My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I hope all of you had as joyous a Christmas celebration with your families as I had with mine. There were 28 of us gathered around the table for a delicious Christmas meal. I knew most of them. I had to ask a few, “What’s your name? Who are you attached to?” You see, the now great nieces and nephews are bringing home the flavor of the month, much as their parents did before them.

As you might imagine, after years of putting up with me, ours is a rather raucous, but very welcoming, family. But, you have to have a bit of a thick skin to become part of our family circle. For instance, while not quite admiring my nephew’s significant other’s most recent tattoos, I asked if she had joined the circus yet. She coolly replied, “Why, no, Uncle Vic, I didn’t want to take the job away from you!” Then we both laughed loudly and with a hug acknowledged she had won that round.

It wasn’t quite that much fun for the family that we celebrate today on that first Christmas. There were the angels and shepherds and magi, but there was also great danger. Herod was on the hunt for this “Child King” with the firm intention of killing him. So, Joseph and Mary had to take the Child with nothing but the clothes on their backs and flee to Egypt.

All of a sudden this family whom we celebrate and call holy found themselves as unwanted strangers in a foreign land with nothing, probably not even able to understand the language that was being spoken. They were refugees. And since Herod ruled for over 40 years, they probably remained refugees for quite a number of years.

That’s something we don’t often give thought to at this time of year—Jesus was probably raised in a refugee camp, not unlike those we hear of in Palestine and Iraq and Afghanistan and Pakistan today—without enough food, water, sanitation, proper housing. When we see pictures of children in these places, have we ever pictured Jesus being raised in such circumstances. Yet, that was the reality. That was his reality.

Even when he returned to Israel, because Archelaus had replaced his father, Herod, as tetrarch, and he was as murderous as his father had been, the Holy Family could not return home, but had to go to Nazareth, a little backwoods village in Galilee to protect the Child. Can you imagine raising a child in such fear? Can you imagine being a child living in such fear and uncertainty? But that’s how Jesus spent the earliest part of his life.

If we dare to contemplate those earliest Christmases for the Holy Family and the hardships they had to bear, Christmas must be for us a call to compassion. First of all, it is a call to compassion for the immigrant people living in our midst. In welcoming them as members of our Church Family, we welcome the refugee Holy Family. That’s why we now offer a Spanish Mass each weekend in our parish.

But this compassion requires more than welcome. It requires real hospitality. It must be action-oriented. We have to encourage our political leaders to develop a fair and just immigration policy for this country so that the immigrant people in our midst don’t have to live in shadows and fear. Yes, it must include some path to full citizenship for the 11 million undocumented refugees already here. The vast majority of them have come here for the same reason that Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt, for the well-being of their families, and whether or not we know their names, they have made their home with us, and have become part of our national family.

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Christmas must mean more than twinkling lights and tinseled trees. Christmas must become for us the time when we rededicate ourselves to work toward helping every person, every family fulfill their human dignity, with all the joy and happiness we enjoy in our own families.

In the second verse of, what is for me, the most beautiful Christmas hymn, “O HOLY NIGHT”, we sing:

Truly He taught us to love one another.

His law is love and His gospel is peace.

Chains He shall break, for the slave is our brother,

And in His name, all oppression shall cease.

This is the work of Christmas. This is our work. This is what we are called to in Christ Jesus, our Lord.