In today’s story of the Savior’s birth, the angel’s message shared by the shepherds resulted in amazement by all who heard it, with one exception, Mary. Mary reflected the angelic message relayed by the shepherds and pondered its meaning in her heart. Her son’s birth was the result of the promise she received from Gabriel and her acceptance of God’s will in her life. Her obedience was mirrored in Joseph’s acceptance of God’s promise and his obedience in the role as foster father of Mary’s offspring, Son of Man, Son of God.

The life ahead for this family would be a most difficult one. Starting with Jesus’ birth, and for the rest of his life, there would be those who would oppose Jesus’ mission. Only three days after Christmas we celebrated the Memorial of the Holy Innocents, Martyrs, which was an attempt by a jealous king to extinguish the life of he who he believed would grow up to be his rival. As you recall Herod was fearful of the child king, predicted by the three wise men, was a threat to his throne. He set about to destroy the child; first to trick the wise men into revealing his location, and when that failed, by the blatant violence of killing all the male children under two years of age in the district of Bethlehem. This attempt on His life wasn’t the only oppression that would plague Jesus, his family, and his disciples. He and those closest to him would also be faced with poverty, homelessness, and violence because of those who opposed God’s message of love and justice. Many would seek his life...
throughout his brief 33 years. In the end they caught up with Jesus in Jerusalem, they tortured him, and executed him in the most brutal way.

Because of their own marginalized status, Jesus, and his disciples could easily understand, and identify with, the plight of the poor, outcasts, and foreigners – and even those today. For the followers of Jesus the only laws by which they lived are the two great commandments, to love God, and to love thy neighbor. (Matthew 22:40) Living by these laws ties the love we have for our neighbor and the love we have for ourselves to the one who loved us first, the Father. More explicitly in the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus connects the love and compassion we have to the littlest and the least to the love of the Father. ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’ (Matthew 25:40b)

It is interesting to note, that the shepherds that were present at Jesus birth were those who were little respected by society at the time, those unwashed men who smelled like the sheep they tended. Ironic, today we place so much importance on status, even in the religious institutions, especially considering the explicit condemnation of seeking places of honor at banquets and the donning of fine clothing. (Mark 12:38-39) I always feel a little squeamish when reading this passage from Mark from the Altar in nice vestments, and then, return to my place in a large comfortable chair located in a prominent location in the front of the congregation. More challenging yet is the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus. (Luke 16:19-31) This challenges me to try to live my life in a way that shares the abundance I have received with those who have little. Pray that I do not make the mistake of the rich man as relates to his relationship with the poor man at his doorstep.

Perhaps, like Pope Francis, we need to look for ways to simplify our lives and live closer to the little ones of the world; whom we are called to serve. Can we follow the lead of our Pope serve to serve with humility, compassion, and understanding? And can we associate with those who, like the Holy Family, were poor refugees of this world?