

2016 Christmas Message – Father Enzo Del Brocco
December 11, 2016

Dear family and friends,

Christmas season with its atmosphere of peace, joy and love is at the door, a door that unfortunately seems closed, stuck or broken because of so many natural, political and economic events that seem to shake our beliefs, our certainties and habits. Pope Francis with his beautiful apostolic exhortation "Mercy and misery" writes: "The future seems prey to an uncertainty that does not make for stability. This often gives rise to depression, sadness and boredom, which can gradually lead to despair. We need witnesses to hope and true joy if we are to dispel the illusions that promise quick and easy happiness through artificial paradises. The profound sense of emptiness felt by so many people can be overcome by the hope we bear in our hearts and by the joy that it gives. We need to acknowledge the joy that rises up in a heart touched by mercy." How important and vital it is to be touched by mercy!

The day after Hurricane Matthew hit Haiti I was struck by the devastation: trees left completely naked or chopped as if the wind was a gigantic chainsaw, dead animals strewn across the countryside, roads blocked or washed away, houses left without roofs, metal sheets scattered everywhere. Yet, what captured my attention was the gratitude of the people we encountered as they gave thanks to God when asked how they were doing!

While the destruction of the natural surroundings and the structural devastation have certainly adversely impacted the residents who already were working so hard just to survive, they also revealed a great sense of faith among the people. This faith is what enables them and us to continue, to rebuild, to "tread on the heights like a deer", to go through yet inaccessible roads in order to reach out to those in remote areas providing them with what is necessary to restart their lives.

Our Christmas trees in our western culture countries may be all green, full of lights and ornaments of every color and shape with so many presents underneath but unfortunately many times the meaning and purpose of Christmas is overtaken by a dominating consumeristic culture that continues to generate a greater selfishness creating so much "human waste". In a culture where "I" becomes the parameter of making decisions, where my own "will" is the one that counts, where the "other" is my neighbor only so far he does not clash with my vision and will, the sense of gratitude and true giving is harder to find. But Advent and Christmas are the time of hope and joy, of patience and peace, of hard work and miracles.

*"But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse,
and from his roots a bud shall blossom". Is 11:1*

Now, after a few weeks with the rains after the hurricane, everything is sprouting again and the landscape is recovering its green lushness, although the bigger trees, such as coconuts and cacao, will take more time to recover. It's amazing to see how nature is recovering by itself with the blessing of the rains – to see how the forests and gardens are recovering so quickly. It may make it difficult for us with our vehicles getting stuck in the rain-soaked mud, but it certainly is a blessing. It is incredible how nature has its own way to recover. Many times Jesus in his parables uses images related to nature to explain the Kingdom of God and His works. The nakedness of the area affected by the hurricane is now blossoming again although it will still need time and hard work to fully recover. The sight of the green leaves is giving us more hope and strength to continue to help without giving up. This week more truckloads of relief with seeds, rice, and sanitary kits are going out to the areas and it is even more beautiful now to see people working the lands and fixing their houses. This also may avoid a new wave of refugees toward to slum areas of Port-au-Prince.

To be honest, faced with the challenge of such devastation, the first reaction was discouragement with the temptation to either give up or turn away. But the 'stump of Jesse' is a perfect image on how we must never give up. That "shoot" is a gift of God and his infinite generosity. It is given to us precisely because we are powerless to raise ourselves on our own. This "shoot" is the source and guarantee of hope. When we are totally "naked and nailed" as Jesus, we should turn our eyes to that "trunk" that is still able to unleash the creativity of mercy that has the power to renew all things and give new life: "Father forgive them...; today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23: 34,43). No one expected that the Messiah would have come from a cave in Bethlehem and no one would consider that God is especially present where people are suffering and are deprived of basic necessities.

God does not abandon his people, He keeps his promises, today as yesterday! And although Advent is the time in which we express our desire for His coming we must remind ourselves how His desire to be with us infinitely surpasses ours! He does so in ways that are so different from what we expect or envision: *"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."* (Isaiah 55:9). This is because God's mercy is infinitely creative and ingenious, just as the way He came into the world! The most unpredicted one was when he chose a young girl, Mary, to open the Way that no one can ever destroy, obstruct or cancel. That Way is Jesus, and that is why the first Christians were also known as those *"who belonged to the Way"* (Acts 9:2).

I personally can give witness to various moments in which God has unleashed his mercy in a very creative way helping me understand more the significance of Pope Francis' invitation to us *"to unleash the creativity of Mercy"* (Mercy and Misery 18).

With Hurricane Matthew having left a wide path of destruction in its wake in Haiti, we felt a profound desire to reach out to our Haitian brothers and sisters cut off by blocked transportation routes. With the help of our Haitian staff and the support of our friends, donors and volunteers, we were able to attempt to open roadways and overcome the bureaucratic obstacles to get supplies and means of transportation needed to come to their aid. Deep in our hearts, we felt call of John the Baptist to *"Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths"* (Mt 3:2).

Just three days after the hurricane, with Fr. Rick and our Haitian team, we reopened the road that goes from Jeremie to Dame Marie in order to open a way so we could start bringing medical and alimentary aid. While we were able to remove several trees and large rocks, there were still destroyed bridges that cut off several small communities, and the rains had significantly increased the chances of getting stuck in deep mud for inordinate amounts of time.

But these weren't the only obstacles. As you may know, in times of disasters, vultures prey on the weak and distressed. In the following days, several trucks began to deliver much needed supplies, at times driving up to more than 24 hours because of the very bad road conditions. Many times, the Lord put his hands to work to open the way for us removing the obstacles in unpredicted ways and in many occasions I have truly seen how God's Mercy unfolds its creativity beating *"swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks"* (Is 2:40). Only his Mercy can bring about situations where

*"The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den".* (cfr. Is 11:6-8)

While we experienced His mercy throughout our trips, one event best exemplifies the words of Isaiah. It occurred while we were on our way to deliver rice and water to the parish community in Baraderes, and the vultures had descended upon us.

We were going out to a parish community at Baraderes in the region of Nippes to deliver 500 sacks of rice and 500 sacks of water (with 60 small bags/sack). At 10pm, after more than 8 hours of driving, we were nearly at the parish house where we would be able to spend the night in order to be ready to cross the sea the next day.

As we approached a very small village, two tires of the heavy truck exploded. The village people were first scared, and then smiled, thinking what luck that this truck destined for somewhere else was now their bounty. They first came and stood around in large numbers. This truck was contracted just for this trip, and the driver did not have any spare tires nor a lug wrench or jack. Our team was able to stop a motorcycle and arrange with the driver to go find some "tire men" who might have the equipment to fix our truck now stuck in the middle of nowhere. This operation would take about 2 hours.

During that time, some armed young people came to make their claim on our supplies. The heat was rising and the dialogue was not leading to any solution. We were completely in their hands. As I descended from the truck with Raphael, I hoped that he would be able to at least keep us safe as he somehow recognized one of the bandits. At that moment, from the darkness around us, a little girl's voice cried out: "Père Enzo!" (Father Enzo), and I soon found myself wrapped in her arms. Caught with surprise I simply said hello and asked who she was. She said: "Don't you remember me? I am Guerlande. I am the girl who spent more than 6 months at St. Damien's for my heart disease. You used to pass by every evening to play with me and give me a blessing before going to bed. When I came to your office, you gave me a toy or some crayons and notebooks." Once I was able to see her face with the flashlight, I recognized her in return. Raphael saw what was happening and came to me asking how I knew this little girl; as I told him, he urged me to keep on talking with her. I then shared a story with her of a remembrance I had about our time together, and inquired about her mother, because she had not been able to have a passport so as to be able to accompany her daughter out of the country for a surgery.

At this point, the bandits were surprised and confused by the scene. As they learned the story of my relationship with the little girl, they put away their weapons and decided to let us go, recognizing how we had helped this girl who belonged to their community.

The name of the girl is Guerlande, which can mean both Garland and Christmas wreath. In the Christian tradition, the circular shape expresses God's infinite love in Jesus and the live holly is used to weave the garlands together, signifying the crown of thorns of Jesus with the red berries reminding us of the blood shed for all. I would say that that this little girl was the garland that God weaved together and launched to us as a life saver. God showed his mercy by shining a light on a bond between us and those people, allowing the cow and the bears, and the wolf and the lamb to lie together in harmony and peace.

It's the peace proclaimed by the angels on Christmas, the peace to people of good will, the peace I wish to you all!
Merry Christmas!!!!

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S. Enzo Del Brocco, cp