Jesus who came as one of us...what a gift! And it is ours to keep.

It is ours to keep not only on Christmas, but every day. When we open our eyes each morning, that special joy of anticipation and expectation should be with us. Some days it will be stronger than others. We might anticipate hearing the song of a bird. Maybe today we will enjoy the colors of a flower or a butterfly or the sparkle of a snowflake. On any given day we might experience the majesty of a mountain or the whisper of a breeze. In every gift of creation, we should see the footprint of Jesus and feel his gaze in the eyes of each person we meet. Every challenge we face is an opportunity for doing good or for daily conversion. We just need to open our hearts and know that he is with us—the Babe in the manger, our Savior on the Cross; our Lord and our Brother.

One of the biographers of St. Francis wrote:

"During the Christmas function at Greccio, when he spoke the name 'Bethlehem,' he would fill his mouth with sound and even more with tender affection, producing a sound like the bleat of a sheep. And every time he said 'Babe of Bethlehem' or 'Jesus,' he would lick his lips, almost as to relish and retain all the sweetness of those words."

The sweetness carried by the name of Jesus is ours every day of the year. It has been freely given to us. We just need to long for him and strive to live out our gratitude for his presence among us.

May the Living God light your path and warm your heart always.

Christmas blessings,
Diane

Diane F. Menditto, OFS
Minister, Our Lady of the Angels Region

December 19, 2015

