

All I want for Christmas...

by Fr Noel Connolly SSC, Plenary Council Facilitation Team

I have been writing columns for about thirteen years. A few Christmases ago, the muse ran dry until one morning when I was talking to a female colleague about her Christmas break.

She said she was hoping to take three weeks off, but she wanted one of them to be before Christmas because she had a young son and she knew that much of his excitement would come in the week before Christmas.

I felt a pang of jealousy for that young boy and his mother. That will be a week full of beauty, wonder and awe. How holy and wholesome it will be.

Suddenly I realised what I want for Christmas. I want something of the wonder and awe a child feels. I want a little of the beauty and excitement Christmas can bring to the wholehearted and innocent.

Everyone searches for the good, the true and the beautiful. These desires are deeply human. We Christians have always stressed truth and goodness, but beauty is usually not as highly valued.

Yet beauty has its own authority - an authority to which everyone responds. It inspires and does not threaten. As the poet Keats said, "Beauty is truth and truth beauty, that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know."

Pope Francis told the Brazilian Bishops after World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro: "Only the beauty of God can attract. God's way is through enticement, allure." Francis uses the words "beauty" and "beautiful" 44 times in *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)* and he questions the evangelising power of Christians who look like "Lent without Easter".

The young boy waiting for Christmas also offers us insights into preparing for the Plenary Council, particularly for our participation in the Listening & Dialogue sessions. We, too, need wonder and an appreciation for beauty. Wonder and awe decentre us and enable us to hear others and see the beauty in them and what they say.

Pope Francis focuses on beauty in *Laudato Si*, his encyclical on ecology. Drawing on St Francis' *Canticle of the Creatures*, the Pope reminds us that, "If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs."

Without the capacity for wonder, we will never have a deeper understanding of life or be able to see the words of love written all through nature and in others.



The Plenary Council is not just about debating and planning. Our sense for the true and the good are critical, but beauty can nourish us and give us a joy that not only makes it all worthwhile, but also helps us present a “beautiful face” to the world.

We need to find ways of disclosing God’s beauty to our contemporaries, because beauty reveals, saves and inspires in a powerful but non-threatening way.

So this Advent, I will think of children and the excitement they feel in the last week before Christmas and I will pray for the gift of awe and wonder so that I, too, can see the beauty around me and perhaps radiate a little myself.