

## Christmas Letter 2014 from Sr Marie



Murillo's "Holy family with a little bird" © Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

Dearest Sisters and Friends,

A very happy and peaceful Christmas to you and to your families! Once again we are celebrating God's most unexpected and simple choice to come into the world as a baby and to grow up in a warm loving family.

Following the first part of the Synod on the Family in Rome, Pope Francis invites us to continue to reflect on family life today. The family is the first place where we learn about relationships, love and trust. Christmas is a time for families and often makes us more acutely aware of any sadness, loss or breakdown of relationships. No family is without its struggles and difficulties. There may be relationship worries, financial troubles, bereavement or some of the many other problems that confront family life today.



Jesus entered into our history. He shared our journey. He came to free us from darkness and to give us light. This is incarnation. Incarnation does not mean that God saves us from the pains of this life but that God-is-with-us. For the Christian, just as for everyone else, there are cold, lonely seasons, seasons of sickness and seasons of frustration. The Holy Family shares our burdens. Mary and Joseph were real, human parents, faced with the daily challenges and joys that being a parent brings. The story of the Holy Family is the story of life not always turning out the way you expected. It is the story of a teenage girl with an unexpected pregnancy. It is the story of an anxious father, confronting scandal, planning on divorce. It is the story of a family forced to become refugees, living as immigrants in the land that once held their ancestors as slaves. It is the story of a missing child, and days of anxious searching by his parents.

We see the Holy Family on the sorrowful road to exile, seeking refuge in Egypt. Jesus, Mary and Joseph experienced the tragic fate of refugees, which is marked by fear, uncertainty and unease (*Matt. 2*). Almost every day millions of families can identify with this sad reality, fleeing war and other grave dangers in search of security and a dignified life for themselves. Jesus allowed himself to belong to a family that experienced these hardships so no one would feel excluded from the loving tenderness of God.

The Holy Family stands beside parents anxious about their children, worrying for their welfare. They walk with immigrants and refugees separated from those they love. They comfort teenage mothers and single parents. They console the prisoner, the outcast, the bullied, the scorned—and the parents who love them. They offer solace and compassion to any mother or father grieving over the loss of a child. Many times during the synod Pope Francis appealed to the Church to accompany the human family along the rocky path of mourning and tears, which is also

the pilgrim path of faith, hope and love.

Let us be drawn into the simplicity of the life led by the Holy Family in Nazareth as shown in our choice of Christmas card this year. It is not the usual Christmas scene of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem but rather gives us a glimpse of his life as a young child in Nazareth. Murillo's 'Holy Family with a little Bird' portrays Jesus' family life with Mary and Joseph as one of harmony, serenity and intimacy. Joseph seems to have taken time out from his work to play with Jesus, while Mary looks on lovingly. They are absolutely at ease with one another and enjoying this moment together. The Child, in turn, is playing with a puppy and a little bird clutched in His hand. The scene certainly lends itself to many symbolic interpretations, but the heart of the painting lies in this dimension of daily life filled with feeling and affection. It is a picture of an ordinary and yet intimate family group, serene and loving as they enjoy a simple moment of togetherness. This glimpse of happy family life calls other families to become communities of love and reconciliation, in which tenderness, mutual support and mutual forgiveness is experienced. This is incarnation, God-with-us. *What aspect of the Incarnation speaks to you through this scene?*

For many of us Christmas is a time of giving and receiving gifts. The greatest gift is that God's love became incarnate and Jesus was born and lived among us. He shared our human condition and chose life within it. He also gave us the gift of others to show us how to love and what it means to be loved. He called us to 'build bridges of unity' so that our world may continue to be a place of beauty and wonder and that all may be led in the way of peace and harmony. At Christmas let us pray especially for those in the war-torn areas of the world today that they too may be touched by the gift of peace offered to us through the birth of God-with-us.

This coming year is also the year dedicated to consecrated life. Pope Francis asks consecrated men and women to 'wake up the world' with a testimony of faith, holiness and hope. He urges us to let our light shine and to give thanks in solidarity with our fellow Christians whose vocations are different and complementary, all together making up the Body of Christ. He prays that this year may be an occasion for bearing vigorous and joyful witness before the world to the holiness and vitality present in so many of those called to follow Jesus in the consecrated life. *As we listen intently to what Jesus says to us through the many people who know us, love us, challenge us and walk with us, how is Jesus calling us to be witnesses within the world in the years to come?*



In the heart of the family at Nazareth the child Jesus flourished and 'grew in wisdom and grace' (Lk.2). With Pope Francis, let us ask Jesus, Mary and Joseph to enlighten, comfort and guide every family so that they may fulfil with dignity and peace the noble mission that God has entrusted to them. This Christmas let us celebrate and thank God for our families, friends and the community of Infant Jesus sisters worldwide. We pray especially for those who find themselves in any kind of danger, suffering or hardship at this time.

Kimiko, Maria and Noreen join me in praying that the unconditional love of God, the Word made flesh, may touch each one of you anew this Christmas.

With love and blessings,

**Marie**

on behalf of Kimiko, Maria and Noreen.



**INFANT JESUS SISTERS**  
22 HEXHAM CLOSE, WORTH, CRAWLEY  
WEST SUSSEX RH10 7TZ UK

Pentecost 2015

Dearest Sisters and Friends,

Peace be with you all on this great feast of Pentecost! And may that peace extend to all those places in the world where our brothers and sisters are suffering because of war, atrocities or natural disasters. May the Spirit of love sent by Jesus be their source of courage and hope.

As the Easter journey of discipleship comes to its fulfilment at Pentecost, we are reminded once again that the Spirit of God is always with us and that we are never alone on our journey of faith. The Spirit abides within us and helps us to speak and live the truth. When we are centred in God, we can hear the Spirit murmuring in rhythm to the beat of our hearts. As with the early disciples, the Spirit gives us courage to speak boldly of God.

Just before his death in 1686, as the feast of Pentecost approached, Nicolas Barré prayed that the Holy Spirit would 'take possession' of the first sisters and that they would 'take possession' of the Holy Spirit. This prayer reaches down through the centuries and includes all those who feel drawn to the spirituality that we have inherited and are committed to living out today. 'Taking possession' of the Holy Spirit means finding a space within ourselves to allow the Holy Spirit to find a home within us. As St Paul says, '*Do you not realize that you are a temple of God with the Spirit of God living in you?*' (1 Cor. 3:16).

God comes to meet us in many different ways. In the person of Jesus it was as the close friend whom the disciples could see and touch, with whom they could share a meal and relate to in heartfelt love and intimacy. Now, since Pentecost, God comes to us in another way that is not limited by space and time, but fully present to everyone, everywhere – always! The Spirit dwells within our hearts and acts from deep within us. So although we never see the Spirit, we do experience movements of the heart that draw us towards God. That is enough to assure us that we 'possess' the Spirit or that the Spirit 'possesses' us.

Led by Nicolas Barré's devotion to the Holy Spirit, which guided the first tentative steps of the Institute, we have always been encouraged to turn to the Holy Spirit to be the source of our inspiration and courage as we responded to God's call. The Book of the Institute states very clearly, "*If we allow the Holy Spirit to take possession of us, the Spirit will gradually bring about the unity of our apostolic lives in which action and contemplation permeate each other*" (no. 14). The 2013 General Chapter document, which sets out our direction for these six years, also reminds us to consciously allow ourselves to be "inspired by God's Spirit" if we are to become "co-creators with God today". If we have the courage to respond wholeheartedly once again to these calls, who knows what wonders the Holy Spirit will bring about through us?

Whenever we open our hearts to receive and our eyes to see, we find that the Spirit is everywhere. We begin to tune into our inner promptings and to ask ourselves, '*Is this a nudge from the Holy Spirit?*' Life takes on a new colour and a new energy. We become free to dance with the Spirit!

Pentecost may be an appropriate time for each of us to ask ourselves, 'How have I collaborated with God's Spirit over the past year, or years? With hindsight, can I identify significant spiritual landmarks? Did I identify them at the time or only later? What did those landmarks teach me? How important are they to me now? Pentecost accompanies all aspects of our meandering journey of life. *Do I give sufficient time to silence and prayer in order to recognize the action of the Spirit in my life?*

As we open and stretch our minds and hearts, we begin to identify the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our lives and notice the unfolding of our personal journey to God. We can only do this when we take time out of our busy schedules and enter into the silence of our hearts. Silence can be a demanding presence. It can push us to probe and question many aspects of our lives and may even call us to respond to God in ways that we could never have imagined.

In this year of Consecrated Life and as we look towards the Council of the Institute in Bangkok in October, we once again call on the Holy Spirit to open us to all the possibilities that God is offering us. May we enter wholeheartedly into these opportunities for renewal and revitalisation so that we may recognise the energy and fire within as the Holy Spirit really does possess us.

The gift of the Spirit is God's greatest gift, inviting us into the heart of God and to share in the life of the Trinity. The Spirit is the spark of love that comes to us from the Trinity to set us on fire with zeal, hope and joy.

The Holy Spirit continues to bring forth and inspire new disciples in the Christian community. Mary is the first disciple, the model to which all other disciples aspire. Mary is truly a woman of the Spirit. She welcomed and accepted God's Word so that the Spirit was able to accomplish great things in and through her. She shines out as the perfect example of what the Holy Spirit can accomplish in human persons, if no obstacles are placed in the way of divine action.

The last glimpse we have of Mary in the New Testament is a heartwarming one. We find her in the midst of the apostles, praying with them and receiving the Spirit. As the mother of Jesus she takes her place in the heart of the community of disciples. She is the perfect disciple. She is, as the Eastern Church calls her, the 'icon of the Spirit'.

As we celebrate Pentecost this year, Kimiko, Maria, Noreen and I assure you of our prayer that God may send his Spirit anew into your hearts. Filled with that Spirit, may we renew our efforts to be a dynamic community of disciples, full of energy and zeal for proclaiming the Gospel. And, as a community, may we give a clear and unmistakable witness to the Truth and Love of God, revealed to us in Jesus our Lord.

May the Holy Spirit be with you all!

*waie*