

# Love stripped away

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**INFO SSCC Brothers No 149 – 1 December 2020**



Image of Saint Francis in front of his Basilica in Assisi

**D**ear brothers,

Fraternal greetings from our community in Rome. We enter this time of Advent looking to rekindle our hope. Through the celebration of Christmas and through vigilant prayer in union with the Church and the human family, we say "Come Lord Jesus!

We all need the light of hope in our eyes to look at one another, to care for the lives of the people entrusted to us, to venture out on the winding and complex paths of peace and justice.

That light is given to us in a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger (Lk. 2:12), as the angels said to the shepherds. That light is given to us in a man from Nazareth, a lost town from which few expected anything good to come (cf. Jn 1:46). The light comes in the one who did not see his divine condition as something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking on human form and the condition of a servant (cf. Phil. 2:5-10). At his last meal, he makes a gesture in which what he does and says reveals the direction of his whole life – a life that is "loving to the end," a life that is "given without measure". He invites his disciples to discover the fullness that is to be found in making themselves servants to one another, just as he did. One empties oneself, not to be less but to make more space for others

and in this way be more. One assumes the condition of a servant not to disappear, but so that all who seek him find him, always ready and available when they meet.

This path of Jesus is both fascinatingly simple and demanding. We are consoled to know that in the heart of Jesus there is always a space of acceptance and forgiveness for each one of us, for all of humanity and for creation that longs for its liberation. At the same time, we know from experience, that our "I" tenaciously returns to the centre, leaving little or no room for others.

### "Naked, following the naked Christ"

This expression, which comes from St. Jerome in his commentary on the parable of **Lazarus and the rich man** (Luke 16:19-31), is made flesh in the life of **Francis of Assisi**. In contemplating his Lord and beloved Jesus, he cannot but follow Him in His condition as servant and poor. At various times in his life, Francis revises this deep perception of the Gospel. It immediately comes to mind, when he strips off his clothes, as he undresses in front of the palace of Bishop **Guido**. This stripping allows him to break the bonds of his patrimony and the ties of his blood family and to base his existence on God his Father, who is in heaven. It allows him to open himself to a fraternal life that embraces everyone and everything, by becoming close to the poor, with whom he lives and whom he serves. But this was not an occasional performance; it was the expression of that secret work that God accomplishes in those who allow themselves to be moulded by Him. Other moments of self-emptying had preceded it. Francis, who wanted to shine as a warrior, was taken prisoner for a year and a half and returned home in defeat. He later insisted on trying to join the Crusaders to defend the Holy Land but fell ill. Without his being stripped of his own projects and assuming and digesting his "failures", Francis would not have been the free, fraternal, joyful man he was and still is.

### "A disarmed love"

In a beautiful prayer composed by the Patriarch of Constantinople, **Athenagoras** (1886-1972) he shares the fruits he has gathered in his long battle, especially with himself, to disarm all the defences that keep him sadly and poorly closed in on himself, to shed himself, make more space for others and be more with them, as a person of peace.

'The hardest war is the war against oneself. One must disarm. I waged this war for years, it was terrible. But now I am disarmed. I'm no longer afraid of anything, because love banishes fear. I am disarmed of the need to be right, to justify myself by judging others. I am no longer on guard, jealously clutching my wealth. I accept and share. I do not particularly care about my ideas, my projects. If somebody suggests better ones — no, I should say good ones not better ones — I accept without regrets. I have stopped making comparisons. What is good, true, real, is always best for me. That's why I'm not afraid anymore. When we have nothing left, we have no fear. If one disarms oneself, if one dispossesses oneself, if one opens oneself to the Love that makes all things new, then that Love erases the bad past and makes for us a new time where everything is possible. This is peace!'

## Counting on Jesus brother and the brothers

At the feet of **Jesus**, our lord and brother, in adoration or in the contemplation of the crib, we can with simplicity converse with Jesus and open our hearts to him, telling him about those who are "in" and those who are "left out", those we want "near" and those that we keep "far away".

We can also ask the brothers and sisters with whom we live, or the people with whom we work, to help us see if there is room in us for others, to question us, to tell us with love and frankness how they have seen us in this time. The provincial of Chile, before the canonical visitation he will be making these days, has invited the brothers of the province to engage in this simple exercise of fraternity: Could we not do it too, before Christmas?

During the days we spent in Assisi as a General Government, we were able to share what each one of us was living, the impact of this year on us and on our service. It was a time for revealing, without fear and trust, what we carry in our hearts - our worries, questions, fears, joys and sorrows. This has helped us to love each other more for who we truly are and understand that we are accompanied by each other. I believe that that as a result of our sharing in Assisi we are now more, because we accepted to be stripped of ourselves and let the brothers enter our houses.

Last month, on 4<sup>th</sup> November, Brother **Heinz Klapsing** (1938-2020) died in Germany. He was a brother who was discreet, shy, upright in his actions and words, sober and balanced in his judgments and attentive to his brothers. Among the testimonies that recorded Heinz's passage through the life of the brothers, one of them said, not only of his room but of his heart "in it there was always a place for me". What simple and beautiful praise of the one who had stripped himself to make room for others!

In this time of Advent and Christmas, and of the celebration of the birth of our congregation, may we make more space for Jesus, as **Mary** did by listening to his Word and welcoming the Word into her womb. And may all the brothers and sisters with whom we live feel at home, in the community and in each one of us. There the Word made flesh, our neighbour, our brother, comes, knocks at our door, and if anyone hears his voice and opens it, he will come once more into our house and dine with us (cf. Rev 3:11).

Fraternally,

**Alberto Toutin ssc**  
*Superior General*