

DISTRICT OF AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

Society of Saint Pius X

*Saint Mary's House
13 William Street
Rockdale NSW 2216*



6 January 2022

Dear Friends,

During this beautiful time of year, when our churches and homes are decorated with reminders of Christmas, our attention is naturally drawn to the Nativity scene. As Catholics, nothing comes more naturally to us than to kneel before that tiny statue of the Baby Jesus and to adore our God Who made Himself small for love of us. As we kneel there, it is as if we become another figure in that Nativity scene. We kneel in the company of shepherds and kings – happy to be one of those lucky ones who are “in the know” concerning the real identity of this apparently poor and insignificant Child.

Since we are so conscious of our own joy at this time, it is easy for us to imagine that, if we had lived near Bethlehem on that first Christmas night, our joy would have been even greater. We would surely have rushed to that cave in order to place ourselves in that living scene. We think it only natural that we would have been eager to be there, at the most privileged spot in all the world, on that first Christmas night. Who would think of being anywhere else at that momentous moment?

Still, the fact remains that very few were eager to come to that humble place on that night. Even among the Jews who had the true faith and were waiting for the Messiah, only the shepherds came to the cave. Only they had the simplicity to leave behind whatever their expectations may have been about the Messiah and to welcome Him on His own terms. We cannot imagine that God would choose to exclude from that joyful moment any who were ready and worthy to be present. Therefore, if among all the citizens of Bethlehem only those shepherds heard the voices of angels in their ears, it is because only the shepherds were truly listening for the will of God in their hearts. They wanted their Saviour – no matter how or where or when He might come. And from heaven, God the Father *heard* the open and simple dispositions of their hearts. “*The Lord hath heard the desire of the poor: Thy ear hath heard the preparation of their heart,*” (Psalm 9:38).

After the passage of so many centuries, it is hard for us to fathom just how incongruous and strange was the setting which confronted the shepherds as they approached the cave that night. The sign given to them for recognizing their Saviour, that He would be “*laid in a manger,*” sounds so familiar and poetic to our Christian ears. But there was nothing normal nor elegant, even for an ordinary baby, about being placed into an animal’s food trough. But surpassing bizarre and almost beyond belief would it have been to find there the anointed One of God, chosen to rule the nations. *Almost* beyond belief – but not quite. Not for those simple men who had little confidence in themselves and even less in their own ideas about God and His will. What a *liberty* and what a *power* those men possessed. They were not hemmed in by the always narrow confines of human ideas; they roamed freely and confidently in the wide ways of God and His real will. They had the “simple eye” whose strong vision can pierce the veil of unexpected and unpleasant circumstance to recognize the Saviour in any setting. This is the main component of what we call a *living* faith.

If you are reading this letter, you surely have faith. You believe in Jesus Christ: in His words, in His love, and in His power. That is not a problem. The problem is when He asks certain things from us which He has not asked before; when He acts with a somewhat shocking liberty that does not respect our devout – or perhaps slightly selfish – expectations; ultimately, whenever He loves us in ways that we did not expect. When this happens, and we do not respond immediately by adjusting our ideas, then we must realize that somewhere along the track, we have created our own system. Within our spiritual lives, there is always a certain space that lies between *the dogmas about the Saviour* which we firmly believe and *the action of the Saviour* in our real lives. And within that space, we often interpose a system of our own ideas – none of which might contradict the faith, but all of which potentially prevent our whole-hearted submission to Christ and His real will when it actually appears in our lives.

The Pharisees knew all of the prophecies concerning the Messiah with a thoroughness we could well envy. And they surely believed in them all. But when Our Lord actually appeared in their life in order to save them, they did not recognize Him. Why? Because besides faith, they also had a system, and the real Saviour actually sent by the Father did not fit into it. *“A man who does not agree with our opinions about morality – he cannot be from God, surely! A man who seems uninterested in our political ideas – no, he could not be the Messiah. And the final proof that he is not the one sent to save us is that he refuses even to save himself. Come down from the cross, and we will believe.”*

My friends, we must be deeply convinced of just how easy it is to have a merely *natural* point of view regarding *supernatural* things. Let us not imagine that, simply because we think and speak of things that pertain to faith, we necessarily do so with a perspective and a motive which comes from faith. Please do not make that fatal mistake. Please do not confidently trust your own reactions, instincts, and ideas on religious questions as if the mere process of dealing with a supernatural question guaranteed the supernaturalness of that process. Such a naivety and neglect of vigilance over oneself will only produce layer upon layer of self-delusion. We are first and foremost fallen creatures, and the effects of original sin (*ignorance, egoism, sensuality, weakness*) will influence almost everything we think, say, and do unless we think, say, and do it under the influence of an actual grace. And it is the work of a lifetime – a work which most people have scarcely begun – to discipline ourselves to live habitually under the influence of God’s grace.

How can we recognize this influence of grace? How do we *live* our faith? Much could be said, of course, but let this suffice for now: grace will urge quiet devotion to duty rather than dramatic gestures; grace will more often remind us of what we do not know rather than what we know; grace will make us rigidly respectful of others’ rights and forgetful of our own; grace will urge silence more often than speaking; grace will usually push us to act contrary to our temperament; grace will demand genuine courtesy towards others; grace will usually prompt us to ignore our emotions; grace will find more reasons for excuse than for fault – except when it comes to ourselves.

In 2022, let us resolve to strive courageously to live supernaturally. That is everything. Unless we live in the present moment and by the grace of the present moment, we are of no use to God nor man. Our talents, our energy, even our good intentions will accomplish nothing worthwhile without the grace that gives them supernatural power and aligns them with the will of God. And any personal system of our own will only make the correspondence with that grace less efficient. In 2021, with all the turmoil and fear, there was much anxious striving. But so very much of it was merely natural – not the striving after the one thing really *necessary* and really *useful*. We must do better this year.

The Saviour is come. We are on the winning side – if we would only know what winning really means.

With my blessing in the New Year,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Daniel Themann" followed by a cross symbol.

Fr Daniel Themann
District Superior