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Christmas Message from Bishop Mouneer Christmas Eve 2012

Today with hundreds of millions of people around the world, we lift our voices with the angels and sing "*Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!*" As we sing the words of this song, we remember all the people of the Middle East and pray for them to live in peace, freedom and democracy. We also pray that God will put an end to this current stage of tension, violence and conflict which these countries are going through.

We pray also for our beloved country Egypt which is divided and in urgent need for national reconciliation among different groups.

I appeal to all people to put what is good for Egypt and it's stability above all partisan and personal interests. If we all have a real desire to achieve such reconciliation, I am confident that God will help us. A real desire for reconciliation allows everyone participates in the democratic process. Reconciliation becomes possible when equality and justice prevails among all people, whether they are from the majority or the minority. We Egyptians need to work together to rebuild our beloved country.

As we go through this time of division, I invite all Egyptians to make national reconciliation a priority. I appeal to all of you to not allow a space, even a small one, for self-interest, exclusion, hatred, distrust, revenge, or violence. Instead, let us open our hearts for love... the love of God and the love of our country in order to bring Egypt back to unity. This will bring Egypt back to its heritage that influenced the whole world... the welcoming Egypt that opened its arms to welcome the Holy Family and Jesus Christ.

Let us now reflect on the story of the birth of Jesus Christ as it was told by St. Luke.

The story started in Rome, the great city, the capital of the Roman Empire where Augustus Caesar, the most important man in the world at the time, commanded that a census should be done all over the Roman world. All citizens had to record their names in their places of birth. This census would help Caesar to better control all people of the empire. It also guaranteed that everyone will pay his share in the taxes. This was a very important event in the history of the empire, and I can imagine that it was an issue that occupied the mind of every citizen, especially those who had to travel a long distance to register their names.

After telling the story of this important event, Luke tells us another story which takes place in the margins of the empire. He takes us to a humble place, an animal stable, where we see a young woman Mary who is exhausted, afraid and suffering from labor pains. At her side, we

see Joseph, who looks anxious and worried about the birth that will take place in this humble and filthy context. In this context, baby Jesus was born. His cries mixed with the sounds of cows, sheep and donkeys. He was wrapped and put in a manger. Suddenly, a group of poor shepherds wearing old, smelly clothes, entered the scene. They came to see the new born... Jesus Christ whom the people of Israel had waited for hundreds of years.

I would like you to see with me the contrast between the two stories. The first is a story of power and tyranny. The second is a story of weakness and poverty. The first story was widely known. The second story was a story from the margins of society. It was told only to a group of poor shepherds. The question now is why Luke would tell us the Christmas story in such a way? Why would God allow Christ to be born into such a humble context? What is God's wisdom in all this?

It seems to me that the Christmas story with all its humbleness declares to us that God's ways are very different from our ways. Logic would expect that Christ the Saviour of humanity, the Eternal King, should be born in a great palace. Remember that the angels said to the Virgin Mary *"You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."* Luke 1: 31-33.

This story also teaches us that God sometimes comes and speaks to us in a quiet voice. He also comes at a time when we are busy with many other things. He comes in the midst of fear, anxiety, tears, labour pains, and the cries of a baby. He comes to share with us our hopes and our fears. He comes to give us life, and life abundant.

My beloved, this is how Christ was incarnated as a human in order to incarnate the love of God to us. With this love, he embraced us and gave us what the world cannot give: salvation, real peace and hope. Indeed, Jesus came with good news for all people in fulfillment of the angel's declaration to the shepherds; *"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."* Luke 2: 10-11.

No-one at that time cared for the Christmas story, but it became the focus of concern of millions of people. It was the story that divided the time and history of human beings into B.C. and A.D. It is the story that is still being told today. Not only that, but it is the story that still influences many lives. It is the story of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

Today, in the midst of this turbulent world and the many concerns that distract us in many different directions, in the midst of political struggles that occupies our minds, in the midst of all this, can we listen to His quiet voice that may come at the margins of our lives... the voice of Christ *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"*. Matthew 11:28.

Is it possible for us to see Christ in the midst of all the events of our lives... Christ came to our world taking the shape of our humble flesh and was born as a weak child to help us in our weakness, as light to enlighten our darkness and to give meaning to our lives. As we celebrate Christmas today, may our prayer be *"O Lord, open our ears to hear Your voice. Open our eyes to see You. Open our hearts to receive You as Savior and Master of our lives."*

As Christ took flesh and was born in our world, as he brought to us the good news of our salvation and as He walked around doing good, we who believe in Him should also incarnate the love of God to the society where we live. We need to be good news to the people around us, and a living witness to the love of Christ that fills our hearts. Today we need to listen afresh to the Christmas story, and we need to retell it to a world that needs to hear it.

+ Mouneer Egypt

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