

INCARNATION

Rome, October 8, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Francis loved Christmas more than any other feast. For him, it was the ultimate reminder of how much God loved us, to come to us, to become one of us and show us the way to be truly human. The Incarnation is the true compassion of God that Francis perceived so clearly. He was so filled with joy that he invited everyone else to discover the eternal mystery and, with him, to enter into it in a stark way.

The birthday of the Child Jesus Francis observed with inexpressible eagerness over all other feasts, saying that it was the feast of feasts, on which God, having become a tiny infant, clung to human breasts... On this day Francis wanted the poor and the hungry to be filled by the rich, and more than the usual amount of grain and hay given to the oxen and asses. "If I could speak to the emperor," he said, "I would ask that a general law be made that all who can should scatter corn and grain along the roads so that the birds might have an abundance of food on the day of such great solemnity, especially our sisters the larks." 2 Celano, 199 and 200

With undivided hearts, let us be an incarnation of God in the heart of every person. Let us live this, not only as a moment in spiritual history, but as the eternal insertion of God, an ever deepening penetration of love in our sacred history. We are part of the Incarnation in our world, God-with-us in our time. We are invited by shepherds and angels to approach the mystery of God incarnate in humanity and in all creation with awe and hope. We are invited by innkeepers and pilgrims to witness God's amazing tenderness and sensitivity. We are brothers and sisters, and ultimately, we are challenged to be a witness that God is with us to a world turned upside-down in every way.

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with the flocks,
then the work of Christmas begins:

to find the lost,
to heal those broken in spirit,
to feed the hungry,
to release the oppressed,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among all peoples,
to make a little music with the heart...

And to radiate the Light of Christ,
every day,
in every way,
in all that we do
and in all that we say.

Howard Thurman

Sr. Deborah LOCKWOOD, President IFC-TOR
Sr. M. Magdalena SCHMITZ, Vice-President
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Born for us Along the Way

Spirituality of the Incarnation

Sr. Christina Mülling OSF
Original language: German

1. Francis Celebrates Christmas in Greccio



Greccio, Photo: Sr. Christina Mülling

“Francis continually contemplated and marvelled at three mysteries in the life of Jesus: the humble descent of God into our flesh and blood in the Incarnation of Jesus, the humble descent of Jesus into the darkest depths of our lives in his suffering and Jesus’ humble self-giving to humanity in the Eucharist.

“In 1223, so as to experience the mystery of the Incarnation tangibly and see it with his own eyes, he had the stable of Bethlehem reconstructed in a grotto near Greccio. He wanted to embrace the mystery of the Incarnation of God with his whole being. And so, his brothers prepared the place for the Christmas celebration with manger and straw, with ox and donkey. Then the people and the brothers celebrated the Christmas service. Francis, as deacon, read the Gospel and preached about the birth of the

poor king.”¹ That celebration was so moving that the description ended with the words: “At that time the Child Jesus was born again in the hearts of many.” This first celebration of the nativity in Greccio was the origin of all future nativity plays.²

Therefore, what he did at the village called Greccio on the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ in the third year before the day of his glorious decease is to be recorded with reverent memory. There was in that place a man named John ... Blessed Francis now sent for this man about fifteen days before the Nativity of the Lord and said to him, “If you will that we celebrate the present festival of the Lord at Greccio, make haste to go before and diligently prepare what I tell you. For I would make memorial of that Child who was born in Bethlehem, and in some sort behold with bodily eyes His infant hardships; how He lay in a manger on the hay with the ox and the ass standing by.” 1 Celano, 4-8; (FQ 249-250)

For Francis, Christmas is the high feast of the love and humility of God. Here the infinite love of God becomes concrete for him. But the Incarnation of Jesus is not a mystery that took place only once, more than 2000 years ago. Jesus also wants to be born again and again in our hearts. “Christmas is a life program, a life’s journey.”³

1.1 Born for us along the way

For Francis, the birth of God has a journey character. It began more than 2000 years ago with Jesus and has continued ever since in the hearts and lives of all people. It is part of our calling as Christians that we, like Mary, say “yes” again and again to prepare God’s dwelling and home in us and to bring him into the world through our actions. Francis recognized that the birth of God is constantly being entrusted to us as Christians. The more we open ourselves to it, the closer we come to our own destiny, to our own incarnation. The birth of God in a person is a progressive process. Our spiritual death occurs when the birth of God no longer takes place in our heart and life. For us as Christians it is not enough to know that Jesus was born over 2000 years ago. We have to keep tracking the mystery of God’s Incarnation!

¹ Mülling, Ch., *Leben in den Fußspuren des hl. Franziskus*, (Living in the Footsteps of St. Francis) 107.

² Kuster, N. *Franz und Klara von Assisi*, 107.

³ Gerken, A., *Weihnachtsgruß der Klarissen* (Christmas Greeting of the Poor Clares) Münster 2011

1.2 Born in our Humanity and Frailty

In the second Letter to the Faithful, Francis states that in Mary's womb Jesus took the real flesh of our humanity and frailty. That means that he accepted humanity in all its fragile reality. This is the poverty of God and our riches.

The most high Father made known from heaven through his holy angel Gabriel this Word of the Father - so worthy, so holy and glorious - in the womb of the holy and glorious Virgin Mary, from whose womb he received the flesh of our humanity and frailty. Though he was rich, he wished, together with the Most Blessed Virgin, his mother, to choose poverty in the world beyond all else. Second Letter to the Faithful 4-5 (FQ 128)

The love of God, his irrevocable yes to us, is consolidated in a person and takes on flesh and blood. In Jesus, God stoops down into the darkest depths of man's being, to bring home in his love all that is lost. In his Incarnation, God accepted in Jesus all our brokenness and sins, in order to meet and help us in our brokenness, sin and weakness.

To describe this reality, Francis used three concepts:⁴

- *fragilitas* (fragility, frailty, weakness),
- *debilitas* (lameness, infirmity) and
- *infirmitas* (sickness, powerlessness, lack of talent, weakness of character, fickleness, timidity, lack of independence, unreliability).

It is truly a comprehensive assumption of our frailty, a yes to our unadorned reality.

A constant basic temptation of the spiritual path is to imagine the path of purification and incarnation in the following way:

- I recognize my sin, brokenness and weakness that don't fit my self-image.
- Then I equip myself with the appropriate tools: axe, hatchet, saw, pickaxe... etc.
- And finally, I begin to rip out sins, to cut off temptations, to weed out weeds, to cut off or bury certain tendencies ... and so on
- And when I have finally left the quagmire of my soul behind me, climbed to the summit of perfection and finally stand before God, pore-deep clean, with a white vest, then God says to me: Because you are so beautifully holy and thoroughly good, you are worthy to live with me in my heaven. Come into the glory of the Lord! This path does not lead to God, but only to the idolatry of myself.

Francis shows us another way.

- God is waiting for us in our depths. The Franciscan way of the incarnation therefore goes down: into my sins, brokenness, weaknesses, perversions and disorder.
- I learn to face them, to accept them responsibly with my rough edges, my depths and low points, so as then to ask Jesus to make them his home and dwelling and transform them in that way.

It is a descent into my own truth and poverty and therefore a path of humility. Spiritual life is not about getting rid of everything that does not fit the image that I would like to have of myself. It is much more about bringing to light, out of the cabinet so to speak, everything that dwells and grows in the darkness of my heart. Only then can I bring it into contact with Jesus and allow it to be transformed by him. Experience shows that only what is accepted can be changed. On the other hand, what I fight against in myself, I will also fight with all my might in other people. There is a danger of becoming a hard and loveless person.

This active acceptance of my weaknesses and brokenness has nothing to do with laissez-faire. I can't say: That's just the way I am, now see how you cope with it. To admit that I am like this, my guilt, my failure, my inability to excuse myself, or to blame it on others is often much more difficult than to suppress and deny it. Often it is more difficult to learn to love oneself and others instead of fighting the malady in myself and in others!

⁴ Schneider, J., *Verbum veram carnem recepit*, 20

In the Incarnation of Jesus, God also spoke his irrevocable yes to my humanity and brokenness. Therefore I, too, may accept myself in my brokenness and know that I am loved.

1.3 Giving birth to Christ through our actions

If Christ has created a dwelling and a home for himself in our poverty in this way, then it is up to us to make him tangible and visible through our actions. In the First Letter to the Faithful, Francis invites us to give birth to Christ through our actions.

O how happy and blessed are these men and women when they do these things and persevere in doing them because the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them, and the Lord make his home and dwelling place with them. They are children of the Heavenly Father whose works they do. They are the spouses, brothers and sisters and mothers of Our Lord Jesus Christ. We are his spouses when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit with Our Lord Jesus Christ. We are brothers and sisters when we do the will of the Father who is in Heaven. We are mothers when we bear Him in our hearts and bodies with divine love and with pure and sincere consciences; and we give birth to him through a holy life which should enlighten others because of our example. First Letter to the Faithful 3-10 (FQ 123-124)

God wants to become incarnate in us all and through us he wants to come into the world - again and again. It is up to us whether God becomes visible and tangible in this world or not.

Actually, there is no doubt about it: the love of God comes every day and knocks at the door of our hearts, asking whether it may enter our lives, whether it may be given a foothold in our actions! The question is only whether we always want to make room for it. Are we willing to let it entice us beyond our narrow limits? Are we ready to risk reconciliation, to allow things to be settled, to give even the most difficult fellow human being credit?

Every time we manage to make room for the love of God in our hearts and actions, the birth of God takes place in our lives and in our surroundings. We give birth to it through holy actions. The whole world is waiting with longing for brother and sister "human beings" who have allowed themselves to be transformed into fellow lovers with God.

2. Incarnation in St. Clare

2.1 Lack of the heavenly food

Therefore, if a Lord of such majesty and such a noble nature wished to enter the virgin womb and appear despised, needy and poor in the world, so that those who were wholly poor and needy and who suffered exceedingly great want of heavenly food might become rich in him and take possession of the kingdoms of the heavens, rejoice from the heart and be filled with overflowing joy and spiritual exultation! (Letter to Agnes 19-21 (FSK 189)

Clare also emphasizes the explicit will of God to accept the contempt, neediness and poverty of human life in the Incarnation of Jesus. "He does not want to embrace poverty as God from heaven, but to enter into the status of poverty himself; he wants to become human".⁵ God wants to become despised, needy and poor in order to come into our poverty and neediness and give us His riches. His philanthropy should be visible to our eyes, audible to our ears and tangible in our hands.

But Clare sees the extreme poverty and neediness of humankind in the fact that people lack heavenly food. Even more than Francis, Clare sees the Incarnation of Jesus in the context of Christ's being made bread in the Eucharist. For her, communion is the ultimate salvific exchange: by coming into our extreme poverty, God fills it with the riches of God.



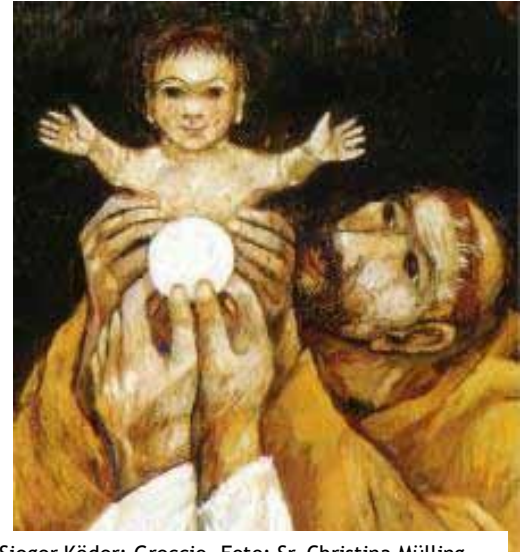
⁵ Schneider, J., Verbum veram carnem recepit, 27

2.2 The Soul is greater than Heaven

See it is already clear that the soul of a faithful person, the most worthy of God's creations through the grace of God, is greater than heaven. For the heavens and the rest of creation together cannot contain their Creator and only the soul of a faithful person is his dwelling place and throne, and this is possible only through love ... For Truth says, "the one who loves me, will be loved by my Father, and I shall love him, and we shall come to him and make our dwelling place with him" (Jn 14,21.23). Just as the glorious Virgin of virgins carried him in her body, so you too, following in her footsteps, especially her humility and poverty, can always carry him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body, of that there is no doubt, you can hold him in you, by whom you and everything is held, you can possess what you will possess with far greater certainty.

(Third Letter to Agnes 21-26 (LSK 208-209))

In the third letter to Agnes of Prague, Clare takes up the idea of St. Francis that we, too, are mothers of Christ. "What has happened in Mary 'biologically and historically' remains, on the 'mystical and spiritual' level, a real possibility for every believing Christian: the contemplation of God, the Incarnation of God, the indwelling of God in humankind."⁶ Love expands the soul so that it can receive God whom all creation and heaven cannot grasp. Through the love for God, for ourselves and our fellow human beings - indeed, for the whole of creation - we can prepare a dwelling place for God in our soul and hold him. And again, a salutary exchange takes place: He whom we hold, holds us. The love that we give to others becomes a gift to ourselves.



Sieger Köder: Greccio, Foto: Sr. Christina Mülling

- Do I know people who bear witness for me to the incarnation of God? What fascinates me about them?
- Where do I want to give Jesus more space and acceptance in my life? What can I do?
- Which people protect and promote the mystery of the Incarnation in me?
- Are there also persons who disrupt or endanger this mystery in me?

⁶ CCFMC, LB 1: Christentum als Religion der Menschwerdung (Christianity as Religion of the Incarnation), 14

INCARNATION TODAY

*Submitted by Sister Carol Juckem, O.S.F.
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The Incarnation - the Word Made Flesh, God among us, Christmas, Jesus is born.

Each year I help the children in our school perform a Christmas pageant. Basically, the story line is the same: God creates and sees that it is good, people use their free will to turn away from God, the promise of a Savior, Mary's "Yes!", Joseph, and the whole Bethlehem scene of angels, shepherds, wise men, etc.

The message tells us that God is true to His promise and sends a Savior. What changes in the pageant is the perspective. The message is seen quite differently by Mary than say, Joseph or the shepherds or even the wise men.

Mary embraces the message completely and surrenders to the Holy Spirit. Joseph's decision is just, but he is open and obedient to the Holy Spirit. The shepherds progress from fear and curiosity to acting on the message and becoming amazed. The wise men take a leap of faith, follow the star and eventually find the Savior.

We each live the Incarnation by how we respond to God sending us the Savior. Do we embrace the message and surrender to the Holy Spirit like Mary? Do we progress from fear and curiosity to acting on the message and being amazed like the shepherds? Our response is our living out the Incarnation.

The Word Made Flesh lives through us as we respond to the promptings of the Spirit and the guidance of the "star" God sends us. Those whose lives we touch see Jesus, living, breathing, Made Flesh through us in our world today.

Many times, it's just little kindnesses that show others that Jesus is alive in us. Maybe it is taking a cup of ice water on a hot day to someone cutting the lawn. It can simply be taking time to acknowledge someone who passes us on the sidewalk or in the grocery aisle. Being Jesus incarnate to others does not need to be complicated. Really, the simpler the gesture, the clearer the message.

Jesus lives in us. Let Him shine through. That is living the Incarnation today.



INCARNATION

Painted by: Sister Victoria Maisel, O.S.F.
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Reflection of Living the Charism Incarnation

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*“In the beginning was the Word:
the Word was with God
and the Word was God...
The Word was made flesh,
he lived among us...” (John 1:1, 14)*

The Incarnation of Jesus affects every part of our lives. Jesus still lives among us. He dwells in us and in our world. All of creation is made sacred by his indwelling. St. Francis had great devotion to the humanity of Jesus as seen in his re-enactment of Jesus birth, in his care and respect for all creatures, claiming them as his family and in his embrace of Jesus' suffering on the cross.

As I reflect on how I witness to the Incarnation, three aspects come to mind. Receiving the flesh and blood of Christ daily in Holy Communion is a great honor and privilege. Jesus comes to me in a physical, tangible way. It is as “fleshy” as the embrace of a lover. It is the closest way I can get to Jesus on earth.

The second way I witness to the Incarnation is my love and respect of other people. I make a conscious effort to acknowledge the presence of people. Eye contact, a smile even behind a mask, recognize Jesus in the other person. Listening to others and my effort to be of service makes the other person feel welcomed and valuable. It can be as simple as listening to their request for prayer or a blessing and praying with them.

During this pandemic we all have really missed the ability to safely comfort another in pain through a gentle touch or hug. We mourn with families separated from a loved one dying in the hospital. Cutting short the wakes deprives us of precious grieving time with the community. At this time, we are all feeling a loss of our humanity. St. Paul reminds us, “Now you together are Christ's body.” and “If one part is hurt, all parts are hurt with it.”(I Corinthians 12: 27, 26)

We all have also felt the pain of our brothers and sisters suffering from racial injustice. The “Black Lives Matter” movement has forced me to reflect on my experience of “white privilege.” As an adult who has had great multicultural experiences I realize that I grew up in a very prejudiced atmosphere. I have been challenged to examine my thoughts words and actions for unconscious traces of bias and prejudice. I was fortunate to stand in solidarity with people of color at a couple peaceful rallies.

The third way I live the charism of Incarnation is by my efforts to care for our earth. Hanging out my wash, walking to work when possible, recycling, tending a small garden are little things that can make life better for everyone especially future generations. With St. Francis I praise Brother Sun and all God's handiwork.

INCARNATION

*Submitted by Sister Marlita Hensler, O.S.F.
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Incarnation recalls our loving Father in heaven sending his beloved Son, Jesus, to this earth to teach us all how to love and respect one another. Jesus did so even to his death, to redeem us especially from our sins and failures to share that love and respect with others. We participate in the Incarnation by bringing to life (becoming actual) this very love of God in our own lives, and being willing to love others unconditionally, as God loves each one of us.

And thereby is the real Christian challenge, being of unconditional love for all of God's creatures, for every person, no matter his/her origin, background, culture, race, or heritage. Especially now in our nation we are invited to "incarnate", bring to life, God's love in our words and actions, so that each life is respected and recognized as having dignity.

Each person is made to the image and likeness of God. There is no one who is outside that actuality. We are invited to live accordingly, and treat each person equally. It is then that the Incarnation of Jesus can be seen for the marvel that it is - God embracing humanity with love and care for all times.



Painted by: Sister Victoria Maisel, O.S.F. Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity, USA

INCARNATION: TO BRING FORTH, TO GIVE LIFE

*Submitted by: Sister Caritas Strodthoff, O.S.F.
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For me, Christmas comes everyday, every single day, when I open the eyes of my heart and see God in every minute manifesting LOVE's life in creation all around us.

INCARNATION: The Angelus bell rings. And Mary said: *"Behold the handmaid of the LORD"* and the WORD of God was made flesh...in Mary's womb...and He dwelt among us. She carries Him...nourishes Him...and brings forth LIFE...CHRISTMAS.

INCARNATION: The Last Supper...Jesus takes bread and wine...*"Eat and drink for this is now My Body and Blood given up for you that you may have LIFE"*. I reach out my hand, receiving Him, bringing Him into my own body of flesh and blood, becoming one with Jesus the Christ, being given LIFE. Transformed by God's LIFE/LOVE within, called now to be Jesus dwelling in me. *"Love and care for each other as I have loved you. Bear each other's burdens and share each other's joys."* Bring forth LIFE.

INCARNATION: Death on the Cross...*"Father, into your hands, I commend my Spirit."* For the love of His Father, Jesus let's go of life and is born to Eternal Life. Death is no more. Death is now LIFE.

CHRISTMAS: born to LIFE.

EUCCHARIST: transformed into new LIFE.

CRUCIFIXION: through dying to self - death becomes NEW LIFE

INCARNATION: The unfathomable mystery of God, master of all Creation: the seas and sky, the sun, the moon with her entourage of stars, dandelions and exotic orchids, tiny spiders and mammoth dinosaurs, fish and whales, man, woman and child...the power of bringing forth LIFE because of God's LOVE

INCARNATION: Francis of Assisi not only loved the LORD Jesus who he had experienced on the Cross of San Damiano, but as his love deepened, he was utterly humbled as he came to know how deeply the LORD loved Francis himself...always LIFE-giving....in His birth, in the WORD of the gospels, in the Eucharistic Presence, in his dying that we could know LIFE/LOVE. Francis grasped the thru meaning of Christmas of, not just a child being born, but even more profound and humbling Jesus the Christ – the Body of God....and he longed hungered for everyone to know deep in their hearts what he had come to know and love. CHRISTMAS is God's gift of self to all who believe.

INCARNATION: God calls me every waking moment to bring forth the LIFE He has given me through LOVE. ...to bring forth His Son through every action, every word, every thought, every deed, every encounter... offering LIFE to everyone, anyone I meet. We, too, are called to be transformed into Jesus – God's image and likeness and then...INCARNATION continues in our BE-ing.

INCARNATION

*Submitted by: Sister Anne Marie Lom, O.S.F.
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It seems to me that incarnating Godself is a favorite activity of our God. The Incarnation of God's beauty, creativity, imagination and magnitude is manifested in creation. We first know God by extravagance in the vastness of creation, not only of earth, but in the infinite space of galaxies and the wonders yet to be discovered.

We further see God in the Incarnation of Jesus in history. All the quiet and tender beauty of Christmas moves our hearts to seek God in the small, the tiny, the vulnerable and the poor. The Infant Jesus is easy to love. The incarnate Jesus in my brothers and sisters is more of a challenge but a necessity of my call to follow as a disciple of Jesus. Each person being made in the image and likeness of God, another Incarnation of God's love, is an invitation for me to practice love of the Incarnation by loving my brothers and sisters. My Sisters in Community invite me to see God incarnate in their intense Baptismal call revealed in their Vowed Consecration.

The Incarnation of God's abiding Presence in the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus demonstrates God's desire to be with us, remain with us, in our sorrows, our deaths, our renewed hopes. The Eucharist deepens God's expression of Presence, abiding love, and generosity.

As Franciscans we are invited to experience Incarnation in creation, in the nativity, the Paschal Mystery, the Eucharist, and in each other.

What a great God we worship Who loves to be present with us in manifold manners!



LIVING the INCARNATION

Submitted by: Sister Leonette Kochan, O.S.F.

Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity

United States of America, English

“God looked at everything he had made and found it very good.” Perhaps we can look at the creation of the world as a prelude to the Incarnation. “God so loved the world that he sent his Son...” A beautiful creation was made even more worthy of dignity and respect by Jesus joining the human race. God was so in love with the world that he wanted to be present himself, so he sent Jesus, his Son.

We associate God with us in many ways. Paraphrasing the words of Rev. James Martin, S.J., even before the Last Supper, Jesus gave his body, took his body to many places and to all people whom he encountered. During his time on earth he gave himself, in his body, to the poor, the rich, the sick, to common laborers, to friends, to sinners, to his enemies, to the marginalized, traveling from place to place, teaching and being present in whatever manner others needed him. *(Martin, Rev. James, S.J. Jesus, A Pilgrimage. Harper Collins, 2014, pp. 240-243.)*

How does this understanding of Incarnation, Jesus with us as a human person and as God, translate into our lives of faith and action? Just as Jesus gave his life, his body, in every circumstance he encountered, each of us is called to give our whole being as an expression of gratitude for God’s love, to care for our world. As Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity we are nourished by the ongoing gift of the Incarnation through our life of prayer, our life in community and our life of ministry in the Church.

Prayer is our foundation, at all stages of our ongoing formation - from initial formation, to our call to active ministry, to the prayer apostolate of our retired and infirm sisters. Through our daily celebration of Eucharist, daily communal celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, daily personal prayer, annual retreats, we are grounded, in personal relationship with Jesus, striving to be witnesses of his presence to others.

Jesus ministered in community with his disciples, functioning in fellowship, his presence in human flesh a gift to all whom he encountered. We, as a Franciscan Congregation, live in community as we serve in education, in varied areas of parish ministry, in healthcare, in service to our Franciscan Congregation, and as we return home to our Motherhouse when that time of life arrives. We are present to and care for each other in all stages of our lives. Our common life is a gift to each other, enhancing and supporting our life of prayer, our vowed life and our active apostolates. As a communal body we are enabled to go out and be the Body of Christ in our world. As Incarnational people, we seek, in the words of Rueben P. Job, to “go where the wounds are, for that is where Jesus went.” *(When You Pray, Rueben P. Job, p. 130)*

INCARNATION OF OUR CHARISM IN EDUCATION IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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Original language : French*

In her letter to the Bishop of Graz, in which she explained the reasons that led her to found our Congregation, our foundress, Mother MARGARITA Pucher, said: "Love and compassion for poor and abandoned children give me the strength to take this step".

Inspired by the spirit of our foundress and committed to incarnate our charism, "To live the Gospel in fraternity, witnessing and announcing the Kingdom in the Franciscan spirit, at the service of the Church and the human person, especially in the educational field", the sisters in mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo are involved in the formation and education of young women, first in the creation of social homes (informal education) and then in the formation of youth in general (formal education) such as the Teachers and the management of Secondary Schools (Ifendula Institute and the Institute of Saint Anthony of Padua in Nyantende).

INFORMAL EDUCATION : At the dawn of evangelization, Congolese women in general and the Shi women (one of the dominant tribes in South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo) were marginalized. Since they could do nothing but housework and taking care of the children, always considered inferior to their brothers regardless of their age, they had no right to education, especially for an intellectual training, so they had therefore to be quite submissive.



Professional School

When the Franciscan Sisters arrived in Luhwinja (a parish in the Archdiocese of Bukavu), the girls and women were illiterate, except for the girls at the royal court. It is the true proclamation of the Gospel that helps a person to love God and to discover the meaning of her or his own life. With firm determination and faithful to the charism of our religious family, the Sisters began, not without difficulty, the formation of girls and some women who would later become animators. They helped a great deal to raise awareness in the villages. They began with the concept of health and hygiene. That formation took place under a tree for lack of a building and also to encourage a coming together between them and the sisters. There followed the learning of skills: reading and writing, dressmaking, sewing and housework.

Thanks to our homes, girls and women have regained their dignity in our society. As the responsible ones, they have since then been able to ensure the subsistence of their families through their technical skills.

FORMAL EDUCATION : if informal education was our priority at the beginning of the Franciscan mission, later on formal education (Normal Schools) proved to be indispensable because, as it is part of our charism, the Diocesan Coordination of the Established Catholic Schools of Bukavu entrusted us with the direction of two schools: IFENDULA Institute in Luhwinja and INSTITUTE NYANTENDE. Our purpose is always incarnated in our charism : compassion for the poorest of the youth. Special attention is given to children from the poorest families by giving them the chance to have a status in society. Hence the care of poor children by the community.

Our charism is always up-to-date. We strive to respond to today's challenges of poor and abandoned children in our societies who need our presence and compassion.

INCARNATION-EMMANUEL, God with us

*Submitted by: Sister Ellen Pachmayer, O.S.F.
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English*

“Incarnation”, “what would one ever write about that?” I put it out of my mind. A few days later I was combing through holy cards and papers in the pocket of my old Bible cover, when I found the writing below. I wrote it October 3, 1979! As I read it I thought, “Wow, this is Incarnation!” I would like to share it here:

*Darkness,
Stillness,
Lord are you here?
Quiet,
Surrender.*

Yes, Love, I'm here!
I am within, the very within of you,
I am your core.
Look to me,
I am your Lord,
I am here loving you,
growing you into existence!

Love me in return,
seek me, find me.
I've been here this whole time,
waiting,
just waiting and hoping
you'd come and find me!

I have so many places to go, but I want
to go them with you.
I have so many people to meet,
but I want to meet them with you.
Seek me then, find me within.
Together we'll make it, together!

Incarnation: Lived out as Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity

Submitted by: Sister Mariella Erdmann, O.S.F.

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Pope Benedict XVI tells us that the Incarnation “shows us the unprecedented realism of divine love.” God’s actions are not limited to words, but he enters into the very messiness of our everyday lives, into our history with its greatness, sinfulness, accomplishments and failures. He takes on the fatigue and the weight of the human condition.



Submitted by Sister Mariella Erdmann

The fact that God chose to join the human experience and grow up in a family, have friends, experience joys, sorrows, disappointments, forgiveness and love, should aid us in a remarkable experience of true and deep faith. God is real and he touches our lives every day in a direct and practical way. This is amazing and incomprehensible when we contemplate a God that loves us so much as to become poor and humble in our midst. We all know that God became man but, recognizing the man he became is so vital to knowing God and knowing ourselves. What a grace! Faith is not just emotional or intellectual but it touches every aspect of our lives.

This is the simple and astounding truth about God’s grace. By grace He gives us a participation in His own life, making us partakers of the divine nature. (2 Peter 1:4) Father Paul Scalia states, “We describe grace as *deifying*.

Its power and purpose are not simply to make us better people but to *divinize* us, to give us the capacity to love as God loves. . . . Indeed, this is the purpose and scandal of the Incarnation.”

So, what do we make of this as Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity! Our Constitutions state, “As a Congregation of apostolic women religious in the Church we respond to God’s call by living in a more intense way our baptismal consecration. Through our profession of the evangelical counsels, we respond in the spirit of Christ with a total gift of ourselves to the Father. . . . It is in this way that we are able, through the power of the Spirit, to manifest the loving presence of Christ with ever-increasing clarity, to bring His love to those we serve, and to become an invitation to others to find life in Him.” Our Constitutions continue, “Faithful to our belief that the Eucharist is the heart and center of Christian community, we come together daily to remember and celebrate the Eucharist, and Paschal mysteries and to incarnate His presence among us.”

So, God becomes incarnate in the person of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit and the ‘yes’ of Mary. Jesus lives among us, suffers and dies for love of us; but before He dies he gives us His body and blood in the Eucharist and in so doing gives us the capacity to love as He loves. We in turn, partake of His very life each time we receive Him in the Eucharist and we in faith through the power of the Spirit are compelled to ‘incarnate’ Christ’s presence in our world today.

God is indeed with us! As Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity, each of us is called in a unique way to fulfill God’s plan of salvation for all. We have a tremendous responsibility, but we also have the freedom to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

The incarnation of our charism in education

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Original language Spanish

Article 2 of our Constitutions states what our charism is and reads as follows: *"To live the Gospel in fraternity for the love of God by incarnating, witnessing to and proclaiming the kingship of Christ in a Franciscan spirit of continual conversion..."*.

But how does this really happen in everyday life, in daily life? I always consider and live everything as a new experience, because God surprises me at every step. He who makes all things new also invites me to be creative and to let myself be renewed by His Spirit. Because to the extent I let God be my motivation and the very meaning of my existence, I can reflect this Grace in me through my actions.



The implementation of the charism inherited from our Mother Foundress, Margaret Puhar, is evident and credible in the witness we give, especially to children and young people, who continually observe us and challenge us with their words and gestures. I remember a young man who returned me back the question I asked him: **Do you believe in God?** When he asked me this same question, I realized that I cannot take anything for granted because of the fact that I am a religious.

I have to give a concrete and credible answer to the young man and to everyone, an answer that can only be given by the experience of life itself, by knowing that I am loved and saved by the Lord. I learned that what I teach I must first of all live it, as the Gospel says: "Do for others what you want

them to do for you: this is the meaning of the Law of Moses and of the teachings of the prophets"

How to incarnate and bear witness to the kingship of Christ? This question is constantly ringing in my ears, it pushes me to deepen my intimate relationship with Jesus and from there to make Him known to others, as the One who wants to come and reign in our hearts and souls, forever.

When I visit our apostolic missions, I can reap the fruits of the beautiful evangelical work that my older sisters have done with their teachings and their testimonies of fraternal listening, closeness and accompaniment to the different personal realities of children, young people and their families, as well as the staff of our schools. Franciscan spirituality can be breathed in the institutional climate and is manifested in hospitality, joy, in the various gestures of charity towards the needy, in the spirit of prayer and sacrifice of many brothers, in the days of spiritual retreat and in the missions.

A teacher who is working in the institution for many years expressed her experience to me: "After much work I discovered that the Franciscan charism is embodied in the personal experience we have of God, and in the experience we have in and with the community. And even when, through empathy and with a compassionate spirit, we put ourselves in the place of the other, not to judge the person but to understand him or her".

Embodying our charism is and will always be the challenge that drives us to seek the will of God.

TODAY IS CHRISTMAS

Sister Madeleine Mbodj
Institute of the Sisters of Saint Francis of Assisi
Togo, French

For a few moments I leave the community festivities, guided like the shepherds...I leave behind the abundance of the table, always well garnished on feast days.

Why do we feel obliged to have so much, or even too much, to celebrate Christmas? Why do we have too much in our festivities, at the risk of scandalizing those who have nothing, those who live with so little?

Yet we have chosen poverty. On this day, however, it is the poverty of the Son of God that we are celebrating.

I leave behind the noise of joyful songs and dances. In all this excitement, who are we celebrating? Who do we join? Only ourselves?

I am attracted by the silence of the nursery where orphaned or abandoned new-borns are welcomed, to whom the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi have been devoting themselves for more than 60 years. It's nap time, everything is silent, calm. An unusual silence, because in ordinary times, there is always a baby crying and asking for arms to comfort it ...



I go upstairs for a «visit», the bottles have just been given to the smallest ones. One of them is resting in his pushchair. I take him in my arms to help him burp.

He asked for nothing, claimed nothing. He is there, helpless, fragile. He smiles at me, confident and I understand then that it is I who am «visited»! This child is in the image of Jesus Son of God incarnate in our fragile humanity. He is defenceless in the risk that I can do with him what I want, begging for our love, our protection, abandoned in our hands. In the image of this child, God wants to depend on us and places himself in our hands

Then I understand better what our Constitutions say: «Our specific charism sends us to the smallest, the poor, the suffering, as «sisters» in presence or in service to announce to them in word and deed that they are loved by God» (Constitutions of the Sisters of St. Francis).

More than through words, we help the Word become «flesh», to live among us, when we take care of the weakest, the smallest, of the one who receives no consideration, fragile and unwanted.

In this way we are making a home for the unheard of that happened in Bethlehem.

Appendices :

Without any wish to praise the institutional care of underprivileged children, we simply wish to point out that from its inception to the present day, 1800 children have been admitted to this home for a temporary stay before being reintegrated into a family setting with close relatives or in an adoptive family.

We rejoice today with all the children who passed through this house and whose lives were saved thanks to the constant and shared commitment of the staff and the sisters and the quality of care they received.