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**Prot. MG 157/19**

**Subject: Circular-message for Christmas Novena**

### **Dearest Sisters!**

This year has been very full of events, meetings and visits of the General Council throughout the religious family. Particularly the General Canonical Visit, which ended a short time ago, and allowed us to "touch" with our hands so many realities of the people, communities, works and services that the LMSC has dispersed in the world. Much to thank! Much, still, to walk!

A few weeks ago we started advent time and we began the pilgrimage, together with Mary and Joseph, to Bethlehem... Together with the whole Church, we have begun to prepare for the celebration of the most beautiful and sweet mystery of our faith: the incarnation of the Son of God, Christmas!

Pope Francis has given us a great gift, precisely to live this Solemnity with renewed love, amazement and depth, with his Admirable Apostolic Letter *Admirabile signum*, on the meaning and value of the Nativity.

As you have already noticed, the traditional "Advent Circular" has not arrived to you this time. I thought, this year, not to overload more the communities that are very busy with everything that implies the coming of the Christmas and New Year holidays and who are carrying out with great commitment and responsibility the Catechesis of the Vow of Charity. So, instead, I send you a preparation closer to Christmas, to live together the last nine days of Advent.

We have no better and more valid reflection than the one that Pope Francis has already offered us with his Apostolic Letter on the nativity crib, but we will also put it in tune with another precious document offered to us by the Pope: the encyclical *Laudato si'*. This last was suggested to me by our young people in formation, during the meeting we held together with Sr. M. Sylwia, in Buenos Aires in the month of november.

«*God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten Son*» (Jh 3:16).

God so much loved his creation that he could not leave her at the mercy of the consequences of sin...

And therefore, I believe that we cannot think of Christmas without thinking about creation, at the "*new creation*". God bursting into history, embodying us in our human reality, bringing within it the recomposition of harmony, of unity and the initial beauty. Baby Jesus is the beginning of the new creation, he is the restoration of the order thought by God in the creation of the universe; in Christmas is the realized "Establishment in Christ", because Jesus comes to

overcome the sin that had ruined the unity and communion of everything between himself and with God, he comes to restore peace, justice, truth and unity.

### A different proposal...



I would like to invite you, through this very particular "circular", to join us by making a "pilgrimage" and an experience together, before the crib that each Community has definitely already prepared, putting us spiritually next to Mary and Joseph, put each one of us among the different "figures" of the nativity crib, to experience their feelings, expectations, fears, insecurities, hopes and joys. Let us make, this year, a "*living Novena*" and welcome the God made man in the "cave" of our community, of our Work, of our service environment.

For that reason, I propose to you, starting from 16th december, the day when we will all begin the traditional Christmas Novena, uniting ourselves in this pilgrimage and squeezing ourselves symbolically, on Christmas Day, in an "*embrace*" that makes us all feel near, all sisters and friends, all connected and all united in the Child Jesus, in Emmanuel, in God with us, and with Him, united, integrated and connected to all humanity and to all creation, redeemed and purified by His coming among us.

**Dear sisters**, I attach to this letter a proposal to live together, as i told you, the nine days that lead us to the sweet Solennity of Christmas. Each Community to see at what time of the day it can be inserted and organize itself so that everyone in the community can participate. If you see it possible and positive, you can also invite the laity and other people who wish to join you in this reflection.

I renew the wishes of a fruitful Advent that leads all, united as the only "body", to experience deeply the presence of Jesus, Mary and Joseph who invites us to love, to solidarity, to the defense of weak life, to the communion with all and with the entire universe.

I embrace you with fraternal affection in the Lord and we are always united in prayer.



*Sr. Mabel Spagnuolo*

Sr M. Mabel Spagnuolo  
Superiora generale

Tortona, Mother House, December 12, 2019.  
Feast of "N.S. of Guadalupe".

**TO MAKE A "LIVING NOVENA":  
LET US PILGRIM TOGETHER, TOWARDS THE CELEBRATION OF CHRISTMAS!**

**DAY 16: THE CRIB: OUR "COMMON HOME"...**

► **We read from the Apostolic Letter *Admirabile signum*:**

1. The enchanting image of the Christmas crèche, so dear to the Christian people, never ceases to arouse amazement and wonder. The depiction of Jesus' birth is itself a simple and joyful proclamation of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. The nativity scene is like a living Gospel rising up from the pages of sacred Scripture. As we contemplate the Christmas story, we are invited to set out on a spiritual journey, drawn by the humility of the God who became man in order to encounter every man and woman. We come to realize that so great is his love for us that he became one of us, so that we in turn might become one with him.

With this Letter, I wish to encourage the beautiful family tradition of preparing the nativity scene in the days before Christmas, but also the custom of setting it up in the workplace, in schools, hospitals, prisons and town squares. Great imagination and creativity is always shown in employing the most diverse materials to create small masterpieces of beauty. As children, we learn from our parents and grandparents to carry on this joyful tradition, which encapsulates a wealth of popular piety. It is my hope that this custom will never be lost and that, wherever it has fallen into disuse, it can be rediscovered and revived.

2. The origin of the Christmas crèche is found above all in certain details of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, as related in the Gospels. The evangelist Luke says simply that Mary "gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (2:7). Because Jesus was laid in a manger, the nativity scene is known in Italian as a *presepe*, from the Latin word *praesepium*, meaning "manger".

Coming into this world, the Son of God was laid in the place where animals feed. Hay became the first bed of the One who would reveal himself as "the bread come down from heaven" (*Jh* 6:41). Saint Augustine, with other Church Fathers, was impressed by this symbolism: "Laid in a manger, he became our food" (*Sermon* 189, 4). Indeed, the nativity scene evokes a number of the mysteries of Jesus' life and brings them close to our own daily lives.

But let us go back to the origins of the Christmas crèche so familiar to us. We need to imagine ourselves in the little Italian town of Greccio, near Rieti. Saint Francis stopped there, most likely on his way back from Rome where on 29 November 1223 he had received the confirmation of his Rule from Pope Honorius III. Francis had earlier visited the Holy Land, and the caves in Greccio reminded him of the countryside of Bethlehem. It may also be that the "Poor Man of Assis" had been struck by the mosaics in the Roman Basilica of Saint Mary Major depicting the birth of Jesus, close to the place where, according to an ancient tradition, the wooden panels of the manger are preserved.

The *Franciscan Sources* describe in detail what then took place in Greccio. Fifteen days before Christmas, Francis asked a local man named John to help him realize his desire “to bring to life the memory of that babe born in Bethlehem, to see as much as possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, and how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he was laid upon a bed of hay”. At this, his faithful friend went immediately to prepare all that the Saint had asked. On 25 December, friars came to Greccio from various parts, together with people from the farmsteads in the area, who brought flowers and torches to light up that holy night. When Francis arrived, he found a manger full of hay, an ox and a donkey. All those present experienced a new and indescribable joy in the presence of the Christmas scene. The priest then solemnly celebrated the Eucharist over the manger, showing the bond between the Incarnation of the Son of God and the Eucharist. At Greccio there were no statues; the nativity scene was enacted and experienced by all who were present.



This is how our tradition began: with everyone gathered in joy around the cave, with no distance between the original event and those sharing in its mystery.

Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of Saint Francis, notes that this simple and moving scene was accompanied by the gift of a marvellous vision: one of those present saw the Baby Jesus himself lying in the manger. From the nativity scene of that Christmas in 1223, “everyone went home with joy».

► **Says Pope Francis in the encyclical “*Laudato si*”:**

“Lack of housing is a grave problem in many parts of the world, both in rural areas and in large cities, since state budgets usually cover only a small portion of the demand. Not only the poor, but many other members of society as well, find it difficult to own a home. Having a home has much to do with a sense of personal dignity and the growth of families. This is a major issue for human ecology”<sup>1</sup>.

“The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home”<sup>2</sup>.

► **To reflect and to contemplate:**

- The Pope calls us to the care of creation, to the care of the world because it is our "*common home*". In the heart of creation God put man and woman and He entrusted them with care and fruitfulness. Created, like a "*home*", preserves the precious treasure of human life, made in the image and likeness of the Creator. A "*home*" with frequency neglected, ruined and devalued by us...

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<sup>1</sup> *Laudato si*, n. 152.

<sup>2</sup> *Laudato si*, n. 13.

- The incarnation of the Son, renews the consciousness of the universal dimension that the Bethlehem cave has, as a "*common home*", the house of man and the house of God. The stable of Bethlehem becomes the space that the creator makes to the "*new creation*", a space, an environment in which all creatures come together: men and women, poor and rich, nature (the animals, plants, stone and air), and universe (the stars, the comet, the angels...). The "cave" of Bethlehem embraces and reconciles two realities: that of exclusion and marginalization: "*there was no place for them in the accommodation*" (Lk 2: 7), and that of reconciliation and inclusion: at the crib, no one is missing!

**Let us Pray:**

Help us Jesus to prepare our environment, the portion of that "*common home*" that is our community and our work, so that it may be tidy, welcoming, inclusive, well cared for and beautiful.

- Let's add to the crib of the community a "star" where the title of this day is written ("our common home").

**DAY 17. THE CRIB: "TO FEEL AND TO TOUCH THE POVERTY"...**

► **We read from the Apostolic Letter *Admirabile signum*:**

3. With the simplicity of that sign, Saint Francis carried out a great work of evangelization. His teaching touched the hearts of Christians and continues today to offer a simple yet authentic means of portraying the beauty of our faith. Indeed, the place where this first nativity scene was enacted expresses and evokes these sentiments. Greccio has become a refuge for the soul, a mountain fastness wrapped in silence.

Why does the Christmas crèche arouse such wonder and move us so deeply? First, because it shows God's tender love: the Creator of the universe lowered himself to take up our littleness. The gift of life, in all its mystery, becomes all the more wondrous as we realize that the Son of Mary is the source and sustenance of all life. In Jesus, the Father has given us a brother who comes to seek us out whenever we are confused or lost, a loyal friend ever at our side. He gave us his Son who forgives us and frees us from our sins.



Setting up the Christmas crèche in our homes helps us to relive the history of what took place in Bethlehem. Naturally, the Gospels remain our source for understanding and reflecting on that event. At the same time, its portrayal in the crèche helps us to imagine the scene. It touches our hearts and makes us enter into salvation history as contemporaries of an event that is living and real in a broad gamut of historical and cultural contexts.

In a particular way, from the time of its Franciscan origins, the nativity scene has invited us to "feel" and "touch" the poverty that God's Son took upon himself in the Incarnation. Implicitly, it summons us to follow him along the path of humility, poverty and self-denial that leads from the

manger of Bethlehem to the cross. It asks us to meet him and serve him by showing mercy to those of our brothers and sisters in greatest need (cf. *Mt 25:31-46*).

► **Says Pope Francis in the encyclical “*Laudato si*”:**

Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption. We need to take up an ancient lesson, found in different religious traditions and also in the Bible. It is the conviction that “less is more”. A constant flood of new consumer goods can baffle the heart and prevent us from cherishing each thing and each moment. To be serenely present to each reality, however small it may be, opens us to much greater horizons of understanding and personal fulfilment. Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack. This implies avoiding the dynamic of dominion and the mere accumulation of pleasures.<sup>3</sup>

**To reflect and contemplate:**

- The cave of Bethlehem is a clear call to live a pure, simple faith, free from the superfluous... To contemplate Child Jesus, born in the hardest poverty, reminds us to revisit our way of life: our sobriety, our ability to enjoy with little, to taste the little things, to thank for what life offers us every day... To Contemplate child Jesus invites us to “*feel and touch*” the poverty and to follow it in humility and charity.
- The contemplation of the Christmas scene of the crib calls us to make an examination of conscience and try to purify in us and in our relationships the “*dynamics of domination and mere accumulation of pleasures*”.

**Let us pray**

We ask you for forgiveness Lord, because the community environments and our way of life do not always reflect the poverty, the sobriety and the simplicity that you wished to assume, coming into the world. Forgive us for the scandal of having made a “*vow of poverty*” and being far from witnessing it.

- Let's add to the crib of the community a “*star*” where the title of this day is written (“*to feel and to touch poverty*”).

**DAY 18. IN THE CRIB “*JESUS IS THE NOVELTY*”...**

► **We read from the Apostolic Letter *Admirabile signum*:**

4. I would like now to reflect on the various elements of the nativity scene in order to appreciate their deeper meaning. First, there is the background of a starry sky wrapped in the darkness and silence of night. We represent this not only out of fidelity to the Gospel accounts, but also for its symbolic value. We can think of all those times in our lives when we have experienced the

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<sup>3</sup> *Laudato si*, n. 222.

darkness of night. Yet even then, God does not abandon us, but is there to answer our crucial questions about the meaning of life. Who am I? Where do I come from? Why was I born at this time in history? Why do I love? Why do I suffer? Why will I die? It was to answer these questions that God became man. His closeness brings light where there is darkness and shows the way to those dwelling in the shadow of suffering (cf. *Lk* 1:79).

The landscapes that are part of the nativity scene also deserve some mention. Frequently they include the ruins of ancient houses or buildings, which in some instances replace the cave of Bethlehem and become a home for the Holy Family. These ruins appear to be inspired by the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* of the Dominican Jacobus de Varagine, which relates a pagan belief that the Temple of Peace in Rome would collapse when a Virgin gave birth. More than anything, the ruins are the visible sign of fallen humanity, of everything that inevitably falls into ruin, decays and disappoints. This scenic setting tells us that Jesus is newness in the midst of an aging world, that he has come to heal and rebuild, to restore the world and our lives to their original splendour.



► **Says Pope Francis in the encyclical “*Laudato si*”:**

At the same time, Judaeo-Christian thought demythologized nature. While continuing to admire its grandeur and immensity, it no longer saw nature as divine. In doing so, it emphasizes all the more our human responsibility for nature. This rediscovery of nature can never be at the cost of the freedom and responsibility of human beings who, as part of the world, have the duty to cultivate their abilities in order to protect it and develop its potential. If we acknowledge the value and the fragility of nature and, at the same time, our God-given abilities, we can finally leave behind the modern myth of unlimited material progress. A fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing and limiting our power. <sup>4</sup>

**To reflect and to celebrate:**

- Pope Francis connects the environment and the atmosphere of Christmas night with our spiritual and human situations, with the doubts, anguish and existential questions that often invade our hearts and minds. But the coming of Jesus into our flesh has forever given light and meaning to the drama of humanity. Jesus is, in his apparent fragility as a newborn, the new life that rips us from the darkness and from the death of sin. This is the “*novelty*” that Jesus offers us in the crib.

- The “*novelty*”, that Jesus is in his incarnation, is to give back to creation his splendor and his beauty and to put man back in his original place, in freedom, in responsibility and in the conscience to care for the world by orienting, cultivating and limiting our Power.

**Let us pray:**

Thank you Lord, because from the cradle of Bethlehem, you entrust once again, to our fragile hands, the “*novelty*” that your Son brought us, the care of the world and, in particular, the care of the daily environment where we want to love and serve you.

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<sup>4</sup> *Laudato si*, n. 78.

- Let's add to the crib of the community a "star" where the title of this day is written ("*Jesus is the novelty*").

## DAY 19. THE CRIB, A PLACE OF "UNIVERSAL FRATERNITY"...

► We read from the Apostolic Letter *Admirabile signum*:

5. With what emotion should we arrange the mountains, streams, sheep and shepherds in the nativity scene! As we do so, we are reminded that, as the prophets had foretold, all creation rejoices in the coming of the Messiah. The angels and the guiding star are a sign that we too are called to set out for the cave and to worship the Lord.

“Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us” (*Lk 2:15*). So the shepherds tell one another after the proclamation of the angels. A beautiful lesson emerges from these simple words. Unlike so many other people, busy about many things, the shepherds become the first to see the most essential thing of all: the gift of salvation. It is the humble and the poor who greet the event of the Incarnation. The shepherds respond to God who comes to meet us in the Infant Jesus by setting out to meet him with love, gratitude and awe. Thanks to Jesus, this encounter between God and his children gives birth to our religion and accounts for its unique beauty, so wonderfully evident in the nativity scene.

► Says Pope Francis in the encyclical "*Laudato si'*":

Care for nature is part of a lifestyle which includes the capacity for living together and communion. Jesus reminded us that we have God as our common Father and that this makes us brothers and sisters. Fraternal love can only be gratuitous; it can never be a means of repaying others for what they have done or will do for us. That is why it is possible to love our enemies. This same gratuitousness inspires us to love and accept the wind, the sun and the clouds, even though we cannot control them. In this sense, we can speak of a "universal fraternity"<sup>5</sup>.



### To reflect and to contemplate:

- In the crib, they gather in a universal embrace, all creatures, celestial and terrestrial. The crib is harmony, it is "*universal fraternity*", it is a "*common home*" where you come to become witnesses and not mere spectators. The crib is the place of man's encounter with God in the Child Jesus, the point of arrival in our search for God, and at the same time, the place of departure, for the proclamation of beauty and the salvation.

- In the incarnation of the Son, God reveals himself without veils as Father, and in the cave of Bethlehem, next to the cradle, with Mary and Joseph, is born the "*universal fraternity*", the gratuity and love is reborn, among us and towards the whole universe.

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<sup>5</sup> *Laudato si'*, n. 228.



**Let us Pray:**

We ask you for forgiveness Lord, because we do not always live as true daughters of yours, as true sisters among ourselves and with others. Forgive us for the times we have polluted fraternal relations with the little capacity to forgiveness, of gratuitousness and of simplicity. Forgive us the times we have not embraced and cared for creation with waste and indifference.

- Let's add to the crib of the community a "**star**" where the title of this day is written ("*place of universal fraternity*").

## DAY 20. IN THE CRIB “THERE IS SPACE FOR ALL ”...

### ► We read from the Apostolica *Admirabile signum*:

6. It is customary to add many symbolic figures to our nativity scenes. First, there are the beggars and the others who know only the wealth of the heart. They too have every right to draw near to the Infant Jesus; no one can evict them or send them away from a crib so makeshift that the poor seem entirely at home. Indeed, the poor are a privileged part of this mystery; often they are the first to recognize God’s presence in our midst.

The presence of the poor and the lowly in the nativity scene remind us that God became man for the sake of those who feel most in need of his love and who ask him to draw near to them. Jesus, “gentle and humble in heart” (*Mt* 11:29), was born in poverty and led a simple life in order to teach us to recognize what is essential and to act accordingly. The nativity scene clearly teaches that we cannot let ourselves be fooled by wealth and fleeting promises of happiness. We see Herod’s palace in the background, closed and deaf to the tidings of joy. By being born in a manger, God himself launches the only true revolution that can give hope and dignity to the disinherited and the outcast: the revolution of love, the revolution of tenderness. From the manger, Jesus proclaims, in a meek yet powerful way, the need for sharing with the poor as the path to a more human and fraternal world in which no one is excluded or marginalized.

Children – but adults too! – often love to add to the nativity scene other figures that have no apparent connection with the Gospel accounts. Yet, each in its own way, these fanciful additions show that in the new world inaugurated by Jesus there is room for whatever is truly human and for all God’s creatures. From the shepherd to the blacksmith, from the baker to the musicians, from the women carrying jugs of water to the children at play: all this speaks of the everyday holiness, the joy of doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way, born whenever Jesus shares his divine life with us.

### ► Says Pope Francis in the encyclical “*Laudato si*”:

Nor must the critique of a misguided anthropocentrism underestimate the importance of interpersonal relations. If the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity, we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships. Christian thought sees human beings as possessing a particular dignity above other creatures; it thus inculcates esteem for each person and respect for others. Our openness to others, each of whom is a “thou” capable of knowing, loving and entering into dialogue, remains the source of our nobility as human persons. A correct relationship with the created world demands that we not weaken this social dimension of openness to others, much less the transcendent dimension of our openness to the “Thou” of God. Our relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God. Otherwise, it would be nothing more than romantic individualism dressed up in ecological garb, locking us into a stifling immanence. <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Laudato si*, n.119.

► **To reflect and to contemplate:**

- Contemplating the characters we have included in our Community crib, let's think about the many people who right now, in different parts of the world, in ports, at stations, at airports, in airports, in the borders, are on the movements looking for more worthy places for their lives, for their development. We are a world is on move! A world in permanent migration... The crib is the destination where God, made him a migrant too, he welcomes everyone and he restores meaning and dignity.

-We are immersed in a world that does not always welcome... in a world created for everyone but where there is no place for everyone! Jesus, who wished to be born and live in a permanent "migration", from the crib he claimed the value of being human and the valorisation and recognition of the other, the welcome and unconditional openness to the other and to God.

**Let us Pray:**

Baby Jesus, help us to be welcoming people, to not discriminate anyone, to overcome the prejudices and subtle racism that attack against your design of love. Purify in us and in our community every meanness and make that in our hearts and in our homes, there is always "a space for all".

- Let's add to the community crib a "star" where the title of this day is written ("*there is room for everyone*").

**DAY 21. THE CRIB, "HEARTH OF THE FAMILY"...**

► **We read from the Apostolic Letter *Admirabile signum*:**

7. Gradually, we come to the cave, where we find the figures of Mary and Joseph. Mary is a mother who contemplates her child and shows him to every visitor. The figure of Mary makes us reflect on the great mystery that surrounded this young woman when God knocked on the door of her immaculate heart. Mary responded in complete obedience to the message of the angel who asked her to become the Mother of God. Her words, "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (*Lk 1:38*), show all of us how to abandon ourselves in faith to God's will. By her "fiat", Mary became the mother of God's Son, not losing but, thanks to him, consecrating her virginity. In her, we see the Mother of God who does not keep her Son only to herself, but invites everyone to obey his word and to put it into practice (cf. *Jh 2:5*).

At Mary's side, shown protecting the Child and his Mother, stands Saint Joseph. He is usually depicted with staff in hand, or holding up a lamp. Saint Joseph plays an important role in the life of Jesus and Mary. He is the guardian who tirelessly protects his family. When God warned him of Herod's threat, he did not hesitate to set out and flee to Egypt (cf. *Mt 2:13-15*). And once the danger had passed, he brought the family back to Nazareth, where he was



to be the first teacher of Jesus as a boy and then as a young man. Joseph treasured in his heart the great mystery surrounding Jesus and Mary his spouse; as a just man, he entrusted himself always to God's will, and put it into practice

► **Says Pope Francis in the encyclical "*Laudato si'*":**

Ecological education can take place in a variety of settings: at school, in families, in the media, in catechesis and elsewhere. Good education plants seeds when we are young, and these continue to bear fruit throughout life. Here, though, I would stress the great importance of the family, which is "the place in which life – the gift of God – can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed, and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth. In the face of the so-called culture of death, the family is the heart of the culture of life". In the family we first learn how to show love and respect for life; we are taught the proper use of things, order and cleanliness, respect for the local ecosystem and care for all creatures. In the family we receive an integral education, which enables us to grow harmoniously in personal maturity. In the family we learn to ask without demanding, to say "thank you" as an expression of genuine gratitude for what we have been given, to control our aggressivity and greed, and to ask forgiveness when we have caused harm. These simple gestures of heartfelt courtesy help to create a culture of shared life and respect for our surroundings.<sup>7</sup>

► **To reflect and to contemplate:**

- The Crib is the "hearth" chosen by God. God wanted to be born in the bosom of a family, he chose a mother and an adoptive father. You can't imagine a crib without Mary and Joseph. Without their love, their tenderness, their courage, their amazement in front of the Child Jesus.

- Today we are in a world where certain ideologies want to impose other "*models*", other "*conceptions*" of the family. The Family of Nazareth is and always will be the clear symbol of God's thought. The family is the place where life, a gift from God, is welcomed, protected and developed.

► **Let us pray:**

- Forgive us Lord because not always we have collaborated in our community environment to create a true and authentic family spirit, a true "*hearth*". Forgive us for the times we have not had the courage to defend family and life in our environmental services and in the community.

- Let's add to the community crib a "**star**" where the title of this day is written ("*hearth of the famil* ").

## DAY 22. THE CRIB, "GUARDIAN OF THE RISING LIFE" ...

► **We read from the Apostolic Letter *Admirabile signum*:**

8. When, at Christmas, we place the statue of the Infant Jesus in the manger, the nativity scene suddenly comes alive. God appears as a child, for us to take into our arms. Beneath weakness

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<sup>7</sup> *Laudato si'*, n.213.

and frailty, he conceals his power that creates and transforms all things. It seems impossible, yet it is true: in Jesus, God was a child, and in this way he wished to reveal the greatness of his love: by smiling and opening his arms to all.

The birth of a child awakens joy and wonder; it sets before us the great mystery of life. Seeing the bright eyes of a young couple gazing at their newborn child, we can understand the feelings of Mary and Joseph who, as they looked at the Infant Jesus, sensed God's presence in their lives.

“Life was made manifest” (1 Jh 1:2). In these words, the Apostle John sums up the mystery of the Incarnation. The crèche allows us to see and touch this unique and unparalleled event that changed the course of history, so that time would thereafter be reckoned either before or after the birth of Christ.

God's ways are astonishing, for it seems impossible that he should forsake his glory to become a man like us. To our astonishment, we see God acting exactly as we do: he sleeps, takes milk from his mother, cries and plays like every other child! As always, God baffles us. He is unpredictable, constantly doing what we least expect. The nativity scene shows God as he came into our world, but it also makes us reflect on how our life is part of God's own life. It invites us to become his disciples if we want to attain ultimate meaning in life.



► **Says Pope Francis in the encyclical “*Laudato si*”:**

Since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion. How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties? “If personal and social sensitivity towards the acceptance of the new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable for society also wither away<sup>8</sup>.”

► **To reflect and to contemplate:**

- In front of the crib, our gaze, our heart and our most beautiful thoughts stop on the figure of the Child Jesus. He is the center of Christmas, everything has been prepared to welcome him, to love him, to follow him. Even our lips often covered by tender kisses of the figure of the Child and experience unspeakable joy and peace for the infinite love of God, a God who is close, human and divine, infinite and little.

- The incarnation and birth of Jesus cries out the value of life and the dignity of the person from the moment of conception. Baby Jesus embodies in himself, the many children panned in the bosom of their mother, so many children who died in the absurd wars, the many children exploited, abused and humiliated in all senses by insensitivity, selfish interests, human absurdity, personal and social issue

► **let us pray:**

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<sup>8</sup> *Laudato si*, n. 120.

We ask you Baby Jesus to protect the fragile life of so many little ones, to give voice with the mystery of your Incarnation to the little ones who have no voice. Jesus enlightens the dark mind of those who have power and decisions in their hands, and give us the courage of the prophecy of life, to announce and to denounce.

- Let's add to the crib of the community a "star" where the title of this day is written ("*caretaker of the nascent life* ").

## DAY 23. THE CRIB, "WITNESS OF SMALL GESTURES OF LOVE"...

► We read from the Apostolic Letter *Admirabile signum*:

9. As the feast of Epiphany approaches, we place the statues of the Three Kings in the Christmas crèche. Observing the star, those wise men from the East set out for Bethlehem, in order to find Jesus and to offer him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These costly gifts have an allegorical meaning: gold honours Jesus' kingship, incense his divinity, myrrh his sacred humanity that was to experience death and burial.

As we contemplate this aspect of the nativity scene, we are called to reflect on the responsibility of every Christian to spread the Gospel. Each of us is called to bear glad tidings to all, testifying by our practical works of mercy to the joy of knowing Jesus and his love.

The Magi teach us that people can come to Christ by a very long route. Men of wealth, sages from afar, athirst for the infinite, they set out on the long and perilous journey that would lead them to Bethlehem (cf. *Mt* 2:1-12). Great joy comes over them in the presence of the Infant King. They are not scandalized by the poor surroundings, but immediately fall to their knees to worship him. Kneeling before him, they understand that the God who with sovereign wisdom guides the course of the stars also guides the course of history, casting down the mighty and raising up the lowly. Upon their return home, they would certainly have told others of this amazing encounter with the Messiah, thus initiating the spread of the Gospel among the nations.



► Says Pope Francis in the encyclical "*Laudato si*":

Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world. Love for society and commitment to the common good are outstanding expressions of a charity which affects not only relationships between individuals but also "macro-relationships, social, economic and political ones". That is why the Church set before the world the ideal of a "civilization of love". Social love is the key to authentic development: "In order to make society more human, more worthy of the human person, love in social life – political, economic and cultural – must be given renewed value,

becoming the constant and highest norm for all activity”. In this framework, along with the importance of little everyday gestures, social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a “culture of care” which permeates all of society. When we feel that God is calling us to intervene with others in these social dynamics, we should realize that this too is part of our spirituality, which is an exercise of charity and, as such, matures and sanctifies us.<sup>9</sup>

► **To reflect and to contemplate:**

- The Pope reminds us of the ideal, to which we are all called, to build a "*civilization of love*", but this ideal that aims to transform society, begins in our environment, there where we live every day, with the people we have next door to home or in the apostolic service. For us, who have professed charity as an identity, it is a question of spirituality and lifestyle.

- In the crib, we can contemplate, in a perfect synthesis, the realization of this "*civilization of love*", made of faith and closeness to God who is love, embodied in the little Jesus, concrete gestures of welcome of all the diversity, present in the cave, expressions of joy and tenderness, generosity and mutual gift.

► **let us pray:**

Forgive us Lord because we have not always been careful to build in our daily environment the "*civilization of love*". Forgive the meanness and selfishness that sometimes has closed us to the other, the little responsibility in the face of the degradation of the environment and the promotion of a "*culture of care*" inside and outside our home.

- Let's add to the crib of the community a "**star**" where the title of this day is written ("*witness of the small gestures of love*").

**DAY 24. THE CRIB, “PLACE OF GRATITUDE AND AMAZEMENT”...**

► **We read from the Apostolic Letter *Admirabile signum*:**

10. Standing before the Christmas crèche, we are reminded of the time when we were children, eagerly waiting to set it up. These memories make us all the more conscious of the precious gift received from those who passed on the faith to us. At the same time, they remind us of our duty to share this same experience with our children and our grandchildren. It does not matter how the nativity scene is arranged: it can always be the same or it can change from year to year. What matters is that it speaks to our lives. Wherever it is, and whatever form it takes, the Christmas crèche speaks to us of the love of God, the God who became a child in



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<sup>9</sup> Laudato si', n. 231.

order to make us know how close he is to every man, woman and child, regardless of their condition.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Christmas crèche is part of the precious yet demanding process of passing on the faith. Beginning in childhood, and at every stage of our lives, it teaches us to contemplate Jesus, to experience God's love for us, to feel and believe that God is with us and that we are with him, his children, brothers and sisters all, thanks to that Child who is the Son of God and the Son of the Virgin Mary. And to realize that in that knowledge we find true happiness. Like Saint Francis, may we open our hearts to this simple grace, so that from our wonderment a humble prayer may arise: a prayer of thanksgiving to God, who wished to share with us his all, and thus never to leave us alone.

► **Says Pope Francis in the encyclical "*Laudato si*"**:

On the other hand, no one can cultivate a sober and satisfying life without being at peace with him or herself. An adequate understanding of spirituality consists in filling out what we mean by peace, which is much more than the absence of war. Inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life. Nature is filled with words of love, but how can we listen to them amid constant noise, interminable and nerve-wracking distractions, or the cult of appearances? Many people today sense a profound imbalance which drives them to frenetic activity and makes them feel busy, in a constant hurry which in turn leads them to ride rough-shod over everything around them. This too affects how they treat the environment. An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence "must not be contrived but found, uncovered". »<sup>10</sup>.

► **To reflect and to contemplate:**

- In front of the Christmas scene represented in our community crib, we all feel a little bit "*children*", little with the "*Little Jesus*"; we can only contemplate him experiencing a sense of purity, of innocence, of peace, of delicacy.... at Christmas we feel like we are and must be better. The crib speaks of love, forgiveness, reconciliation, gratitude.

- Pope has invited us to discover also in the nature his "*words of love*", and to listen in silence and in an inner peace, to recover balance and harmony by getting used to contemplating it in creation, in the people and in ourselves..

► **let us pray:**

Looking at you Jesus in the silence of the nativity scene and in the arms of Mary, we ask you to teach us to have a pure, deep, contemplative gaze, able to see beyond appearances your loving presence, able to listen, to discover and respect your humble and powerful presence. Teach us Baby Jesus the amazement of children, teach us to say "*thank you*"!

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<sup>10</sup> *Laudato si*’, n. 225.



- Let's add to the community crib a "**star**" where the title of this day is written ("*place of gratitude and amazement*").

## DAY 25. GOD IS BORN FOR US , *LAUDATO SI'*...

► We look for a moment on Christmas Day, to find ourselves all together next to the Crib, we put the last "**star**" with the inscription "*Laudato si'*" and pray with Pope <sup>11</sup>

Father, we praise you with all your creatures.  
They came forth from your all-powerful hand;  
they are yours, filled with your presence and your tender love.  
Praise be to you!

Son of God, Jesus,  
through you all things were made.  
You were formed in the womb of Mary our Mother,

You became part of this earth,  
and you gazed upon this world with human eyes.  
Today you are alive in every creature  
in your risen glory.  
Praise be to you!

Holy Spirit, by your light  
you guide this world towards the Father's love  
and accompany creation as it groans in travail.  
You also dwell in our hearts  
and you inspire us to do what is good.  
Praise be to you!

Triune Lord, wondrous community of infinite love,  
teach us to contemplate you  
in the beauty of the universe,  
for all things speak of you.

Awaken our praise and thankfulness  
for every being that you have made.  
Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined  
to everything that is.

God of love, show us our place in this world  
as channels of your love  
for all the creatures of this earth,



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<sup>11</sup> Laudato si', n. 246, Preghiera cristiana con il creato.

for not one of them is forgotten in your sight.

Enlighten those who possess power and money  
that they may avoid the sin of indifference,  
that they may love the common good, advance the weak,  
and care for this world in which we live.

The poor and the earth are crying out.  
O Lord, seize us with your power and light,  
help us to protect all life,  
to prepare for a better future,  
for the coming of your Kingdom  
of justice, peace, love and beauty.  
Praise be to you!  
Amen.

