



Trosly, December 2012

Dear Friends,

«To be born and reborn each day, despite all the difficulties and uncertainties of our wounded world»



Christmas is the celebration of the birth of hope. Christmas is a light at the end of some long tunnels. Two thousand years ago, in Bethlehem, the angels announced the great news, news of joy for all the people: the birth of a saviour, Jesus, whose name means, “God saves.” Two centuries earlier, the prophet Zechariah had spoken of the one who was to come, who would proclaim peace to all the nations. Isaiah too used to talk of a child to be born with the purpose of sowing and planting justice everywhere, *“a time where the wolf will live with the lamb, where a young child would be able to put his hand into the nest of a viper. No longer would there be any evil or violence on my holy mountain.”*

This hope of peace is in the hearts of all men and women on earth. Peace, Peace, Peace. Peace of heart, peace in families, peace in each nation, peace between the nations. This peace will come about when we all see ourselves in the other person and above all see something beautiful, good and true, something of God in all those who are different. Can my non-judgmental look of kindness transform a potential enemy into a friend?

For that to happen, my heart of stone needs to be changed into a heart of flesh. A stony heart is founded on fear. Isn't fear the great enemy of peace?

L'Arche and Faith and Light desire to be among those places where hearts of stone founded on fear are changed into hearts of flesh. Our communities are true schools where one learns to love and live in tenderness. Of course, people with visible disabilities are transformed by this community life, as well as assistants, friends, and neighbours whose disabilities are less visible. The look of tenderness of Marie-Jo, with her wide eyes and the great effort she makes just to live, transforms those who draw near her and accept to really meet her.



Marie-Jo

Our communities, which gather together such diverse people, are called to become places of transformation, of peace and of unity. A lot of assistants live a deep movement from their heads to their hearts. Our heads are often places of implacable certainties. A person acting from his head often considers himself to be superior: he has knowledge and wants to create order where there is disorder. The person acting from the

heart first and foremost desires to live a relationship where people continually rediscover their own poverty. Relationship implies a listening ear, a caring eye, the birth of trust, and an understanding of the suffering and of the other person's needs, born of deep respect for their story.

Of course, in our world, there are terrible divisions where walls separate people from each other. Fear creates these walls of separation. And separation leads to suspicion. And suspicion leads to hatred. And hatred leads to war.

This thirst for peace appears so distant. Those prophecies about the wolf and the lamb seem so far away.

Let us not pay too much attention to the headlines of the newspapers which so frequently proclaim disaster, but let us listen instead to those men and women who sow peace in small ways, with little moments of forgiveness each day. At the time of the Rwandan genocide, there were Hutus who, at risk of their own life, hid Tutsis. Shortly before her death, Etty Hillesum used to say, *"I would like to be a balm on the wounds of many."* There are Israelis who keep in touch with Palestinians, and with them look for ways of dialogue and understanding. After his children had been killed in Gaza, Izzeldin Abuelaish declared, *"I will not hate."*

There are also young people who, in front of violence in schools, learn how to be artisans of peace. There are more and more men and women taking the path of non-violence as a way of resolving conflict, meeting violence with tenderness.



Patrick Mathias

Patrick Mathias, who for 22 years served as our psychiatrist, used to speak of tenderness as the great sign of human maturity: *"look, listen, welcome the other person with respect and tenderness."* Tenderness liberates and gives life. The most powerful sign of tenderness is a child cradled in the arms of its mother. Etty Hillesum used to say that we need to learn that we are hidden in the arms of God.

In these days of Christmas, I love re-reading the Good News announced to the poor. Isn't peace more likely to come if we put our energy into living relationships with marginalised people, with those pushed out of society, who are locked away in places of sadness, instead of our going flat out to earn more and acquire more? Our rich societies urge us to spend money on presents and luxury food. It is good to celebrate

feast days -rejoicing together in a shared desire for unity. But Christmas is all about celebrating hope. And that implies meeting others who are not celebrating.

I love re-reading the old poet, Tagore, a man of peace and a seeker of God:

«Pride can never approach to where thou walkest in the clothes of the humble among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

My heart can never find its very to where thou keepest company with the companionless among he poorest, the lowliest, and the lost.»

(Gitanjali No. 10)

I feel at home in the house of Lazarus. I am happy to live near to the chapel and to La Ferme, to have time near Jesus. Happily, Odile watches over me, my health and so many other things. In November, I went to Italy (me who no longer travels!) to give a conference to 700 priests of the diocese of Rome. I told them that it is important to evangelise the poor, yes, but above all to be evangelised by them, to allow time to let go of the certainties of one's head in order to live heart to heart with them. During this time, I was able to embrace Benedict XVI and be welcomed in his arms. He is like a humble and transparent lamb. It was a great joy for me to be able to live this meeting together with Patrick Fontaine.



Pray for me, that I may enter into the joy of Christmas humbly and that I celebrate hope.

And let us pray especially for our brothers and sisters in Faith and Light, and in L'Arche in Syria.

Thank you for your cards and your good wishes. Thank you above all for this communion which unites us all in great hope, in spite of all that is suffering and uncertain in our world.

I hold you close to my heart,
Jean