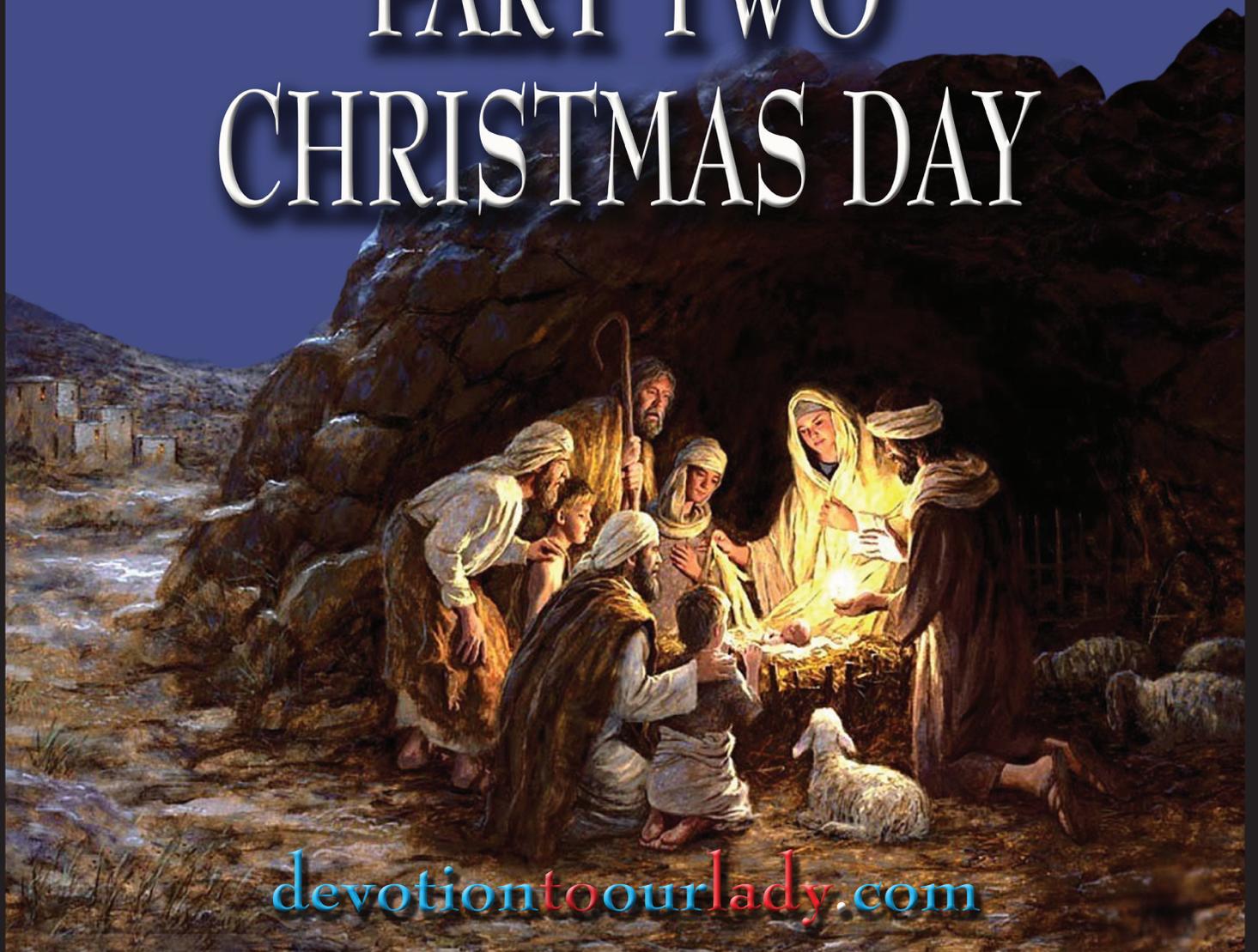


# CHRIST AT THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS

## Prayers & Rituals

### PART TWO CHRISTMAS DAY



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**“For a Child is born to us, and a son is given to us, and the government is upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called, Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace”**

**(Isaias 9:6)**

**“She shall bring forth a Son and thou shalt call His name **JESUS**. For He shall save His people from their sins.”**

**(Matthew 1:21)**



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# 1. PROCLAMATION OF CHRIST’S BIRTH

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This Proclamation of Christ’s Birth can be made first thing in the morning, when the family has assembled for morning prayers, or it could be made before Christmas dinner, when all the guests and visitors are present and assembled.

## THE LEADER READS THE FOLLOWING:

Brethren! Let us listen to the prophet Isaias:

*“Be comforted, be comforted, my people, saith your God. Speak ye to the heart of Jerusalem, and call to her: for her evil is come to an end, her iniquity is forgiven: she hath received of the hand of the Lord double for all her sins. The voice of one crying in the desert: ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the wilderness the paths of our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough ways plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh together shall see, that the mouth of the Lord hath spoken! Say to the cities of Juda: “Behold your God! Behold the Lord God shall come with strength, and his arm shall rule! Behold His reward is with Him and His work is before Him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: He shall gather together the lambs with His arm, and shall take them up in his bosom, and He himself shall carry them that are with young.” ” (Isaias 40:1-11).*

*“For a Child is born to us, and a Son is given to us, and the government is upon His shoulder: and His Name shall be called, ‘Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace.’ His empire shall be multiplied, and there shall be no end of peace. He shall sit upon the throne of David and upon his kingdom: to establish it and strengthen it with judgment and with justice” (Isaias 9:6-7).*

Brethren, this prophecy was fulfilled as we see by the words of the Evangelist, St. Luke, in the following account of the Incarnation:

*“And in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God into a city of Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. And the angel being come in, said unto her: ‘Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee! blessed art thou among women!’ Who having heard, was troubled at his saying, and thought with herself what manner of salutation this should be.*

*“And the angel said to her: ‘Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace with God. Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shalt bring forth a Son; and thou shalt call His name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the most High; and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of David His father; and He shall reign in the house of Jacob for ever. And of His kingdom there shall be no end!’” (Luke 1:21-26-33).*

*“And it came to pass, that in those days there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that the whole world should be enrolled. And all went to be enrolled, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem: because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary his espoused wife, who was with Child.*

*“And it came to pass, that when they were there, her days were accomplished, that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:1-7).*

*“And there were in the same country shepherds watching, and keeping the night watches over their flock. And behold an angel of the Lord stood by them, and the brightness of God shone round about them; and they feared with a great*

*fear.*

*“And the angel said to them: Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all the people! For, this day, is born to you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. And this shall be a sign unto you. You shall find the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God, and saying: ‘Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of good will!’ (Luke 2:8-14).*

*“And it came to pass, after the angels departed from them into Heaven, the shepherds said one to another: ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem, and let us see this word that is come to pass, which the Lord hath showed to us!’*

*“And they came with haste; and they found Mary and Joseph, and the Infant lying in the manger. And seeing, they understood of the word that had been spoken to them concerning this Child. And all that heard, wondered; and at those things that were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God, for all the things they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.” (Luke 2:15-20).*

Brethren, as we rejoice over the coming of our Savior, Who has come to save us from the devil, the world and the flesh. Let us not celebrate as the world, the flesh or the devil would have us celebrate. But let us celebrate more with the soul than with the body. As Jesus said: *“Not in bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God”* (Matthew 4:4). Let us then place the Word and Bread of Heaven before the words and food of this world. Let us inebriate ourselves with the Word of God and not the wine of the world. Let us digest the words of God more than the food of the world. In this way we shall both please Heaven and sanctify our souls—rather than please the world and tarnish our souls.

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## 2. CHRISTMAS MORNING PRAYERS & THE ANGELUS

from devotiontoourlady.com

Just as we prepare a special meal—and not the usual meal—on Christmas Day, so too should our prayers be somewhat different on Christmas Day. Routine is the killer of devotion and fervor. Yet it is hard to break out of the cycle of routine. Hopefully the following prayers—some new, some merely expanded—will give you ideas for “cooking up” your own special prayers on this great feast day!

### ACT OF ADORATION

Jesus! My Lord and my God! I adore Thee in Thy humility—in that Thou hast forsaken the joys of Heaven and exchanged them for the sufferings of Earth, taking on the mantle of our sinful human nature. I beg of Thee to remove my heart from its adoration of the world and what it can offer, and place my heart in the cradle of Thy heart. For my treasure is, then there is my heart also!

### ACT OF PRAISE

O Jessus, incarnate God! I rejoice in Thy coming and praise Thy goodness—in that Thou hast come to seek and save that which was lost! Thou dost come to save, not only those who love Thee—though imperfectly—but to also save those who hate Thee! O Love incomprehensible! *“Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends”* (John 15:13)—but Thou didst lay down Thy life even for Thy enemies! Thy Love is to be ever praised!

### ACT OF THANKSGIVING

Who can grasp the immensity of Thy charity, O Lord incarnate? Thou dost never cease to shower us with blessing and graces, while we never cease to shower you with sins and offens-



es! Turn our cold indiffernet hearts of stone into hearts of flesh: *"I will give them one heart, and will put a new spirit in their bowels: and I will take away the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh!"* (Ezechiel 11:19).

### ACT OF SORROW

Thou didst come to seek and save that which was lost—Thou didst come to call sinners to penance! O Lord! I am a sinner and I fee lost in the middle of such a sinful world. I an overcome with confusion, dread and sorrow at the sight of my faults, omissions and ingratitude. I detest them and the offence they have caused Thee, Who art so good and deserving of all my love. This is the miserable way in which I have repaid Thee, for having humbled Thyself in Thy incarnation—having come to shed Thy blood and die for my salvation! How much more ungrateful can I be? I beseech Thee to continue that same mercy and to inspire me with a true sorrow for my faults, a firm desire to amend my life and graciously grant me the forgiveness of all my sins.

### THE ANGELUS

**V.** The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.

**R.** And she conceived of the Holy Ghost.  
HAIL MARY....etc.

**V.** Behold the Handmaid of the Lord.

**R.** Be it done unto me according to thy word.  
HAIL MARY....etc.

**R.** And the Word was made flesh.

**V.** And dwelt amongst us.  
HAIL MARY....etc.

**R.** Pray for us O holy Mother of God.

**V.** That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

**Let us pray.** Pour forth, we beseech Thee O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ, Thy Son, was made known by the message of an angel, may, by His Passion and Cross, be brought to the glory of His Resurrection, through the same Christ Our Lord. **R.** Amen.

### DAILY REMINDER OF THE INCARNATION

The Incarnation is a central dogma of the Faith. It is the launch-pad of the act of our Redemption and Salvation. It the foundation of all that follows. It is a mind-blowing event, where God humiliates Himself to take on our flesh and our nature. For us to reduce ourselves to the level and nature of tiny bug, is not even anywhere near the 'reduction' undergone by God in becoming man. It is something that we rightfully and justly should remember each day.

The Angelus reminds us of the Annunciation and Incarnation, when the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary with great, if somewhat startling, news! As we read in Chapter One of Luke's Gospel, (Luke 1:26-38) God wished Mary, truly a model of humility, to be the Mother of His Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ!

Mary had been prepared in God's mind before the beginning of time. She had been conceived without the stain of Original Sin, as defined by the Church's dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

The Angelus pays tribute to a crucial aspect of Mary's role in the Incarnation, when it quotes from Luke's Gospel "be it done to me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). This wonderful event could not have happened without her consent, without what is known as her fiat. By saying "yes" to God in allowing herself to become His mother, she showed us the ultimate example of trust in our Creator!

Whenever we pray the Angelus, we are reminded of the threefold aspect in cooperating with God. First God makes an offer—"the angel of the Lord declared unto Mary"—He sends a message; He makes His will known in some way. Secondly, we have to respond to that offer—"be it done unto to me according to thy word"—we can accept or refuse God's offer. Thirdly, if we accept, then the fruit is eventually produced, sooner or later—"and the Word was made flesh."

# THE ROSARY

## 15 Meditations on Palm Sunday

**“But Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart.”  
(Luke 2:19)**



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### 3. FIFTEEN ROSARY MEDITATIONS ON THE NATIVITY

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#### **POWER, RICHNESS & UNFATHOMABILITY**

The Rosary consists of a few very short prayers, but they have a most powerful effect. The Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Glory Be form the backbone and are the essence of the Rosary. If these simple prayers are used well—and are prayed slowly and with devotion—then marvelous results can flow forth. But mark well the words “prayed slowly and with devotion”! That can be a real challenge, even for the best of folk! God is not mocked, and, therefore, we should pray in a manner that manifests our seriousness about what we are doing, and shows that we really want to pray, thereby, saying what we mean, and meaning what we say! Then, a simple prayer can be powerful and will simply produce powerful results. The power of the simple Rosary is beautifully shown by St. Louis de Montfort, in his book, *The Secret of the Rosary*.

We have all heard of the saying: “Familiarity breeds contempt.” The more we become used to something, then the chances are that we will gradually—perhaps even imperceptibly—lose our estimation and respect for it. Marriage is a wonderful (or should we say “terrible”) example of this. The respect, patience, efforts and love, spent in winning-over the future spouse, can very quickly evaporate over the years and give place to their opposites. The same applies to newly bought items—at first we take such great care over them, handle them gently, keep them sparkling clean, etc. However, over time, all that is forgotten and we can even give way to misuse and abuse.

The same can be said of prayer—whether it be the supreme prayer of the Sacrifice of the Mass,

or the Divine Office, or the Holy Rosary. If we are not careful, our assistance at Mass will degenerate with relative ease, and our Rosaries and other prayers will slide comfortably into a daily mechanical routine that we apply to so many other things and chores of life.

### FIRST MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY “REJECTION AT BETHLEHEM”

Can you imagine such audacity? Rejecting God! Mary and Joseph come to Bethlehem, carrying God with them, and they are rejected! However, we must add that there was no massive signpost being carried by Mary and Joseph saying: “We are bringing and offering God to you!” Very few followed their religion that well, so that they knew what to expect and when to expect it. It was hidden from most eyes—just like many mysteries of the Faith are hidden from the eyes of the worldly and vain people.

St. Paul says: “It is written: ‘God hath given them the spirit of insensibility; eyes that they should not see; and ears that they should not hear, until this present day!’” (Romans 11:8), while Jesus says: “God hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart, that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them” (John 12:40). Let us not be so caught up with the things of this world that we end up closing the door on Jesus.

### SECOND MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY “POVERTY IN THE FIRST CHRISTMAS”

The King of kings should have a palace in which He should be born—or at least that would be our way of doing things! Yet God says: “My thoughts are not your thoughts: nor your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are exalted above the earth, so are my ways exalted above your ways, and my thoughts above your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Most people want to be rich—God, the richest of all, wanted to be poor. Our Lord and God’s masterpiece, Our Lady, were dealt the ‘cruel’ card of poverty—yet every cloud has a silver lining (if

we have the eyes of Faith to see it). When we have many things, we have less time for God—this was the sad case of affairs in the history of the Chosen People. Whenever they experienced “times of plenty”, they gradually fell away from God by enjoying the many things they had. God is the only really important thing that we cannot afford to lose.

It reminds us the parable Our Lord told: “The land of a certain rich man brought forth plenty of fruits. And he thought within himself, saying: ‘What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits?’ And he said: ‘This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and will build greater; and into them will I gather all things that are grown to me, and my goods. And I will say to my soul: ‘Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years take thy rest; eat, drink, make good cheer!’” But God said to him: ‘Thou fool, this night do they require thy soul of thee: and whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?’ So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God” (Luke 12:16-21).

### THIRD MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY “THE SYMBOLISM OF THE CAVE”

The cave or stable, in which Our Lord was born, symbolizes our sinful soul. The cave was outside the city walls, just as we are outside the ‘walls’ of Heaven. A stable is for animals, and, when we sin, we act like animals—which lack human reason. St. Thomas Aquinas says that any thought, word or action against right reason is a sin of one kind or another—either mortal or venial.

The cave or stable would have smelled of animals—just as our soul smells of sin. St. Joseph would have cleaned the cave or stable the best he could, so that it would be in better shape for Mary to give birth to Jesus there. We should likewise clean our souls the best we can by good and frequent confession. If we fail to clear out mortal sin, then Our Lord will not come to our cave!

#### **FOURTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "THE SYMBOLISM OF FIRE"**

It was winter time, and so, no doubt, St. Joseph would have tried to light some kind of fire. This is very fitting, since Our Lord would later say: *"I am come to cast fire on the earth; and what will I, but that it be kindled?"* (Luke 12:49).

Fire is both light and heat—it is a symbol of both Faith and Charity. Yet we cannot love what we don't know—if our Faith and knowledge of the Faith is weak, then our love of God will be weak. St. Therese of Lisieux lamented: *"Jesus is so little loved, because He is so little known!"* Do I feed the fire of my Faith continually with logs of knowledge?

Yet knowledge without charity is vain and useless. As St. Paul says: *"Now concerning those things that are sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up; but charity edifieth ... If I speak with the tongues of men, and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And if I should have prophecy and should know all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I should have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing"* (1 Corinthians 8:1; 13:1-3).

#### **FIFTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "THE SYMBOLISM OF THE OX AND ASS"**

In most paintings of the Nativity, we see an ox and an ass in the stable. Both are beasts of burden—which immediately brings to mind the burden of having to carry the cross if we wish to get to Heaven: *"And Jesus said to all: 'If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me'"* (Luke 9:23) ... *"And he that taketh not up his cross, and followeth Me, is not worthy of Me"* (Matthew 10:38).

The ox is a symbol of our mind, that must labor in acquiring knowledge—not so much of the

world, but of God. That man with a most brilliant mind, St. Thomas Aquinas, was nicknamed "The Dumb Ox." Actually, he was far from dumb—but that was because his main intellectual labor was thinking, learning and talking about God. The ass is of the equine family, comprising horses, donkeys, mules, etc. We all know the saying: *"Stubborn as a mule!"* The ass, or mule, symbolizes our stubborn will, which wants to do its own thing, rather than doing the will of God.

Usually, the ox and the ass are seen as kneeling—this signifies that we must humbly bow down, kneel and adore God. We may well be the adopted children of God, but we are not His equals.

#### **SIXTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "THE PRESENCE OF SHEPHERDS"**

Our Lord comes to be the Good Shepherd, so it is fitting that God would arrange for shepherds and sheep to be present at His Son's birth:

*"I am the Good Shepherd. A good shepherd giveth his life for his sheep. But the hireling, and he that is not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and flieth: and the wolf catcheth, and scattereth the sheep. And the hireling flieth, because he is a hireling: and he hath no care for the sheep. I am the Good Shepherd; and I know Mine, and Mine know Me. As the Father knoweth Me, and I know the Father: and I lay down My life for My sheep. And other sheep I have, that are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice, and there shall be one fold and one shepherd"* (John 10:11-16).

As Our Lord also said: *"Enter ye in at the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there are who go in thereat. How narrow is the gate, and strait is the way that leadeth to life: and few there are that find it! Beware of false prophets, who come to you in the clothing of sheep, but inwardly they are ravening wolves"* (Matthew 7:13-15).

## SEVENTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "THE PRESENCE OF SHEEP"

Our Lord may be the Good Shepherd—but are we good sheep? Do we listen to His voice? Or do we listen to voice of worldly shepherds, who are false shepherds, mere hirelings, seeking some self advantage or profit at our expense? They preach a doctrine of worldliness: fun, entertainment, riches, pleasures, indulgence, etc.

Our Lord, though He was the Good Shepherd, would be called—by St. John the Baptist—*"the Lamb of God."* Before baptizing Our Lord, John would say: *"The next day, John saw Jesus coming to him, and he saith: 'Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who taketh away the sin of the world!'"* (John 1:29). Isaias also spoke of the Messiah under the symbol of a sheep: *"He was offered because it was His own will, and He opened not His mouth. He shall be led as a sheep to the slaughter, and shall be dumb as a lamb before his shearer, and He shall not open His mouth"* (Isaias 53:7). Are we uncomplaining lambs and sheep in the hands of God and His Divine Providence? Or do we bleat complainingly at everything that God allows to happen?

## EIGHTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "THE SYMBOLISM OF HEROD"

Herod blatantly symbolizes the world. He fears losing his place and palace to Christ—the so-called "King of the Jews."

*"When Jesus therefore was born in Bethlehem of Juda, in the days of King Herod, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem. saying: 'Where is He that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east, and are come to adore Him!' And King Herod, hearing this, was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And assembling together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where Christ should be born. But they said to him: 'In Bethlehem of Juda. For so it is written by the prophet: "And thou Bethlehem the land of Juda art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come forth the Captain that shall rule My people Israel."'*

*"Then Herod, privately calling the wise men, learned diligently of them the time of the star which appeared to them; and sending them into Bethlehem, said: 'Go and diligently inquire after the Child, and when you have found Him, bring me word again, that I also may come to adore him!'"*

*"And having received an answer in sleep that they should not return to Herod, they went back another way into their country ... Then Herod, perceiving that he was deluded by the wise men, was exceeding angry; and sending killed all the men children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the borders thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men" (Matthew 2:1-16).*

We would like to see peace between Christ and world—but it will never happen. The world, together with the devil and the flesh, make up the three chief enemies that we have to fight. There is no and can be no truce between them and us. As Scripture says: *"Bear not the yoke with unbelievers. For what participation hath justice with injustice? Or what fellowship hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath the faithful with the unbeliever? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God; as God saith: 'I will dwell in them, and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people!' Wherefore, 'Go out from among them, and be ye separate!' saith the Lord"* (2 Corinthians 6:14-17).

## NINTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "THE THREE WISE MEN"

The number three is a powerful mystical and symbolic number. We have the three Persons of the Holy Trinity; the three members of the Holy Family; the three Theological Virtues; the three stages of the spiritual life that we must pass through before being allowed into Heaven.

On the negative side, we have the three ways in which we sin—thoughts, words and actions; we strike our breast whilst saying the *Confiteor* or "I

Confess to Almighty God" prayer; we have the three required elements that must be present if we are to be guilty of mortal sin: the thought, word or action must be seriously wrong, we must know it is wrong at the time of doing it, and we must fully want to do it; we have the three places or destinations that are directly connected to our sins or lack of sins: Heaven, Purgatory or Hell.

If we are wise—like the three wise men—then we will avoid sin at all costs, just like they avoided Herod, and seek Christ with all our might.

### TENTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "THE THREE GIFTS"

The Apocalypse has those terrible words to say: *"I know thy works, that thou art neither cold, nor hot. I would thou wert cold, or hot. But because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold, nor hot, I will begin to vomit thee out of My mouth. Because thou sayest: I am rich, and made wealthy, and have need of nothing: and knowest not, that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked. I counsel thee to buy of Me gold fire tried, that thou mayest be made rich; and mayest be clothed in white garments, and that the shame of thy nakedness may not appear; and anoint thy eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see"* (Apocalypse 3:14-18).

Yes, we are spiritually poor, blind and naked, as the Apocalypse just said. Just as the three kings brought three gifts, so do the three persons of the Holy Trinity counsel us to turn to Them for the solution: to buy from Them gold, white garments, and eye-salve. These three are an echo of the three gifts offered to Jesus by the Magi.

The Gold in both cases is the gold of charity, which, as we said with the Scriptural quote above, will have grown cold in many souls.

The white garments correspond to the Myrrh. The Myrrh is a symbol of suffering, being used both as a painkiller and for embalming the dead. The white garments reflect that suffering, as shown by this quote: *"These are they who are come out of great tribulation, and have washed*

*their robes, and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb."* (Apocalypse 7:14).

The Eye-Salve corresponds to the frankincense of prayer, which rises like smoke to Heaven. The blind man is begging and praying to Jesus for his blindness to be removed. *"Jesus asked him saying: 'What wilt thou that I do to thee?' But he said: 'Lord, that I may see!'"* (Luke 18:41). His prayer is the eye-salve that removes his blindness.

The three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh also remind us of Holy Eucharist in another way.

(1) The Holy Eucharist is our most precious treasure on Earth, just like gold is regarded as the most precious metal.

(2) The Holy Eucharist as the Sacrifice of the Mass is the most powerful prayer that we have, and frankincense is the most precious of all brands of incense, and incense is a symbol of prayer: *"The smoke of the incense of the prayers of the saints ascended up before God"* (Apocalypse 8:4).

(3) The Holy Eucharist is also the greatest sacrifice that can be offered to God, and this what the Eucharist as the Sacrifice of the Mass does daily. The Sacrifice of the Mass brings healing graces to world. Likewise, Myrrh is a symbol of the supreme sacrifice, as it is used for embalming after the supreme sacrifice of death has taken the life of person; and myrrh also has healing 'graces', for it is also used for medicinal purposes.

Today there is not enough gold, frankincense and myrrh in our lives. We love too little; we pray too little; we suffer too little. That is why we risk having little chance for salvation unless we follow the example of the three kings and follow the counsels of the Apocalypse in our apocalyptic times! Love, pray and suffer!

## ELEVENTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY “THE GIFT OF GOLD”

Gold is a symbol of charity and God. The word “gold” even has the word “God” in it! Scripture says: *“As silver is tried by fire, and gold in the furnace: so the Lord trieth the hearts”* (Proverbs 17:3).

Just as gold is most valued of metals, so too is charity the most prized virtue: *“Now there remain faith, hope, and charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity”* (1 Corinthians 13:13).

It is “soul” of all other virtues, giving them life and value. This is why St. Paul says: *“If I speak with the tongues of men, and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And if I should have prophecy and should know all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I should have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing”* (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

He then goes on to describe the effects of charity: *“Charity is patient, is kind: charity envieth not, dealeth not perversely; is not puffed up; is not ambitious, seeketh not her own, is not provoked to anger, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth with the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things”* (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Let us often meditate and reflect on this most crucial of all virtues, for, as one saint said: “When we die, we will be judged on one thing alone—charity!” How much charity, if any, was in all the things that I thought, said and did? It is our charity that will pay for our sins: *“Charity covereth all sins”* (Proverbs 10:12). This is what Our Lord pointed out to the Pharisees, concerning the seven-devil possessed adulteress, St. Mary Magdalen: *“Many sins are forgiven her, because she hath loved much”* (Luke 7:47). And this is why St. Peter says: *“But before all things have a constant mutual charity among your-*

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*selves: for charity covereth a multitude of sins”* (1 Peter 4:8).

## TWELFTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY “THE GIFT OF FRANKINCENSE”

Frankincense is an aromatic resin obtained from trees of the genus *Boswellia* family of trees, particularly *Boswellia Sacra*. The English word is derived from Old French “*franc encens*” (i.e., high quality incense) and is used in incense and perfumes. So we see that there is “incense” and “frankincense” with frankincense being high quality incense. The same applies to our prayers: there are prayers that are “said” and there are prayers that are “prayed”. The difference is what Our Lord Himself spoke of: *“This people honoureth Me with their lips: but their heart is far from Me”* (Matthew 15:8).

There are four main species of *Boswellia* that produce true frankincense and resin from each of the four is available in various grades. We could very broadly categorize prayer in a similar arbitrary fashion, saying that there are four main species of prayer: (1) the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, (2) The Divine Office or Liturgy of the Hours, (3) The Holy Rosary and (4) all other prayers. Each of these species has various grades of quality, which depend upon the fervor we put into praying those prayers.

Frankincense is tapped from the scraggly but hardy trees by slashing the bark, which is called striping, and allowing the exuded resin to bleed out and harden. These hardened resins are called tears. The aroma from these tears are more valuable for their presumed healing abilities and are also said to have superior qualities for religious ritual. Similarly, suffering greatly enhances the power of prayer.

Our Lord said on the Mount of Olives: *“Pray! That ye enter not into temptation! The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh weak”* (Matthew 26:41). Our Lord spent forty days and nights praying in the unforgiving environment of the desert. Also, the mountain is a rock and Our Lord would go there to pray often:

*"And having dismissed the multitude, he went into a mountain alone to pray. And when it was evening, he was there alone" (Matthew 14:23). "He went out into a mountain to pray, and he passed the whole night in the prayer of God" (Luke 6:12). "He took Peter, and James, and John, and went up into a mountain to pray" (Luke 9:28).*

St. Augustine says that prayer is the key of Heaven that fits all the gates of Heaven and all the treasure chests of God. Elsewhere he says that what bread is to the body, prayer is to the soul. And *"He knows how to live well, who knows how to pray well."*

Jesus said: *"And when ye pray, you shall not be as the hypocrites, that love to stand and pray in the synagogues and corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men: Amen I say to you, they have received their reward" (Matthew 6:5).*

*"And Jesus spoke also a parable to them, that we ought always to pray, and not to faint" (Luke 18:1).* This is why St. Paul says: "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

### **THIRTEENTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "THE GIFT OF MYRRH"**

What is Myrrh? It is a fragrant gum or resin obtained from certain trees, especially in the Near East, which is used as incense, perfume and medicine. Frankincense and myrrh were the antibiotics of the ancient world.

Myrrh resin is a natural gum. It can also be ingested by mixing it with wine. The soldiers mixed Myrrh with wine and offered it on a sponge on the end of a lance, for Jesus to drink as He was dying on the Cross, but Jesus refused it. It was meant to act as a painkiller, but Jesus did not want any painkillers, He wanted to suffer as much as He possibly could to prove His love for us. *"And they gave Him to drink wine mingled with myrrh; but he took it not" (Mark 15:23).*

The name Myrrh is rooted in the Aramaic word for "bitter." The rugged appearance of the Myrrh

tree, together with its sharp thorny branches, cries out loud and clear the idea of suffering and mortification. To get Myrrh, the Myrrh tree must be first wounded, this is done with a knife or some other lance-like pointed object. This reminds us of Our Lord being pierced with the nails and the lance upon the cross.

Let us understand that Heaven sent sufferings, though, like myrrh, they may be very bitter, they also have a wonderful medicinal effect, which if we 'swallow' the medicine, will cure us of our past and present ailments and also preserve from any future disease of sin.

### **FORTEENTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "THE PRESENCE OF JOSEPH"**

Joseph oozes humility—the virtue so precious in God's eyes, and the solid necessary foundation of the spiritual life, without which we merely build on collapsible sand.

He is the head of the Holy Family, yet he is lower than both Jesus and Mary in sanctity. He is up there among the greatest saints, yet we hear so little coming from his mouth in the records of Holy Scripture.

God humiliates him by leaving him in anguish about Mary's pregnancy—to the point where he is about to walk away and leave her.

His efforts at providing for Mary in Bethlehem are "shot-down" by God, who arranges for constant rejection at each door Joseph approached seeking shelter.

He is humbled by 'losing' the Christ Child for three days—goodness knows how much he must have suffered anguish over losing Him.

As Holy Scripture says: "He that loveth his son, frequently chastiseth him" (Ecclesiasticus 30:1). "For whom the Lord loveth, he chastiseth: and as a father in the son he pleaseth himself" Proverbs 3:12).

## FIFTEENTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY “THE PRESENCE OF MARY”

God chose Mary as the doorway through which Christ would come into the world. She must also be the doorway through which we must enter Heaven. There is no other way. The saints have to powerful things to say on this matter:

St. Albert the Great (a Doctor of the Church), says: *“They who are not thy servants, O Mary, shall perish.”*

St. Bonaventure (a Doctor of the Church) repeats the same thought when he says: *“They who neglect the service of Mary shall die in their sins.”* And again: *“For them, from whom Mary turns away her face, there is not even a hope of salvation.”*

St. Ignatius of Antioch (a Father of the Church), a martyr of the second century, writes: *“A sinner can be saved only through the Holy Virgin who, by her merciful prayers, obtains salvation for so many who, according to strict justice, would be lost.”*

If a lack of devotion to her is a mark of eternal reprobation a constant love for her must be a sign of eternal salvation. Many spiritual writers state that devotion to Mary is a sign of predestination.

St. Alphonsus Liguori (a Doctor of the Church) says: *“It is impossible that a servant of Mary be damned, provided he serves her faithfully and commends himself to her maternal protection.”*

St. Anselm (a Doctor of the Church) writes: *“He who turns to thee and is regarded by thee cannot be lost.”*

St. Antonine is of the same opinion. He says: *“As it is impossible for them from whom Mary turns away her eyes of mercy to be saved, so it is necessary that they to whom she turns her eyes of mercy and for whom she intercedes to be saved and glorified.”*

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# THE ROSARY

## 15 Meditations on Palm Sunday

**“But Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart.”  
(Luke 2:19)**





# CHRISTMAS DAY VIGIL AT THE MANGER OF OUR LORD

**Don't leave Him alone,  
lest He leave you alone!**



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## 4. CHRISTMAS DAY VIGIL AND PRAYERS

from [devotiontoourlady.com](http://devotiontoourlady.com)

Whose birthday is it today? Well, we all know the answer in theory—it is Jesus' birthday—but is that reflected in practice?

In many, if not most families, Jesus will have been left behind at the church! We go to Mass to see Him, but we do not really take Him home. Or, if we do take Him home, we leave Him sitting alone in the corner somewhere, while we go about having our Christmas Day ‘fun’.

It was much the same on His first birthday. There was no room for Him in any house, so He had to be born in a cave. Today is no different, we just stuff Him in a closet until it's time to bring Him out for some attention during our Christmas Day Rosary! Yet some will not even find time for their daily Rosary today!

If it is HIS BIRTHDAY, then LET US SHOW IT by giving Him regular attention all throughout the day. If you are invited to someone's birthday party, you can “bet your bottom dollar” that that person will have one or many people paying them attention all throughout the party. Someone will always be talking to them or listening to the “birthday boy”! Let it be the same for Christ on His birthday. An all-day vigil, whereby somebody is praying at the nativity scene can and will be a powerful statement as what Christmas is all about! If we cannot give Jesus material presents at Christmas, let us at least ensure a spiritual presence.

We cannot outdo God in generosity. After all, it's His birthday! Parents spend day and night watching over a sick child! The world is sick and Our Lord is sick of the world! *“Watch and Pray! The spirit is willing, the flesh is weak.”*

# SIGN-UP SHEET FOR ALL-DAY PRAYER VIGIL

10:00 am to 10:15 am	10:15 am to 10:30 am	10:30 am to 10:45 am	10:45 am to 11:00 am
11:00 am to 11:15 am	11:15 am to 11:30 am	11:30 am to 11:45 am	11:45 am to 12:00 pm
12:00 pm to 12:15 pm	12:15 pm to 12:30 pm	12:30 pm to 12:45 pm	12:45 pm to 1:00 pm
1:00 pm to 1:15 pm	1:15 pm to 1:30 pm	1:30 pm to 1:45 pm	1:45 pm to 2:00 pm
2:00 pm to 2:15 pm	2:15 pm to 3:30 pm	2:30 pm to 2:45 pm	2:45 pm to 3:00 pm
3:00 pm to 3:15 pm	3:15 pm to 3:30 pm	3:30 pm to 3:45 pm	3:45 pm to 4:00 pm
4:00 pm to 4:15 pm	4:15 pm to 4:30 pm	4:30 pm to 4:45 pm	4:45 pm to 5:00 pm
5:00 pm to 5:15 pm	5:15 pm to 5:30 pm	5:30 pm to 5:45 pm	5:45 pm to 6:00 pm
6:00 pm to 6:15 pm	6:15 pm to 6:30 pm	6:30 pm to 6:45 pm	6:45 pm to 7:00 pm
7:00 pm to 7:15 pm	7:15 am to 7:30 pm	7:30 am to 7:45 pm	7:45 pm to 8:00 pm
8:00 pm to 8:15 pm	8:15 pm to 8:30 am	8:30 pm to 8:45 pm	8:45 pm to 9:00 pm
9:00 pm to 9:15 pm	9:15 pm to 9:30 pm	9:30 pm to 9:45 pm	9:45 pm to 10:00 pm



## 5. THE CHRISTMAS MIDDAY ANGELUS

from [devotiontoourlady.com](http://devotiontoourlady.com)

### THE ANGELUS

- V.** The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.  
**R.** And she conceived of the Holy Ghost.  
HAIL MARY....etc.
- V.** Behold the Handmaid of the Lord.  
**R.** Be it done unto me according to thy word.  
HAIL MARY....etc.
- R.** And the Word was made flesh.  
**V.** And dwelt amongst us.  
HAIL MARY....etc.
- R.** Pray for us O holy Mother of God.  
**V.** That we may be made worthy of the  
promises of Christ.

**Let us pray.** Pour forth, we beseech Thee O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ, Thy Son, was made known by the message of an angel, may, by His Passion and Cross, be brought to the glory of His Resurrection, through the same Christ Our Lord. **R.** Amen.

### A PRAYER OF UNITY

In rural parishes, when the parish Angelus bell tolled at noon, a person could scan the many fields and see people stopped in their tracks as they prayed the Angelus. In those days, the Angelus was so much a part of rural life that as soon as the first toll of the bell was heard, the horses stopped themselves without having to be told to do so by their drivers. What a wondrous sight it must have been to look out over the fields and, there, see your neighbor praying the same prayer you were praying at the same time of the day—giving a little token and a sense of feeling of unity in Faith.

**IT COMES IN "THREES"**

Since the Angelus is divided into three parts, we will have three parts to the article. Firstly, the spiritual part; then the historical part; and finally the practical part or its usage.

The Incarnation is a central dogma of the Faith. It is the launch-pad of the act of our Redemption and Salvation. It the foundation of all that follows. It is a mind-blowing event, where God humiliates Himself to take on our flesh and our nature. For us to reduce ourselves to the level and nature of tiny bug, is not even anywhere near the 'reduction' undergone by God in becoming man. It is something that we rightfully and justly should remember each day.

The Angelus reminds us of the Annunciation and Incarnation, when the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary with great, if somewhat startling, news! As we read in Chapter One of Luke's Gospel, (Luke 1:26-38) God wished Mary, truly a model of humility, to be the Mother of His Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ!

**GENUINE HUMILITY**

When we pray the first mystery of the Holy Rosary—the Annunciation—we often announce that the fruit of this mystery is humility. Mary's humility was genuine. As St. Alphonsus Liguori notes in his classic work *The Glories of Mary*, "*her only desire was that her Creator, the giver of every good thing, should be praised and blessed.*"

When Mary calls herself the handmaid, or the servant, of the Lord, in the Angelus (from Luke 1:38) it is with inspiring humility and sincerity. She thought of herself first and foremost as God's servant, seeking glory, not for herself, but rather for Him. Mary was happy to have God work through her. As she expressed it most famously in the canticle the Magnificat, "*My soul magnifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior*" (Luke 1:46-47).

St. Paul echoed this wonderful sentiment when he wrote that "*he who boasts, let him boast in the Lord*" (2 Corinthians 10:17). In so doing, Mary became, as St. Augustine put it rather poetically,

a "heavenly ladder, by which God came into the world," descending from Heaven to Earth, to become flesh in her womb. This brings to mind the line from Matthew's Gospel: "*Whoever humbles himself shall be exalted*" (Mathew 23:12).

**"YES" TO GOD — "NO" TO THE WORLD**

The Angelus pays tribute to a crucial aspect of Mary's role in the Incarnation, when it quotes from Luke's Gospel "*be it done to me according to thy word*" (Luke 1:38). This wonderful event could not have happened without her consent, without what is known as her fiat. By saying "yes" to God in allowing herself to become His mother, she showed us the ultimate example of trust in our Creator!

**TOO TOUGH?**

Do you think that having that kind of Faith is too daunting a task? Think about the ways in which God calls each of in our daily lives. Do we say "yes" when Christ wants to work through us, in showing His love to others? Or when He asks us to be graceful in trying and testing situations? Mary knew that the Messiah would be a "Man of Sorrows"—to accept being His Mother, meant that this was not going to be walk in the park or a picnic! This was going to mean trouble, real trouble; together with suffering, real suffering. Prayer and meditation on Mary's reaction, to the invitation in the Annunciation, can help us to do His will.

**LOVE IS A UNION OF WILLS**

Speaking of God's word, the Angelus completes its short summary of the Incarnation with the moving reference to our Lord from John's Gospel: "*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us*" (John 1:14). As we read in the letter to the Hebrews, Christ was like us in all things but without sin (Hebrews 4:15). St. Bernard noted that our Lord came to show us His love, so that He might then experience ours—that we might say to Him, "Be it done unto me according to Thy word"—for love is a union of wills; it is wanting what the beloved wants.

## 6. PRAYERS AND READINGS FOR THE CHRISTMAS DINNER

from [devotiontoourlady.com](http://devotiontoourlady.com)

**“And it came to pass, that when they were there, her days were accomplished, that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped Him up in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”  
(Luke 2:6-7).**

**“The star which they had seen in the east, went before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. And seeing the star they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And entering into the house, they found the Child with Mary His Mother, and falling down they adored Him; and opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts; gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”  
(Matthew 2:9-11).**



### OPLATKI

If the Oplatki were not eaten on the Vigil of Christmas, they can be eaten either at breakfast on Christmas Day, or at the later Christmas dinner. This ceremony should precede the meal. The following chapter has the ceremony and history in all its full detail.

### PRAYERS BEFORE EATING

THE LEADER READS THE FOLLOWING:

Before we joyously celebrate the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ by partaking in His symbolic banquet, let us remind ourselves of what Holy Scripture says of such matters:

Our Lord Himself pointed out the true hierarchy of things when He said: *“It is written, that Man liveth not by bread alone, but by every word of God”* (Luke 4:4).

This is why St. Paul speaks of people *“Whose end is destruction; whose God is their belly; and whose glory is in their shame; who mind earthly things”* (Philippians 3:19).

Since the Word of God is better food than the material food that God has provided for us; and since we are made of both body and soul, it is therefore fitting that on such a great spiritual feast as the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh, we should not just focus on the meat and food for our bodies, but also the spiritual bread that nourishes our souls.

That is why we begin our physical meal with these spiritual thoughts, so that we might eat like the pagans, whose “god is their belly and who mind earthly things” but that we might celebrate joyfully but in a Christian manner, always bearing in mind the counsels of mortification and sobriety.

Let us now say together our Grace Before Meals:

“Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which are about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ Our Lord. Amen.”

AT SOME POINT DURING THE MEAL, PERHAPS IN BETWEEN COURSES, IT IS SUGGESTED THAT YOU BREAK FOR PRAYER, WHICH CAN BE SAID STANDING AROUND THE TABLE.

A DECADE OF THE ROSARY COULD BE PRAYED, OR ANY ONE OF THE FOLLOWING READING COULD BE MADE

### **THE MARRIAGE FEAST AT CANA**

*“And the third day, there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee: and the mother of Jesus was there. And Jesus also was invited, and his disciples, to the marriage. And the wine failing, the mother of Jesus saith to Him: ‘They have no wine!’ And Jesus saith to her: ‘Woman, what is that to Me and to thee? My hour is not yet come!’*

*His mother saith to the waiters: ‘Whatsoever he shall say to you, do ye!’*

*Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing two or three measures apiece.*

*Jesus saith to them: ‘Fill the waterpots with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim.*

*And Jesus saith to them: ‘Draw out now, and carry to the chief steward of the feast!’*

*And they carried it. And when the chief steward had tasted the water made wine, and knew not whence it was, but the waiters knew who had drawn the water; the chief steward calleth the bridegroom, and saith to him: ‘Every man at first setteth forth good wine, and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse. But thou hast kept the good wine until now!’*

*This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee; and manifested his glory, and His disciples believed in Him.” (John 2:1-11).*

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# OPLATKI



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## 7. PRAYERS AND RITUAL FOR THE EATING OF THE OPLATKI

(Christmas wafer bread)

from [devotiontoourlady.com](http://devotiontoourlady.com)

On Christmas Eve, the Poles have a beautiful custom that recalls the Eucharist: Oplatki (“oplatek” in the singular: note that the “l” is pronounced as a “w”, as in “opwatki”)—are very thin, crisp, large rectangular breads with the consistency of Communion wafers and impressed with religious designs—are eaten on Christmas Eve (Wigilia—meaning Vigil, from the Latin, vigilia).

This Polish custom symbolizing forgiveness and unity dates back to pre-Christian times, and is still practiced in many Polish homes throughout the world. The word “oplatek” is thought to be from the Latin *oblatum*, which gives us the English word “oblation” meaning an offering or sacrifice, which has the derivative meaning of “holy bread”—since bread is used for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

This custom is widespread throughout Eastern Europe. Among Catholic families in Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia and other Eastern European countries, the start of the traditional Wigilia (Christmas Eve Vigil) meal begins with the *Oplatki*, *Oblatky*, or *Plotkele*—which is a thin Communion-like rectangular wafer made of unleavened bread and stamped with different Christmas symbols.

Some families call it the “bread of Love” and it is widely known in English-speaking countries simply as the Christmas wafer. Some eastern German families are also known to use a wafer called *Opladen* in their Christmas cooking.

## BREAD OF LIFE

Bread is one of the most ancient and simple of all human foods. It has been a symbol of life and of hope for millennia. We recall that God sent *manna* to His people as they wandered in the Sinai desert.

Bethlehem, where the Savior was born, means “house of bread” in Hebrew. We also recall that Jesus said “*I am the bread of life,*” and that He left us His Body and Blood under the appearances of bread and wine in the Holy Eucharist. Blessed bread, associated with Mass and yet distinct from the Eucharist, has long been used as a sacramental in both the Eastern and Western Christian traditions.

In the West, the custom lives on in the pain benit (blessed bread) given in some French churches after High Mass. In the East, the use of blessed bread developed into the practice of antidoron. Some of the bread prepared for Mass (the prosphora, or offerings) is not consecrated, but is used for a kind of spiritual communion. The blessed bread is given out at the end of the Liturgy and as a gift to those who may not be able to receive the Eucharist. This practice still continues in the Byzantine Rite, but usually only on major feasts.

In the Latin Rite, the bread and wine offered at Mass are referred to as *oblata* (offerings). It is from the Latin word *Oblata* that the Polish word *Oplatki* and the Slovak word *Oblatky* is derived. The Lithuanian word *Plotkele* has the same origin, but due to something called “vocal shift” in the Lithuanian language the name has changed slightly. While the source of the name is derived from the Latin, the religious custom of Oplatki at Christmas is shared by both the Latin and the Byzantine traditions.

The Oplatki tradition developed from earlier Christian traditions, such as the antidoron, in the Kingdom of Poland not long after Christianity came to the country in 966. The custom was adopted later by the Lithuanian, Czech and Slovak peoples and has made its way into countless other households who find that its rich sym-

bolism is an easily adoptable Christmas custom which also carries profound meaning for Christians.

Poles, Slovaks, Czechs, Lithuanians and Latvians are fortunate in preserving such a meaningful custom at Christmas, as an aid to a worthy reception of Holy Communion and as a family spiritual communion on this most joyous of Christian feasts. It is customary to have the Oplatki wafers blessed by the parish priest prior to Christmas Eve and many parishes provide the Oplatki for their parishioners.

## CHRISTMAS EVE—VIGIL OF CHRIST’S BIRTH

Following time-honored tradition, many families will begin their Christmas Eve celebration by waiting for the appearance of the first star in the early evening sky as they look toward the East. This first star appearing symbolizes the Star of Bethlehem which announced that the Great Light was coming into our world, to the “*people who lived in darkness.*”

The table at which the family gathers for the Christmas Eve dinner typically has some straw strewn beneath a fine white tablecloth, to commemorate the birth of the Christ Child in the manger or cave, where the animals lived. A more modern adaptation includes the use of straw or sprigs of evergreen, which are placed on a serving platter and then covered with a fine white napkin, on which the Oplatki wafers rest.

## THE OPLATKI BREAD

This is a thin bread pressed in oblong irons in the convents, and on it in relief is the Nativity scene. Made like the host, it is a reminder of our daily bread and the Bread of Life who was born a man tonight.

You could make your own by simply mixing flour with water. Rolling out the dough to a very thin consistency and then cutting out the squares. The word “JESUS—SAVIOR” could be traced on the thin squares before baking. Or you could have a circular wafer. Some folk bake it as a circular bread-roll (like a gigantic donut) in a round tin, round like the circle of eternity and like the

everlastingness of God. Others prefer the flat-bread style.

## THE OPLATKI RITUAL

When the sun has set on Christmas Eve, and the sky begins to darken, the youngest child is sent outside to watch for the first star, just as the three Wise Men watched for the star that led them to the place of Jesus's birth. When the first star is spotted in the evening sky, the child comes in and announces that the star has appeared. Then, inside the house, like a signal that the Light of the World is about to appear, candles are lit. The Oplatki are laid at the center of the table this night, on a bed of straw. The host or head of the household (the father of the family or the oldest person, usually) begins the Oplatki ceremony:

**HOST:** May the name of God be praised!

**ALL:** For ever and ever Amen.

**HOST:** In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. On this year's shortest of days and longest of nights, a star appears shining in the darkness. For on this night, the Word was made flesh...

**ALL:** And dwelt among us!

**HOST:** "God is born," proclaims the majestic Christmas carol. Jesus, Son of God, is born of Mary. For on this night, the Word was made flesh...

**ALL:** And dwelt among us!

**HOST:** The star has appeared announcing His birth. The star of Bethlehem guides the Three Wise Men in their search for the new-born King. For this night, the Word was made flesh...

**ALL:** And dwelt among us!

**HOST:** This night a Child is born to us; a Son is given to us. His name is wonderful Counselor, eternal Father, Prince of peace. The Word was made flesh...

**ALL:** And dwelt among us!

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**HOST:** Throughout the ages on this eve, as the first star appeared, our ancestors throughout the world celebrated with joy this Christmas Vigil as we do today. For the Word was made flesh...

**ALL:** And dwelt among us!

**HOST:** Our forefathers celebrated this evening with the breaking of the bread, the Christmas Oplatek. Following their example we share in this sacred heritage. In the breaking of this bread and sharing of this meal, Jesus is born for us this evening, around this table, under our roof, in our hearts. Let us now listen to the story of his birth as recounted by St. Luke:

A READER presents the Gospel of Midnight Mass: Luke 2:1-14

**READER:** In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you, who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

**HOST:** At this feast, we share the joy of heaven. We rejoice with the Holy Family of Bethlehem. Having sighted the first star, we gather at this table to hear glad tidings of comfort and joy. Summoned to the festival, we break bread and share the holy wafer. The breaking of this bread brings with it a promise of reconciliation and peace. As we share it with each other, we are bound to forgive each other all the wrongs we have done in the past, and never return to them. Through forgiveness the Lord is born in our family, as Bethlehem, *"the house of bread,"* happens once again among us. For this reason the holy wafer is called the *"bread of love."* Glory to God in Highest Heaven! And Peace...

**ALL:** Peace to His people on earth!

### SHARING THE OPLATKI BREAD

After the Blessing of Bread, the father or an older member of the family reads the Blessing of Bread and sprinkles the bread with holy water. The father wishes all a holy Christmas and recalls those who've died during the year and brings to memory Christmas Eve suppers past.

He then breaks off a roll and passes it to the person on his right, who breaks a roll from it for himself and passes it on. Some fathers will break-off a piece to give to his wife. He places it in her mouth with a blessing such as, "May the Lord bless and keep you through this next year."

The mother reciprocates and then hands a piece to the person next to her and blesses him. That person does the same to the one next to him, and so on, until all have received and given a piece. If it is more than just the immediate family present, the oldest person present will initiate by offering an Oplatek to another, and the two break off a piece between them, passing the remainder on to the next person.

Each then shares pieces of the Oplatek wafer with everyone else present at the table. Some families, particularly of the Slovak tradition, share the Oplatek with honey on it, as a symbol of the sweetness and joy of the occasion.

The sharing-ritual is accompanied by embracing and the exchange of good wishes. The symbolism of sharing the wafer to each person, and then back and forth, symbolizes the giving and the sharing in our lives.

So loved is this tradition that Poles will mail small oplatki inside Christmas cards to those who aren't present for Christmas Eve. Many have adopted a custom from the Polish for Christmas Eve.

### CHRISTMAS EVE SUPPER

Following the sharing of Oplatki comes the Christmas Eve or Vigil supper. This annual supper is anything but another fancy dinner party, and the symbolism that has marked its introduction is carried on throughout the meal. The supper not only consists of certain types of foods but even a specific number of dishes.

Although the origins are unclear, to this day it is customary to serve an odd number of dishes. In the olden days, the number was determined by the affluence of a given household, with aristocratic families serving eleven different dishes, the nobility serving nine dishes and the peasantry serving seven.

The meal is meatless (even free of meat drippings or meat stock) and symbolizes the cleansing effect of abstinence in preparation for the coming of Christ. Among Catholics in the East, a period of fasting and abstinence is observed during Advent. The variety and abundance of what is served during the Christmas Vigil dinner makes this anything but a penitential one though.

The Christmas Eve meal, unlike the typical meal, at which a cold appetizer such as herring would be served first, traditionally begins with a simple soup. The most common is a clear beet broth with tiny mushroom-filled dumplings floating within, or a clear mushroom soup served over egg noodles. A mushroom and potato soup is also common.

Next comes the herring, usually marinated, in oil or in sour cream. This is followed by the fish dishes, the favorite being carp in various forms: fried, baked, in raisin sauce, or in aspic. Pike has traditionally come in a close second, often served in a horseradish sauce, or served cold, stuffed in its own skin and served as is or in aspic. Other common fish dishes include perch, or walleye, with a hard-boiled egg topping, tench baked in red cabbage, or crucean stewed in sour cream.

The fish, which dominate the Christmas Eve meal, have long been a symbol of Christianity. The head of the pike, when dismembered, contains bones in the shape of a cross, ladder and nails: the tools of Christ's crucifixion. Horseradish is said by some to be a reminder of life's bitterness, while honey represents its sweetness and poppyseeds symbolize tranquility.

Other dishes include sauerkraut stewed with mushrooms and/or peas, perogi with various meatless fillings—both savory or sweet, buckwheat groats and mushroom gravy, *golabki* (cabbage rolls) filled with rice or barley and mushrooms.

Rounding out the meal are such varied sweet dishes as almond soup, cranberry jelly, stewed prunes and dried fruit, noodles and poppy seed, wheat and honey pudding, rice and apple casserole plus nuts, raisins, dates and figs to snack on. Traditional cakes include poppy seed rolls, fruit cakes, and honey-spice cake. Some families serve a dessert or a drink, called compote, which is made of 12 different fruits to honor Christ's Twelve Apostles. Although drinking is rather subdued, often *krupnik* (a hot honey-spice cordial) is served.

Singing *koledy* (Christmas carols) has long been the crowning touch of the Christmas Eve Vigil celebration. The family moves to where the Christmas tree stands, lights its tapers and joyously sings the age-old hymns in honor of the Savior's birth.

## CYCLE OF LIFE

The order in which the courses of the evening meal are served signify human life and its natural cycles—honey on the Christmas wafer followed by sour potatoes or tart soup, and fish, then pastries—the sweet, the sour, and the sweet again—that is the order of our human life on earth, from joy to sorrow and back again. As Christians we live in Hope, for God's mercy to us and for the hope of ultimate Joy in Heaven which is our reward for a life well-lived. The beauty and rich symbolism of the Oplatki tradition offers us a profound, yet simple, lesson for our Christian life.

## OPLATKI DURING PERSECUTION

A story was told by a woman whose family is still in Poland. Every Christmas their family had Oplatek. When some migrated to America, those in Poland sent Oplatek to America and those in America sent Oplatek to Poland. When the Russians occupied Poland and began their persecution and espionage, the family in Poland learned to conform, withdraw, carry their religion in their hearts and write between the lines of their letters.

When it was time to send the Oplatek, they determined to find a way. That year the family in America received a conventional card on which was pasted a red paper-like disk with a conventional greeting. The censor never suspected that it was Oplatek, properly blessed, cut in a circle like a host, painted red for Divine Love, not for Communism, and sent as a salute from one part of the Mystical Body to another half a world away. They were reminding each other that they share the same Body, eat the same Flesh.

It is the end of Advent. So much of it we have understood better by signs and symbols. The first Gospel warned us to watch the signs and prepare. Our Lord spoke of His Second Coming, saying there would be signs in the sun and the moon and the stars. Now we are again on the threshold of the feast of His First Coming. Holy Church is so good. She has us prepare every year, prepare and prepare and prepare. She will keep us ready.



## 8. THE CHRISTMAS EVENING ANGELUS

from [devotiontoourlady.com](http://devotiontoourlady.com)

### THE ANGELUS

- V.** The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.  
**R.** And she conceived of the Holy Ghost.  
HAIL MARY....etc.
- V.** Behold the Handmaid of the Lord.  
**R.** Be it done unto me according to thy word.  
HAIL MARY....etc.
- R.** And the Word was made flesh.  
**V.** And dwelt amongst us.  
HAIL MARY....etc.
- R.** Pray for us O holy Mother of God.  
**V.** That we may be made worthy of the  
promises of Christ.

**Let us pray.** Pour forth, we beseech Thee O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ, Thy Son, was made known by the message of an angel, may, by His Passion and Cross, be brought to the glory of His Resurrection, through the same Christ Our Lord. **R.** Amen.

### HISTORY OF THE ANGELUS

The historical origins of the Angelus are rather complex. According to Fr. Herbert Thurston, "The history of the Angelus is by no means easy to trace with confidence, and it is well to distinguish in this matter between what is certain and what is in some measure conjectural." The big picture view is this:

### BIG PICTURE VIEW

Firstly, it is certain that the Angelus at midday and in the morning were of later introduction than the evening Angelus. Secondly, it is certain that the midday Angelus, which is the most recent of the three, was not a mere development or imitation of the morning and evening

devotion. Thirdly, there can be no doubt that the practice of saying three Hail Marys in the evening, somewhere about sunset, had become a general custom throughout Europe in the first half of the fourteenth century; and that it was recommended and indulged by Pope John XXII in 1318 and 1327.

There was a tradition in the monasteries of Europe, during the Middle Ages, around the 11th or 12th century, to ring a bell at dusk, or early evening, as a kind of salute to the Virgin Mary. This custom was then embraced by cathedral and parish churches, where, at the sound of a bell, the faithful were encouraged to pray three Hail Marys in honor of the Blessed Virgin being visited by the angel, which was believed to have occurred during the evening.

The morning Angelus grew out of a practice of ringing a bell in the morning, honoring Mary as the "Morning Star," and seeing in her the bride who "cometh forth as the morning rising ... bright as the sun" (Canticles 6:10).

The Angelus prayed at noon was the last to develop. It is possible that it had its origin in the custom of the ringing of a bell at noon, on Fridays, in memory of our Lord's Passion. This further developed with the prescription of Pope Callistus III, who ordered the daily ringing of the bells at noon, with the praying of three Our Fathers and Hail Marys, asking for divine protection from the Turks, who were threatening Christendom at that epoch.

The present-day form of the Angelus, with its antiphons, Hail Marys and final prayer, came about in the 16th century and is found for the first time in a catechism printed in Venice, in 1560.

### **MORE DETAILED HISTORY**

(Getting Sleepy? You will now!)

These facts are admitted by all writers on the subject, but when we try to push our investigations further we are confronted with certain difficulties. Therefore, we can say with certitude that this devotion was already well established around 700 years ago—but if it was well-established

at that time, it means that it must have begun well before that time. Here are the fruits of research from some Church historians that will now give a slightly more detailed picture of its origins.

### **ELEVENTH CENTURY EVIDENCE—1000's**

The Angelus originated with the 11th-century monastic custom of reciting three Hail Marys during the evening, or Compline, bell. The first written documentation stems from Italian Franciscan monk Sinigardi di Arezzo (died 1282). Franciscan monasteries in Italy document the use in 1263 and 1295. The current form of the Angelus prayer is included in a Venetian Catechism from 1560. In 1269, St Bonaventure urged the faithful to adopt the custom of the Franciscans of saying three Hail Marys as the Compline bell was rung.

### **FIRST CAME THE EVENING ANGELUS**

Fr. T. Esser, O.P., who has studied the history of the Angelus in depth, says we can be absolutely certain of three Hail Marys being recited at the sound of the bell in the evening, from the text of a decree of the Provincial Synod of Gran in the year 1307. However historians are agreed that there are a good many facts which suggest that some such practice was already established at least in the previous century, or not even earlier. There is a vague, and not very well confirmed tradition, which ascribes to Pope Gregory IX, in 1239, an ordinance requiring that a bell should be rung for the salutation and praises of Our Lady.

Further back than this, direct testimonials do not go; but that does not mean the Angelus is not older than existing testimonials! In a monastic rule composed by St. Aethelwold of Winchester, England, around 975, that certain prayers called the *tres orationes* (three prayers), preceded by psalms, were to be said after Compline, as well as before Matins and again at Prime, and, although there is no express mention of a bell being rung after Compline, there is express mention of the bell being rung for the *tres orationes* (three prayers) at other hours.

In the Franciscan decree of St. Bonaventure's time, referred to above, this is precisely what we find, namely, that the laity in general were to be induced to say Hail Marys when the bell rang at Compline, during, or more probably after, the recitation of the Divine Office of the friars. A special appropriateness for these greetings of Our Lady was found in the belief that at this very hour she was saluted by the angel.

### **THEN CAME THE MORNING ANGELUS**

This last suggestion about the tres orationes (three prayers) also offers some explanation of the fact that shortly after the recital of the three Hail Marys at evening had become familiar, a custom established itself of ringing a bell in the morning and of saying the Ave thrice. The earliest mention seems to be in the chronicle of the city of Parma, 1318, though it was the town-bell which was rung in this case. Still the bishop exhorted all who heard it to say three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys for the preservation of peace, which is why it was called "the peace bell".

The morning Ave Maria soon became a familiar custom in all the countries of Europe, not excepting England, and was almost as generally observed as that of the evening. But while in England the evening Ave Maria is found as early as 1324. No formal direction, as to the morning ringing, is found before 1399.

### **LAST OF ALL CAME THE MIDDAY ANGELUS**

This suggests a much more complicated problem which cannot be fully discussed here. The one clear fact, which seems to result alike, from the statutes of several German Synods in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as also from books of devotion of a somewhat later date, is that the midday ringing, while often spoken of as a peace bell and formally commended by King Louis XI of France, in 1475, for that special object, was closely associated with the veneration of the Passion of Christ—for tradition has it that Christ was crucified at midday and died at three o'clock in the afternoon.

At first it appears that this midday bell, e.g. at Prague in 1386, and at Mainz, Germany, in 1423, was only rung on Fridays, but the custom, by degrees, extended to the other days of the week. In the English Hours of Prayer and the German Hortulus Animæ of the beginning of the sixteenth century, rather lengthy prayers commemorating the Passion are provided to be said at the midday tolling of the bell, in addition to the ordinary three Hail Marys.

### **THE ANGELUS BELL**

The Angelus, in all its stages of development, was closely associated with the ringing of a church bell. Though, in modern times, this custom has fallen by the wayside—like so many other good customs that expressed the Faith.

The ringing of the Angelus bell, in the 14th century and even in the 13th century, must have been very general. The number of bells belonging to these two centuries, that still survive, is relatively low, but a considerable proportion bear inscriptions that suggest that they were originally intended to serve as Ave bells. Many bear the words Ave Maria; or, as in the case of a bell at Helfta, near Eisleben, in Germany, dated 1234, the whole sentence: Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum.

Bells inscribed with Ave Maria are also numerous in England, but there the Angelus bells seem in a very large number of instances to have been dedicated to St Gabriel, the angel mentioned in the prayer (Luke 1:26–27). In the Diocese of Lincoln alone there are nineteen surviving medieval bells bearing the name of Gabriel, while only six bear the name of Michael, a much more popular patron in other respects.

In France, the Ave Maria seems to have been the ordinary label for Angelus bells; but in Germany the most common inscription of all are the words *O Rex Gloriæ Veni Cum Pace* ("O King of Glory, Come with Peace"). In Germany, the Netherlands, and in some parts of France, the Angelus bell was regularly known as the Peace bell, and "to toll for peace" was a phrase popularly used for ringing the Angelus.