

At the heart of the world, the grace of Bethlehem

Fraternity Retreat 25-10-2025 – Bernadette & Xavier Muller

INTRODUCTION – BACK TO SOURCE

Xavier:

Dear brothers and sisters, here we are at the beginning of our retreat.

It is always a highlight of our community year.

It is the moment when we rediscover the joy of being together, brothers and sisters united by the same consecration, scattered in the four corners of the world, but brought together by the same love of God. Christ.

It is the time to rekindle our hope, our missionary zeal, our desire to burn ever more for the Lord.

But for this, it is first and foremost the opportunity that is given to us to return to the source, to be renewed by the Lord.

Bernadette:

Back to the source...

It's simple to say, but it presupposes a real movement of the heart.

It's simple, because a spring is beautiful. It's soft, refreshing, pure, thirst-quenching. In a world saturated with noise and speed, who doesn't aspire to recharge their batteries?

But getting back to the source is also difficult, because somehow we have moved away from it.

The spring, over time, has become a river. The river has widened, it has passed through obstacles, it has taken on the silt of life.

Of course, it remains connected to the source, but it knows the whirlpools, the rapids, the meanders, the dams and it sometimes gets lost in the marshes of our preoccupations or our weariness.

To return to the source is therefore to leave the river and go upstream.

We must agree to detach ourselves, to leave aside our thousand concerns, our habits or our comfort.

Xavier:

This approach is therefore not without internal resistance.

Perhaps some of us doubt: *"Is the spring still alive?"*

How many times have we already been there? Perhaps, we felt like we were drinking dry?

But the source is never dried up. It is there, hidden, ready to burst forth as soon as a heart opens. This is where the Lord awaits us.

This retreat is precisely a time for this: to go back together to the source, in trust.

Bernadette:

To begin our journey towards the source, let us start from where we are: on the banks of the river, in this world we inhabit, with its anger, its hopes, its wounds and its desires.

It is there, in reality, that God comes to join us.

1. A WORLD IN CRISIS

Xavier:

If we look at the world from the banks of the river, we can first be seized with fear and anxiety.

Our time is anything but a long, quiet river. Everywhere, the tumult of the waters can be heard. Every day, the news seems to rewrite the story of a worried world, confronted with many anxieties:

- War, which was thought to have been relegated to the pages of history, is reappearing in many parts of the world.
- The ecological crisis is jeopardizing our common home.
- The anthropological and cultural crisis is shaking the way in which man understands himself.
- ...

There is no need to go on and on with the list, we all know it, and we know that we are collectively living in difficult times that do not spare the Church herself.

Bernadette:

If we talk about these crises, it is not only because they affect our contemporaries, but because they affect us and also cross our personal lives.

They enter our families, our communities, our hearts. They give rise to worry, doubt, or even discouragement.

How many young people today struggle to found a couple, how many parents struggle to educate their children, to transmit the faith?

As Chantal Delsol once confided to us, "our children are more the children of their time than of their parents."

And it's true: our children, our contemporaries, are profoundly marked by these developments.

All this has an impact on the way we believe, hope, love, live.

Xavier:

Wherever we look, many people have the feeling that the world is collapsing and that the future is very bleak.

I remember the conferences or teachings that were given 20 or 30 years ago, in which we could spend long moments discussing the stakes of this or that political orientation and the value of the social doctrine of the Church.

Today, we can have the feeling that the world has turned upside down and that many things that we were trying to avoid have ended up happening.

Many of our contemporaries are thus experiencing a form of disenchantment where even the "safe house" seems to be cracked?

Some ask: "Where has the joy of the Gospel gone?"

2. THE TEMPTATION OF POWER

So what can be done about all this?

"When the foundations are shaken, what can the righteous do?" asks the psalmist (Ps 11:3). Faced with fear, uncertainty, loss of bearings, suffering, we naturally seek to regain control.

It's an almost reflex reaction: when everything falters, you have to hold on, organize, control. Let's look again at our contemporary world: it remains permeated by an obsession with driving, performance, "always more":

Faced with the threat of wars, we are rearming.

Faced with the ecological crisis, we are trying to "save the planet" with technologies, standards, calculations.

In the face of political crises, our reflex is to multiply the measures, decrees and regulations.

Bernadette:

Faced with the crisis of meaning, we create spiritual performance therapies or follow "resilience coaches" who make us believe that our will is limitless.

Even in education, the logic of strength infiltrates through the search for performance. We certainly want to prepare our children to "succeed" in a difficult world, we want them to be armed, but at the risk of forgetting to teach them gentleness, gratitude, confidence.

Xavier:

Of course, many of these steps are necessary. But above all, they reveal an immense faith in human mastery, as if man could save himself, by his own means.

We believe that if we think well, organize well, plan well, we will avoid tragedy and heal crises.

In this regard, Paul Ricoeur spoke of the "myth of the omnipotence of instrumental reason".

From the philosophical point of view, all this stems from the same paradigm: that of man as the center and measure of everything.

An old temptation of humanity, of course, but singularly linked to Western Modernity.

Modern man puts his faith in his own power, in his will, in his technique.

This faith has certainly produced wonders: science, democracy, material progress. But it engenders immense spiritual fatigue, because it excludes dependence, grace, and acceptance of what is given.

Nietzsche had sensed this, announcing the death of God, and with it the disappearance of all common horizons, adding that if God dies, it is so that man may become superman, that is to say, God himself.

Is it not this man-god, exhausted from having to carry everything, who today ends up falling to his knees — not from adoration, but from exhaustion?

The exhaustion of a world that wanted to be strong without God, and that discovers that it no longer knows how to receive. Let us not be deceived: despite the fact that the current crisis does not spare the Church, it is not Christianity that is collapsing. Because it had been for a long time.

What is collapsing before our eyes is Modernity in its temptation to want to achieve paradise on earth by human forces alone.

Bernadette:

It is, in essence, the old story of Babel, updated for our time. Building higher, stronger, faster. Wanting to touch the sky by our own means.

And the higher the tower rises, the more the word is divided, the more our hearts are separated from each other. Until collapse.

If we accept to see things this way, we can consider that this collapse, that of Babel, is not necessarily a catastrophe.

Because even if we do not want it, because of the suffering it causes, this time of collapse can also be a source of grace.

First of all, because it is good that one day everything that can be distorted in our lives and that until now locked us in illusion and error, whether it is our personal lives or the lives of peoples, will collapse.

Secondly, because when illusions fall, reality can speak again.

When false assurances fall, God can make himself heard again.

When everything collapses, the spring reappears.

Perhaps this is the grace of our time: not the end of the world, but the end of a world that believed itself to be self-sufficient.

Xavier:

What if, in fact, this crisis was not an end, but a new beginning?

What if, in the night of the world or of our personal trials, God was leading us back to the source?

It is often when our strength is exhausted, when our towers collapse, that the desire for the Saviour can be reopened in us.

This is what happened at other times in history.

So let's continue our path to the source and go beyond Modernity to discover how God has chosen a completely different path than the Promethean illusion to respond to the world's crises.

3. THE CONTEMPLATION OF THE MANGER AND THE HUMILITY OF GOD

Already at the time of Jesus, the world was already in crisis: Judea crushed by Rome, the poor overwhelmed, religion frozen in legalism. Many were waiting for a powerful Messiah, a political liberator.

But God did not come as a conqueror: He came in the fragility of a child. Instead of power, He chose straw; instead of the throne, a manger; instead of an army, a few shepherds; instead of a palace, a stable; instead of domination, proximity.

God chose the poverty and frailty of a child to save the world.

Bernadette:

And behold, on the night of Bethlehem, a child is born.

God chose the smallest place.

He did not take the form of a king, but that of a fragile newborn, dependent on a human yes, a mother, a father, a precarious shelter.

Why is Jesus true God and true man? Because God didn't want to stay away. He wanted to make himself touchable, visible, close.

He wanted to come and inhabit our humanity from within, to teach us to live as children of God. *"The Son of God became the son of man in order to accustom man to receive God,"* said St. Irenaeus.

The mystery of the manger is this: the Creator of heaven and earth who makes himself small enough to be carried in human arms.

How lucky we are to have a God to whom we can assimilate, to whom we can resemble, a God who enters into a relationship of affection with us.

What a chance to be a Christian, to love a God who is not a principle, a judge, a way of thinking, but who, on the contrary, by taking on our humanity, will join us in our daily lives.

P Goursat: "To know that Love is a person, the Most High and the Almighty Lord, but also the most sweet Lord who has only one desire, is to communicate Himself, to kindle in our soul the divine fire that consumes everything in us, except our yes, as soon as we agree to pronounce it. Ah, mystery of love. Joy without equal, fire that burns every burning temptation. (72-M7)

Xavier:

This proximity changes everything.

If God acted by force, we would have feared him, just like the ancients who feared the gods. But because he chose weakness, we can love him and no longer fear him.

"Christ came in the flesh to be seen, in humility to be loved," said Saint Bernard. The nativity scene is a revolution of power. It reveals the true face of God and, by the same token, the true face of man.

The key word for Christmas is humility. But it is not a question of a moral virtue: it is a question of a divine movement. God does not pretend to humble Himself: He really humbles Himself.

This is the kenosis of which St. Paul speaks: "He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant." (Phil 2:7)

Bernadette:

Through this process of humility, he teaches us not only to open ourselves to a reality other than ourselves, but also and above all to welcome grace.

Without humility, there is no possible awareness of any gift coming from the outside, and therefore no grace possible.

We will see through the characters of the Bible present at the birth of Jesus, that they allow themselves to be seized by grace, precisely because they are humble.

Maurice Zundel defines humility as "the gaze that turns away from oneself and towards the other".

This humility is not weakness, it is the very form of love.

God makes himself small so that we are no longer afraid of him. He makes himself poor so that we are no longer ashamed of our poverty. He makes himself vulnerable so that we dare to entrust our wounds to him.

Xavier:

Philosophy has often sought God in the heights: Plato spoke of the supreme Good, Aristotle of the first immobile mover, Spinoza of an infinite substance.

But none of these figures can imagine a God who humbles himself.

And yet, human reason can marvel at this paradox. For if God is really God, he has nothing to prove: he can afford to be small. God's omnipotence is therefore expressed not in dominion, but in the freedom to humble oneself.

Bethlehem is this: the infinite that consents to the limit.

And in this consent, the boundary becomes transparent to the light.

Bernadette:

Let us now enter into the contemplation of the manger.

To contemplate is not "to look to know", but "to look to love". It is to let oneself be touched by the mystery, without trying to understand it.

Contemplation, Simone Weil said, is "to look attentively until you are transformed by what you are looking at."

In the nursery, there is nothing extraordinary: a little straw, animals, a young and tired couple, a baby.

But this is precisely where God hides. The ordinary becomes a sign, a sacrament.

This logic runs through all of Scripture:

- the burning bush is a simple bush that becomes a sign of the Presence of God;
- the bread of the desert becomes a sign of God's gift;
- the cross becomes a tree of life.

Xavier:

God always hides in what seems small. Contemplation is this ability to see God in the ordinary and in what does not shine.

The great mystics have all lived this experience:

- Francis of Assisi embraces the leper and discovers Christ;
- Thérèse of Lisieux discovered the "little way";
- Charles de Foucauld chose the desert, poverty and silence.

All of them learned from the manger to worship a hidden God. A God who does not give himself in evidence, but in discretion.

We live in a culture saturated with images: everything must be immediately visible, instantaneous, efficient. The nativity scene teaches us again the slow, patient, loving gaze, the gaze of the heart and not just the gaze of the eyes.

Bernadette:

Contemplating the manger changes the way we pray.

Until then, the Elders prayed to gods of majesty, distance, and law.

In Bethlehem, God becomes close, accessible, human.

It is no longer a question of ascending to Him, but of welcoming Him who descends.

Christian prayer begins here: in consent.

Not first "what can I do for You, Lord?", but "what do You want to do in me?"

Not "give me signs of your strength," but "let me enter into your humility."

To contemplate the manger is to learn to pray not "upwards", but "towards the heart". It is a prayer of welcome, of listening, of presence.

The nativity scene is therefore not only an event in history; it is an inner place.

Bethlehem is also the most fragile point of my existence: where I am hungry, where I am cold, where I am afraid, where I need love. This is where God wants to be born.

Xavier:

Too often, we seek God in the heights of our spiritual successes (Babel); but He is in the caves of our poverty (Bethlehem). He does not ask us to open this poor place to Him.

To contemplate the nativity scene is therefore to let God reach out to our frailties. It is to recognize that there is nothing unworthy of God in my life. Nothing too small, nothing too banal. He is not the God of success, but the God of presence in all things.

Bernadette:

Let us now turn our eyes to those who surround the newborn: they tell us something of the attitude to be taken before this mystery.

Mary

Mary is the one who welcomes.

There is no room in the hotel, she gives birth to Jesus where she can and wraps him in swaddling clothes and puts him in a manger.

One can imagine the perplexity of Mary, to whom the angel had announced that she would bear a son, who would reign over the house of Jacob for ever and ever, and his reign would have no end, "will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father," Lk 1; 31-34. I, in his place, would have complained!

But she did not, she "gave birth to her firstborn, wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was not enough room in the room" (Lk 2:7).

She accepted to enter into trust during the Annunciation, she let herself be worked by Grace.

Mary's attitude is to remain in interiority; she continues to meditate on this mystery of God ("As for Mary, she carefully guarded all these things, meditating on them in her heart" Lk 2, 19).

She integrates events into herself; She takes the time to find out what it means to her ("carefully").

What about us? What do we do with the words received from the Lord? Do we note them? And then what do we do with it? What is the purpose of our notebooks? Do we reread them to remember the gifts received, to reread our sacred history? to give thanks? To understand God's will? To enter into God's will? Do we let ourselves be fooled by the words received?

How fortunate to have Mary, as a mother, who shows us the way, who opens the way to Heaven.

Xavier:

P Goursat : "A very important point," Pierre stresses, "is to have a mother... A mother; she is the mother of Emmanuel and this is very important. So, with Mary, it goes by itself" (76-E11) Mary who carries Jesus also carries the Emmanuel Community.

Bernadette:

Mary teaches us that faith is not primarily a question of knowledge, but of availability, of trust, or that faith goes beyond knowledge.

I like the image that our brother Alain Dumont once gave us: I know that tobacco is harmful to health, but do I believe it?

Faith is not just knowing God, it is believing that He can do all things and that He is the only salvation of my life and of the world, beyond what I can comprehend.

Bernadette:

Joseph

The painters depict Joseph in a humble way (simple clothes, without too much color). We know that he is there but he is not the central character of the nativity scene, and for good reason it is Jesus!

Joseph teaches us silent faith. He does not speak, but acts according to the word received. He allows himself to be moved, disturbed, guided in the night.

When everything seems dark, he chooses to obey God rather than fear. He is a just man, not because he is in control, but because he trusts.

In his poverty, even in his doubts, he becomes the guardian of Life. And his discreet faithfulness makes him a sign of God's faithfulness.

He therefore accepts to be God's instrument that will allow the Savior to come.

In the manger, he leaves all the room to Jesus, standing in silence next to Mary. He continues to taste this closeness to the Lord by contemplating Jesus.

His "docility" can only take place because he has accepted the grace of being the earthly father of Jesus. There is really something beautiful in this humility, this simplicity.

Xavier:

Joseph is the man of silence and service.

Through him, God teaches us that true strength is not so much in the word as in humble faithfulness.

I was struck one day by the teaching of one of our psychologist brothers who explained that it was better for a child to have a mediocre but constant parent than a generally exceptional but inconstant parent, with moments of absence, anger, silence.

In a way, it was consoling not to feel guilty about his mediocrity and his limitations, but the importance of consistency was a lesson for me.

So you have understood: Joseph was not mediocre, but on the contrary exceptional in his constancy and fidelity, which is the most important thing for a child.

Bernadette:**The poverty of the nativity scene**

No one wants Mary and Joseph when Mary is about to give birth.

There is no room for them at the hostel. And it is in a stable that they welcome the Son of God.

No decorum, no red carpet, no fanfare (at least not on earth), no event, as our students would say.

Yet we see so much joy in the manger: the smiles of the shepherds and of Mary and Joseph, gestures of gentleness of each other.

The greatest gifts come from who we are, not from what we have.

It is a real invitation to simply give what we are, our poor successes but also our failures, to bring everything back to God.

And not wait until we are saints to give what we are, otherwise water will probably pass under the bridge.

Let us beware of false humility (I am not capable of it, it is not for me).

PG : "There is really a grace of Emmanuel. it must be received in faith. It is truly this grace of Emmanuel, of the one who is born in this manger, very small, so humble. He really asks us to strip ourselves of everything, to be in this poverty. This is what he asks of us

(...) . (76-E11)

The poverty of the nativity scene is therefore not an accident: it is part of the very message of Christmas. God chooses to come where there is no room, to open a new space in our overfilled hearts.

Xavier:

This place where there is no place: is this not precisely a way of designating the world in crisis that is ours, this world that struggles to save itself and that hardly wants to leave room for God?

Yet, it is in the heart of this very place that God chooses to be born, in Bethlehem, which means "house of bread", because in this poverty, it is already the bread of life that is offered to us.

Christ is born in a bare place, as he will die on a bare cross. The nativity scene is the place of stripping. Nothing shines there, except love. This is where God gives himself.

Bernadette:

The shepherds

They are simple men, sometimes despised, who are nevertheless the first to be called.

It is to them that the angels announce the news. They immediately get up and set off. They don't discuss, they don't calculate, they don't do cost/benefit analysis. They let themselves be joined and say yes, a priori, giving priority to the invitation made to them.

I am edified by the yes of some brothers, who respond to my requests, without worrying first about how things will go.

The main thing for them is to say yes and then they see how to put that into practice.

How good it feels to feel brothers burning like this, it makes me want to give myself even more. Without them knowing it, their yes makes my yeses grow.

And I'm learning to change the way I see things. Because I'm rather fearful by nature, first to see what will go wrong if I say yes rather than to say yes and then see how to put it in place.

So, thank you, the brothers who teach me to enter into the Providence and the will of God.

Xavier:

The shepherds also remind us that faith is first and foremost a movement of the heart. They don't understand everything, but they let themselves be touched. True contemplation does not begin in the head, but in the amazed gaze at what is presented.

"Amazement at the beauty of the world is the beginning of wisdom," said Aristotle.

But here astonishment becomes adoration, for he discovers not only the mystery of the world, but the mystery of God himself.

On the other hand, the shepherds move together: "Let's go to Bethlehem," they say to each other.

One of our ancient archbishops used to say that a single Christian is in danger of death. We need brothers to help us act.

Bernadette:

One of the treasures of the community is the prayer of the brothers, so simple and at the same time so promising. By asking for the prayer of our brothers and sisters, we accept that God passes through human beings, who in turn let themselves be "done" by the Lord.

What a beautiful humility of one and the other, of the one for whom we pray and who expects everything from his brothers and sisters and from those who, all humbly, accept to be the instruments of the Lord, to be transmitters of light.

It requires a lot of humility from the one who asks for the prayer of the brothers because it is recognizing that we are very small, that we need others but what graces to be surrounded by benevolent, blessing brothers and sisters, who show us concretely that we matter in the eyes of God (and theirs too).

So how many times have I asked for the prayer of the brothers in the past year? What did I do with the words/images received? When did I also propose the brothers' prayer to a brother/sister who seemed a little adrift, tired, discouraged? It also requires humility because you take the risk of being barred but it doesn't matter if there is prayer or not, what matters is to have taken care of the brother/sister.

Xavier:

PG : "We really need all together to carry each other and to trust in the grace of the Community because, really, alone, we can't get out of it, but all together we hold on: it's really "Emmanuel, God with us" (79-E41)

Bernadette:

"A brother leaning on another is an impregnable citadel" (Prov.18:19).

Shepherds are men, like us, with doubts, calculations of profitability in mind (waste of time? I do or I don't?), the fear of being judged by others.

They go to see and then tell everyone the good news.

We need to be edified by our brothers.

Maybe I don't see the presence of the Lord in my life, but my brother/sister did.

So in the midst of my doubts, my fears, I can take a leap of faith. "There, Lord, I don't see you, but I know you're there. It is the heart of our households.

Xavier:

PG : "In a world that goes against the grain, we are constantly unravelling. Whereas when we are in the Community, we encourage each other: "Today you are tired, but I will support you a little". And the next day, he's the one who is tired and you support him too. And little by little, we arrive together. It is a great joy because we know that the Lord has made the community to help us, to allow us to hold on, and then to be in hope and joy (80*E45)

Bernadette:

Here are the shepherds who arrive at the manger. They kneel before Jesus. As we can do before the body of Christ at Mass or before the Blessed Sacrament, but also before a smaller one who needs us.

It is a step of humility before the one who, although being God, took our humanity, made himself very small.

So the shepherds kneel before Jesus and offer what they have, namely their wonder, a little warmth, their presence, without thinking too much.

They don't complicate their lives, they don't say to themselves: "We don't have anything to offer, so it's not possible to go there". They offer their mere presence which can change a lot of things.

Just giving time can change the life of our neighbour, like a brother and sister couple who went to visit an old cousin in hospital and who would have asked for euthanasia without these visits.

What gift should I give today to the one I meet? Offering a smile, a gesture of gentleness, time?

The Mages

Xavier:

Let us now turn to the Magi.

They come from far away. They don't know the Scriptures, but they saw a light.

They represent all those who sincerely seek the truth.

They follow a star — a fragile, uncertain, but sufficient sign.

And their path leads them, not to a palace, to Jerusalem where they make their first stopover, but to the stable in Bethlehem.

When they saw the child, they fell to their knees. They offer gold, the precious metal of kings, incense, which honored the gods, and myrrh, which announces the passion.

In the poverty of the manger, the Magi were not mistaken: they recognized the king of the universe. In front of the manger, everything is transformed: the rich become worshippers, the poor become messengers, the humble become witnesses.

It is a new world that is beginning, which is not based on strength, power, royalty, prestige, wealth, but on humility, acceptance, contemplation, communion...

In short, this world that we can discover ourselves in community!

Bernadette:

Each figure in the manger tells us something about God's closeness.

God makes himself close to Mary through trust, to Joseph through faithfulness, to the shepherds through joy, to the Magi through the search for and acceptance of the truth.

To each one he gives himself in a different form, but always with the same heart: a humble and gentle heart.

Xavier:

So this is the great Christmas turnaround.

God comes to inhabit the world, not in the heights of power, but in the depths of love.

To Babel's claim, he replied with Bethlehem. To the logic of strength, he opposes that of humility.

This contemplation of the nativity scene is therefore not a simple tender look.

It is an invitation to conversion: to welcome God's logic within us, to consent to our own vulnerability.

Let us therefore continue on our way: in Bethlehem, God's way of acting is so different from ours. To what conversion does it call us in our troubled times?

4. A TRANSFORMATION OF VISION : WELCOME ITS ULNERABILITY

Bernadette:

The contemplation of the manger does not stop at the beauty of the mystery.

It calls for an interior conversion.

Whoever contemplates a vulnerable God can no longer look at himself as before.

In front of this unarmed child, we are invited to lay down our masks, our defenses, our certainties.

The nativity scene becomes a mirror: it reveals to me my own poverty, no longer as a shame, but as a place of encounter.

For what distances us from God is not our misery, but our desire to come out of it alone. Now, "What pleases God," said little Thérèse, "is to see me love my littleness and my poverty."

Contemplating the manger, God's humility becomes a school of prayer: learning not to have answers to everything, learning to pray without success, learning to simply be present, offered.

Our prayer is purified to recognize in weakness, the strength of God; in poverty, fertility; in silence, the true word.

In front of the manger, God said to me: "Stop wanting to be great. Let yourself be loved where you are little."

Xavier:

This conversion is demanding for us and never completed.

For modern man who thinks of himself as the center, the measure and master of all things, God, at Christmas, shifts the center.

And He puts him in a stable, in a child who does not speak, in absolute dependence on love.

This is the true heart of the spiritual reversal towards which we can help our world to move forward: it is the reversal of the logic of technology (where man produces and masters) to the logic of gift and consent (where man welcomes and receives).

This conversion of the gaze is in line with the anthropology of "receiving", dear to our brother Pascal Ide.

Modern man thinks of himself as an autonomous subject, master of himself, producer of meaning.

Christian revelation teaches us that the human being is first and foremost a received being.

I do not make myself exist: I am called, wanted, loved.

My existence is a gift, not a conquest.

"I am not master of my beginning," said Ricoeur.

I didn't make myself.

But the contemplation of the manger goes even further: not only am I not my origin, but I am called to become a child again — to receive myself unceasingly from God.

For "Unless you become like little children, you will not enter the Kingdom." (Mt 18:3)

To become a child is not to regress: it is to rediscover the truth of loving dependence, to know that everything comes from the Father and to return everything to the Father.

Balthasar summed it up when he said that "Everything in Christianity is grace: one must first let oneself be loved in order to be able to love in return."

To become a child again: this is the great reversal and the great conversion that the manger indicates to modern man.

It is this reversal that Mary had already sung in the Magnificat, even before she saw it accomplished.

Bernadette:

"My soul exalts the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. He bent over his humble servant..."

The Magnificat is the cry of joy of those who have understood how God acts.

He overthrows the mighty from their thrones, he exalts the humble, he fills the hungry, he sends away the rich empty-handed.

It's the song of the world upside down... or rather of the world put upside down, according to the logic of the Kingdom.

God does not do things "like us". He does not take the strongest, he chooses the smallest. It does not come in the spotlight, but in the brightness of a star shining in the night.

This is how the nativity scene becomes a school of holiness.

It teaches us that vulnerability is not a shame, but the place where God gives himself.

We spend our time wanting to be strong, effective, high-performing.

The Gospel invites us to consent to be loved as we are.

The word "vulnerable" comes from the Latin *vulnus*, the wound.

To be vulnerable is to be hurtable, and therefore accessible.

In other words, vulnerability is the very condition of the relationship.

God, in the manger, makes himself vulnerable: he puts himself at the mercy of our arms, of our welcome, of our refusal.

And this is how he saves us.

Moreover, in the Bible, God always joins man in his wound: Adam and Eve, after their sin, are clothed in a garment of skin, a sign of tenderness; Jacob receives the blessing while he is limping; Peter mourns his denial and becomes the shepherd of the flock.

Each time, the wound becomes a place of visitation.

To look at the manger is to let ourselves be looked at by this God who expects nothing but our welcome.

It is accepting to be loved where we thought we did not deserve it.

Saint Francis de Sales said it magnificently:

"Humility does not consist in despising oneself, but in recognizing oneself as one is before God."

Xavier:

Let us return to the contrast with our time.

The world seeks greatness: God chooses littleness.

The world wants visibility: God is hiding.

The world values performance: God makes himself dependent.

The world exalts autonomy: God abandons himself.

This choice of God is the radical reversal of human logic.

Before the child of Bethlehem, our illusions of mastery fall away.

The nativity scene lays bare the folly of the modern world: wanting to be "like God" without God.

God, on the other hand, becomes man in order to save the world, not by compulsion, but by gentleness.

And this gentleness is stronger than all forces, or, as Benedict XVI said: "The gentleness of God is more powerful than the power of men."

5. ACTING IN THE WORLD IN THE MANNER OF CHRIST

"My Kingdom is not of this world." (Jn 18:36)

Bernadette:

What practical conclusions can we now draw from this if we want to return to our lives and the challenges of the world that we discussed earlier?

- We started from the river of our lives and from history to take an uncompromising look at the situation in which we live;
- As we walked up the banks to the source, we became aware of our temptation, both universal and typically modern, to want to solve crises by relying solely on our human strength;
- as we continued on our way to the source, we discovered how God Himself took a completely different path to come to us and asks us to follow Him on this other path.

How then can we respond to this call?

How can we follow this other path that the manger shows us in order to live the grace of the Incarnation in the present world and the crises we are experiencing?

Here are 2 ways, which stand like the 2 sides of a coin.

Xavier:

The first way is to imitate Christ's way of acting, detaching ourselves resolutely from the world's way of acting.

To do this, let us let go of events that are beyond us.

Let's stop blaming ourselves for it or letting ourselves be locked in a bad conscience that is a bad advisor.

Let us not let ourselves be robbed of the joy of the Gospel! But let us discover how Christ's way of acting allows us to develop a new way of acting in this world in times of crisis.

Bernadette:

Let's take an image to illustrate this.

You are certainly familiar with the distinction made by the Stoic philosophers between a zone of concern and a zone of influence.

We each have an area of concern in which our worries, our torments, our trials are located... These are the personal trials or crises that we talked about earlier.

Unfortunately, we have to note that on many of these concerns, we have little control.

Our area of influence, on the other hand, concerns what we have control over. It is therefore much smaller than our area of concern.

The misfortune of many, said Epictetus, is that we are more concerned with what concerns us than with what we have control over. This is a fruitless way of acting, for we torment and agitate ourselves in vain.

The whole Stoic art of living consists in concentrating one's energy on what depends on oneself and welcoming the rest with serenity.

Xavier:

Let us apply this image to our subject.

Can it be appropriate for the Christian action to which we are called?

To tell the truth, not quite. For Stoic wisdom aimed to preserve inner peace by leading to detachment from the world.

However, we are not called to flee from the world, nor to indifference to human suffering, as Rousseau thought.

The Incarnation of Jesus shows us exactly the opposite: God was not content to speak to the world, He took flesh in it, He took upon Himself our condition and our sufferings.

But the Stoic distinction was rediscovered and enriched in the 20th century by humanistic psychology and Steven Covey, an American coach, added a dynamic dimension to it: if one acts consistently in one's area of influence, it expands.

It is therefore no longer a question of cutting oneself off from the world, but rather of discovering that the secret of the proactive person is to focus one's energy on one's "zone of influence", instead of wasting one's time in one's "zone of concern".

Now, is this not exactly what Christ agreed to do through the Incarnation? Is this not the way in which he positioned himself in relation to the crises of his time to bring us not a solution, but much more than that: salvation.

As we have said, many of the crises we are talking about already existed in their own way at the time of Jesus.

The Roman Empire seemed invincible, it imposed on the world its iron dictatorship, its cult of power, the saturation of pleasure, the loss of moral sense, the poverty of the masses. It is into this already declining world that God has chosen to come.

But do we read in the Gospel that Jesus spoke about the occupation of Palestine, about war or slavery?

He did it quite differently. Not from above, but from within.

Bernadette:

Through the Incarnation as well as in the fulfillment of his mission, Christ agreed to limit the infinite divine power that is his to the tiny area of influence of a human being.

This is what we contemplated in the manger.

And throughout his earthly life, during which Jesus did not pretend to be man, he remained limited in the area of influence of his humanity.

He, whose power was infinite, overthrew no power or exercised no kingship. On the contrary, he went to the end of abasement, following the same path of humility that would lead him from the manger to the cross.

It is there, in this abasement, that what no eye had seen, what no ear had heard, what had not occurred to man's mind was accomplished: it is in the humility of this incandescent earthly life that Jesus brings about the Kingdom of God which is now given to us, and which has transfigured history by extending Jesus' earthly sphere of influence to the fullness of his divinity.

Xavier:

This reversal, which is madness in the eyes of men, is also the one to which the lives of the saints bear witness.

It is not by seeking to extend their power or their concerns, but by welcoming the Kingdom of God into their zone of influence that they succeed in radiating God's love far beyond this zone.

Jesus showed us how to be fully present to the world without allowing ourselves to be absorbed by it.

To be "in the world without being of the world" is in fact to hold together two loyalties:

- fidelity to our contemporaries, to our brothers and sisters in humanity, whom we want to serve to the best of our ability;
- but above all fidelity to the Kingdom of God, which defines our way of acting.

If we accept this letting go to follow Jesus on this path of humility, then we discover a renewed freedom of heart and joy, and we can enter into the wonder of the manger, the second way to welcome the grace of the Incarnation.

6. WONDER AND COMMUNION: A RENEWED PRESENCE IN THE WORLD

Bernadette

"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen.
(Lk 2:20)

At the end of the Nativity story, the shepherds leave "glorifying and praising God".

Nothing has changed around them: Bethlehem remains an obscure village, Herod is still king, Rome still dominates the world.

But something has moved within them.

They have seen the glory of God revealed in the poverty of a child, and their gaze is transfigured by it.

Their joy is not a passing enthusiasm; it is the sign of an inner lightening, the fruit of a new confidence.

For the who has seen God make himself small can no longer live in the tension of mastery.

The shepherds discover that salvation does not depend on them: God acts.

Like the shepherds, we are invited to enter into jubilation to sing the glory of God, with all that we are.

Created in the image of God, we are fortunate to have a body that we can use to praise Him.

Praise is a privileged moment when human beings express their love to God through voice, body, gestures and dance. By committing our whole being, we give thanks for the body, life and talents we have received—whether it is singing, welcoming, consolation, or discernment.

It has a transforming force: it turns us away from ourselves to turn our gaze to God and Heaven. It changes the way we live the day and gives meaning to our actions.

Praise is also gratitude, because it opens our eyes to the goodness, mercy and patience of God, who brings good out of evil and gives us living hope.

Just as Saint Teresa expressed it when she said that "all is grace", praise teaches us to recognize the presence of God in every moment of our lives, in struggles as well as in joys.

How lucky I was to be able to start my day at home with praise. I connect with Heaven at the beginning of the day. One day when I was discouraged by material things concerning the Home, our chaplain said to me "Bernadette, don't forget that you are working for Heaven". And this little sentence changed my view of things.

Xavier:

This is exactly the movement to which we are invited.

We have seen how Christ frees us from the modern temptation of omnipotence: to want to understand everything, to control everything, to repair everything by ourselves.

Conversely, to follow Jesus is to enter into that humble realism that He teaches us: to act where we can, in our area of influence, entrusting the rest to Providence.

He who acts in this way does not withdraw from the world; he remains there, but with a free heart.

And this freedom is the very source of joy: not the joy of the successful, but of the one who knows that he is already saved.

The Kingdom is not to be built: it is already at work, silent and discreet.

The whole challenge, at the beginning of this source retreat, is therefore to move from the will to do to the capacity to welcome.

This inner movement is a conversion to be constantly resumed.

To the temptation of the Promethean spirit, which wants to snatch fire from heaven, Jesus calls for openness to grace.

To seek the Kingdom that is already there, not to want to build it by ourselves.

Only then can the rest be given to us in addition.

Bernadette:

This openness transforms our prayer.

It is no longer primarily a request, but a confident praise.

It is in tune with the song of the shepherds and the Magnificat of Mary: gratitude precedes the request, gratitude prevails over anxiety.

This renewed prayer can also give birth to a new way of inhabiting the world.

For those who know they are saved no longer need to impose their strength: they can become a presence.

Praise opens to communion; confidence breeds more gentleness.

Little by little, the joy of God becomes our joy: that of a world already visited, already reconciled. We then understand that faith is not an escape from reality, but a transfiguration of reality.

CONCLUSION – ENTERING THE RETREAT WITH A TRUSTING HEART

Xavier:

Brothers and sisters, it is in this disposition that we are invited to enter into the retreat.

Not as men and women charged with carrying the world, but as trusting disciples, who allow themselves to be reached and renewed.

Like the shepherds, let us place our concerns at the threshold of the manger.

Let us receive the joy of a salvation already given, of the Kingdom already there, of God ever present.

May we live this retreat in gratitude and lightness of heart, letting grace work more than our efforts, and rediscovering the simplicity of the Magnificat.

Bernadette:

We suggest that you end together by singing the Magnificat.