

PP: The birth of Jesus Christ is something totally unheard of! In a stable, laid down in a manger. Who could have imagined that the Saviour of the world would be born in such poverty? More prestigious surroundings would have seemed more fitting. And the outcome was by no means certain: Mary was nearly repudiated; she went to live at her cousin Elisabeth's for a while – did she take refuge there?

DO: I find this story particularly moving – a very young woman, pregnant for the first time, going through the deep upheaval in her body and soul created by a birth being prepared within herself. And in difficult circumstances too: rejection, lack of understanding. It's nice to think that the angel Gabriel's words helped both the women concerned. Mary is always shown rushing to her cousin's to help her out and putting herself at her service. But who was at the service of whom? What can be more beautiful than these two women supporting one another, with the younger one certainly more nimble and the older one giving some wise advice. Two women quite alone in the face of this surging of life – Mary starting her pregnancy without the support of a father and Elisabeth going through hers without the verbal support of her husband, made dumb by this incredible situation.

PP: Then, quite near term, the couple starts on the road to Bethlehem. It is not really a good idea to do that if you want an easy childbirth with a well-rested mother, under good conditions. On top of this, Luke tells us that the delivery takes place in precarious circumstances, without proper lodging or comfort. Everything seems stacked against this birth. But life prevails over all! The child is born and is alive. Life does prevail! In our parishes in Belgium, the poverty of Christ's birth has long been associated with extreme poverty in our regions. The Church's proposals for Advent are rooted in solidarity with the poor in order for us to be prepared to welcome Christ. Fundraising is organized in support of a number of associations helping those in need.

DO: I find this preferential option for the poor so difficult. We often avoid the confrontation between our wealth and the poverty of those who are given by Christ as our brothers and sisters. The road through Advent may well be first of all a conversion of the heart.

PP: Yes indeed! For me, Advent means showing solidarity with the poor by becoming poor ourselves, so that we are really waiting for Christ to come, for Christ to have a place in ourselves. Advent means purifying ourselves to welcome Him, putting on our white garment to join in the party celebrating His coming among us. Advent means turning to God, taking off our grave clothes in order to live life to the full. This road sounds a bit like the Easter road, where everything is also stacked against Christ's survival. But life does prevail!

Illustrations by **Jacques Noé**, from the Liège lay Dominican fraternity:

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