

CHRIST AT THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS

Prayers & Rituals

PART ONE
CHRISTMAS EVE



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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.
Matthew 2:3-5

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1. THE PURPOSE OF CHRISTMAS

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THE LOST SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

Over the centuries, the idea and spirit of Christmas has been deformed and destroyed—to the point where the spiritual takes second place to the material; where the food of the world takes precedence over the Bread of Heaven; where receiving gifts comes before giving gifts, especially giving Christ a gift on His birthday. We need to convert and change our false, sentimental, worldly ideas of Christmas back to the true idea and purpose of Christmas.

A BABE WITH A SWORD!

A Babe—a new born Babe—but more than a mere babe! This is a fiery Babe Who has come with a sword! Could we call it the Sword of Christmas? We speak of peace at Christmas, but this Babe will later say: *“Do not think that I came to send peace upon Earth: I came not to send peace, but the sword!”* (Matthew 10:34).

HE COMES TO DIVIDE!

He will then go on to say: *“For I came to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man’s enemies shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than Me, is not worthy of Me. And he that taketh not up his cross, and followeth Me, is not worthy of Me. He that findeth his life, shall lose it: and he that shall lose his life for Me, shall find it”* (Matthew 10:35-39).

A FIERY BABE!

Fiery talk, eh? This Divine Babe will later add: *“I am come to cast fire on the Earth; and what will I, but that it be kindled? Think ye, that I am come to give peace on Earth? I tell you, no; but separation. For there shall be, from henceforth, five in*

one house divided: three against two, and two against three.” (Luke 12:49-52).

A PAINFUL PRESENT FOR HIS MOTHER

That sword would even strike His most Holy Mother, as Simeon would prophesy to Our Lady not many days after the birth of this Babe—*“Behold this Child is set for the fall, and for the resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be contradicted; and thy own soul a sword shall pierce!”* (Luke 2:34-35).

Simeon already speaks for the Divine Babe a short while after the first Christmas—saying exactly what the adult Jesus would later say—this Child will be a cause of division: the rise of some and fall of others. We have here, as Simeon says, a “contradiction”—which comes from two Latin words: *contra* meaning against and *dicere*, or *dictus*, meaning to speak or spoken. This Divine Babe will be “spoken against”—not just that, but this Babe will be plotted against, worked against, fought against and finally caught, tortured and killed! This Babe comes to die! But through His death, He will not only live again, but offer eternal life to us!

HE COMES TO PAY, NOT PLAY!

He does not come to play, but to pay—He comes to pay for our sins.

He does not come to enjoy life, but to give they joy of eternal life—but that eternal life comes at a price.

He comes not to live on Earth forever, but to forever detach us from this Earth.

He prefers poverty over power; humility over honors; rejection over riches and suffering over splendor.

His way is not our way, yet He Who called Himself *“the Way”* shows us wayward wayfarers the true way—and it is not a pleasant way, but the Way of the Cross. He will already carry that Cross from His infancy. Both the Crib of Bethlehem and the Cross of Calvary are made of rough wood, and He would have us carry it after Him.

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CHRISTMAS IS A RESCUE MISSION

This is the purpose of Christmas—it is the beginning of the rescue mission. He comes not to party—but to fight for our souls. What He would later say of St. John the Baptist, is all the more applicable and true of Himself—just substitute the word “cave” for the word “desert” in the following passage.

NOT A ‘SOFTIE’

Jesus said: *“What went ye out into the desert to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went you out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Behold they that are in costly clothing and live delicately, are in the houses of kings. But what went you out to see? A prophet? Yea, I say to you, and more than a prophet! This is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold I send my angel before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee!’ For I say to you: amongst those that are born of women, there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist!”* (Luke 7:24-28).

OUR WAYS ARE NOT HIS WAY

This Divine Babe chose a cave, not the court of a king into which to be born. This Divine Babe may have trembled with cold in the winter wind, but He refused to be shaken like a reed in the political wind that would come later. This Divine Babe was bound tight in swaddling clothes and not in rich and fashionable clothing, with a brand name like Levis. This Divine Babe would live in poverty and not in the houses of kings. This Divine Babe was laid on the wood of the manger to teach us about the wood of the Cross, which prepares the way for our salvation—the way of the cross. This Divine Babe carries His cross from Day One! A beautiful read over Christmas would be a book entitled *The Wood of the Cradle, The Wood of the Cross* by Caryll Houselander.

—He comes now in mercy, so that we might find His mercy before we find His justice at His second coming!

—He comes to cure now, so that He does not have to amputate later!

—He comes to enlighten our minds now, so that we do not end up in eternal darkness later!

BLIND TO THE LIGHT

Yet the danger is that we fail to fully grasp the purpose of His coming and His teaching—as St. John says at the start of his Gospel which, in the liturgy we call the “Last Gospel” and hear at the end of each Tridentine Mass (Extraordinary Rite)—“*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness... The true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world ... and the darkness did not comprehend it ... He was in the world ... and the world knew Him not. He came unto His own, and His own received Him not*” (John 1:4-11).

SEEK AND SAVE

When the Pharisees would later complain “*to His disciples: ‘Why doth your Master eat with publicans and sinners?’ But Jesus hearing it, said: ‘They that are in health need not a physician, but they that are ill. Go then and learn what this meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice. For I am not come to call the just, but sinners!’*” (Matthew 9:11-13). “*The Son of man came not to destroy souls, but to save!*” (Luke 9:56). “*For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost*” (Luke 19:10). “*For I came not to judge the world, but to save the world*” (John 12:47).

SONS OF THUNDER OR MERCY?

When this Divine Infant became a Man and Teacher, even the Apostles did not fully grasp the purpose of His coming and His teaching. And among the guilty ones are even Jesus’ favorite three: Peter, James and John! The latter, James and John, called the Sons of Thunder in Scripture, wanted fire and brimstone to rain down from Heaven on those who just won’t listen to Jesus, who had “*sent messengers before His face. And going, they entered into a city of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. And they received Him not, because His face was of one going to Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John had seen this, they said: ‘Lord, wilt Thou that we command fire to come down from Heaven, and consume them?’ And turning, He rebuked them, saying: ‘You know not of what spirit you are! The Son of man came not to destroy souls, but to save!’*” (Luke 9:52-56).

FORGIVE TO BE FORGIVEN

Peter had to be instructed in the ways of mercy, for “*Peter came unto Him and said: ‘Lord, how often shall my brother offend against me, and I forgive him? As much as seven times?’ Jesus saith to him: ‘I say not to thee, till seven times; but till seventy times seven times!’*”

He then proceeds to tell Peter the parable about the unjust steward, who had a massive debt canceled by his master, but then refused to cancel a tiny debt of a fellow steward—for which injustice the master calls him back, withdraws his merciful forgiveness of the debt and casts him into prison until he pay it all. Then Jesus adds: “*So also shall my heavenly Father do to you, if you forgive not everyone his brother from your hearts.*” (Matthew 18:21-35).

“*Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy*” (Matthew 5:7). “*The just are merciful and show mercy*” (Proverbs 13:13). “*Judgment without mercy to him that hath not done mercy*” (James 2:13).

THEY JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND!

Jesus Himself would later say to all His Apostles: “*Do you not yet know nor understand? Have you still your heart blinded? Having eyes, see you not? And having ears, hear you not?*” (Mark 8:17-18). He then says to the Apostle Philip: “*I have been so long a time with you; and have you not known Me?*” (John 14:9).

Even today, there are many Catholics—even well-intentioned ones—who do not truly comprehend Him, do not truly know Him, nor truly understand Him, nor truly receive Him. They, like so many others in times past, partially comprehend Him, partially know Him, partially understand Him and partially receive Him. As God said through Jeremias: “*Hear, O foolish people, and without understanding: who have eyes, and see not: and ears, and hear not!*” (Jeremias 5:21).

OUR OWN MAN-MADE RELIGION

This partial knowledge, partial understanding, partial reception leads us make up our own ver-

sion of the true religion—much like the Pharisees had done. This Divine Infant would later say of these—both Pharisees and us: *"This people honoureth Me with their lips: but their heart is far from Me!"* (Matthew 15:8).

Will that be our Christmas? A partial Christmas? A partial understanding of it? A partial practice of it? Has that been our Christmas in bygone years? To honor and praise Him with our lips, while our hearts are submerged in some of material aspect of Christmas or the externals of Christmas?

LET HIM ENLIGHTEN YOUR DARKNESS

On the 2nd Sunday of Advent, in the Divine Office, we had the following antiphons: *"Behold, our Lord cometh with power, and He shall enlighten the eyes of His servants. Alleluia."* (Psalm 148). And as St. Zachary, the father of St. John the Baptist, said: *"To enlighten them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death"* (Luke 1:79).

SUPERFICIAL LIGHT

This Divine Babe would echo the words of St. John's Gospel later in life: *"I am the light of the world! He that followeth Me, walketh not in darkness, but shall have the light of life!"* (John 8:12). We look around during this Christmas season and we see plenty of lights—maybe so many lights that we are tempted to say to the *"Light of the world"* that is born for us—*"We have enough lights already! We don't need any more lights, thank you!"*

All these lights are superficial, or at least external. They are fine if they reflect the light within—but they are pointless if there is darkness within. Our Lord comes to give light, to enlighten our minds and lighten our burdens—just as, at the Paschal Vigil at Easter, the big Paschal Candle, which represents Christ, gives light to candles of the clergy and the laity. He has come to give light!

Now light—until the advent of electricity—was primarily the light of fire, of the flame of fire. This is why we see God choose fire to symbolize Himself. God appears to Moses in the burning

bush; later, all the Israelites see Mount Sinai is on fire with the presence of God; for forty years He leads them through the desert under the form of a pillar of fire; the Holy Ghost comes upon the Apostles under the form of tongues of fire; the Sacred Heart appears to St. Margaret Mary with flames of fire shooting out from His Heart.

It is not for nothing that Jesus says in the New Testament: *"I am come to cast fire on the Earth; and what will I, but that it be kindled?"* (Luke 12:49). A fire can be started from a tiny spark and this Babe is that tiny spark of fire, born to communicate that spark to us—to inflame us, to—as we say in the prayer to the Holy Ghost—*"enkindle in us the fire of Thy love!"*

Thus, fire and flame not only symbolizes light—but it also symbolizes love. That fire, sparked in our soul by the divine Babe, is meant to not only catch fire, but to become a blazing fire of love. We can have the fire of flame of Faith, but even the devil in the fires of Hell believes in God. That Faith—or knowledge of God—is meant to grow into charity. Charity is the fully raging fire—Faith and Hope are, in a very loose sense, the stages that the fire progresses through.

KNOW-ALLS, BUT LOVELESS

Today, too many persons prize and place knowledge above charity—their main focus is to know more and more and more. The internet fuels this fire. Yet we must remember the warnings from *The Imitation of Christ*: *"The more you know and the better you understand, the more severely will you be judged, unless your life is also the more holy. Do not be proud, therefore, because of your learning or skill. Rather, fear, because of the talent given you. If you think you know many things and understand them well enough, realize at the same time that there is much you do not know. Hence, do not pretend wisdom, but admit your ignorance. Why prefer yourself to anyone else, when many are more learned, more cultured than you? If you wish to learn and appreciate something worthwhile, then love to be unknown and considered as nothing. Truly to know and despise self is the best and most perfect counsel"* (Book 1, chapter 2).



2. MORNING PRAYERS & THE ANGELUS

from devotiontoourlady.com

Just as we prepare special things for Christmas, so too should our prayers take on a special character also. 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 raising your level of fervor as we approach this great feast day of Christmas!

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 Jesus, 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 offenses! Turn our cold indifferent 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!”* (Ezekiel 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 feel lost in the middle of such a sinful world. I am 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.

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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 is 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 Nativity

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



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3. ROSARY MEDITATIONS ON THE NATIVITY

from devotiontoourlady.com

On this Eve of Christmas, the magnificent feast of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, let us simply meditate on all that led up to this wonderful moment. Divide your day and meditate each of the following 15 meditations as you pray a decade of the Rosary.

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!

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 fu-

ture 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 "MARY'S PLACE IN GOD'S PLAN"

The end (goal) of all devotion is Christ. *"I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end"* (Apocalypse 1:8). Christ is the cornerstone of our salvation, for *"this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, Whom Thou hast sent"* (John 17:3). *"There is no other name under Heaven given to men, whereby we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12). If Christ be not the rock upon which rests the spiritual edifice of our sanctification, the edifice is doomed, and great will be the fall thereof.

But if the edifice be founded upon Christ, the winds of the tempter may blow and the rains of his temptations may fall and the floods of passion may rise and beat upon that house, and it will not fall, because it is founded upon a rock, We must be one with Christ according to His words:

"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abide in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine: you the branches. He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit: for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone abide not in Me, he shall be cast forth as a branch and shall wither: and they shall gather him up and cast him into the fire: and he burneth" (John 15:4-6).

We must be one with Christ because, Christ being our Mediator with His Eternal Father, it is only *"by Him and in Him and through Him that we can render all honor and glory"* to the Father in the unity of the Holy Ghost. It is only through Christ that we can be holy ourselves and radiate holiness around us.

Now, devotion to Mary is devotion to Christ, because Mary has given us Christ. The humble Virgin was chosen by the Eternal Father to shed upon a sinful world, without lesion to her glorious virginity, its eternal light, Jesus Christ our Lord, the Savior of men.

But union with God was essential for Mary to accomplish this, the most wondrous work ever given to mortal to perform. And Mary was most intimately united with God, for the angelic ambassador said to her: *"Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women"* (Luke 1:28). Mary's union with God has been most tersely and accurately expressed by a child of genius.

"Mary's fullness of grace," says St. Thomas Aquinas, *"was so great that it brought her to a most intimate union with the Author of grace; that this fitted her to receive into her holy womb the One Who contained all graces; and that thus, in conceiving Him, she became in some sort the source of that grace which He was to pour forth over all mankind, and so concurred in giving the human race its Deliverer."*

Mary's intimate union with her Divine Son is the reason for her power with Him. *"He that shall find me shall find life, and shall have salvation from the Lord"* (Proverbs 8:35); *"for God,"* says St. Bernard, *"Who has given us His Son through Mary, has willed that we should obtain the graces He has merited for us by the intercession of Mary."* A degree of honor higher than that conferred on His Mother, God, all-powerful though He be, could not bestow upon a creature. He could not make her divine by nature, but He has, through the grace which He so freely lavished on her in virtue of the divine maternity, made her inseparable from Him in the salvation of souls.

The heart of Christ and the heart of Mary beat in unison. When we love and honor the Mother, we must necessarily love and honor the Son. The closer the union with Mary, the more intimate the association with Christ. He who will not have Mary for his Mother, cannot have Christ for his Brother. The indissoluble union of Jesus and Mary established by the Eternal Father and the Holy Ghost is the best proof of Mary's love for Christ, and consequently, for souls redeemed by the blood of Christ. Mary loves Christ because she is His Mother; and she loves us because she is our Mother.

SECOND MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "HUMBLE MARY AVOIDED PRIDE OF LIFE"

How old the Blessed Mother was when she vowed her virginity to God, we do not know. We do know that her consecration was inspired by the Holy Ghost and was preceded by a perfect prevision of its minutest consequences.

Marriage and motherhood were the cherished ideals of every Jewish maiden. Even the daughters of the tribe of Levi, dedicated to the service of the priests or indeed of the high priest, all without exception married, because Jewish women with their intense love for maternity reprobated sterility. Thus was Mary's vow truly unique, and it branded her with a kind of stigma, opposing as it did the honored traditions of the Jews.

As the Blessed Virgin was full of grace and thereby absolutely free from the sting of the flesh, her vow accorded completely with her natural desires, and consequently the sacrifices associated with it are in no wise to be measured by the voluntary surrender of the joys of married life. Mary's body was on Earth, but her soul was in Heaven. The Lord being her portion, she renounced all else, honors, dignities, the pleasures and rewards of marriage, and joyously chose the life of a virgin; chose, that is, to be entirely disengaged from the world and hidden.

To appreciate Mary's oblation of herself by her vow of virginity, we must look higher. None knew better than she the meaning of the prophecy:

"And thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, art a little one among the thousands of Juda: out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be the Ruler in Israel: and His going forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity" (Micah 5:2).

She understood that Christ was to be born at the time in which she lived, and was to descend from David's family, which was her own. Both Jew and Gentile were expecting the Messiah, but they had lost sight of the prophecy of Isaiah: *"Behold, a Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and His name shall be called Emmanuel"* (Isaiah 7:14).

They had not grasped the truth that the birth of Christ was to be accompanied by a miracle that would never be repeated: a virgin would become a mother. It would seem, then, that Mary, in consecrating her virginity to God, had given up all hope of becoming the Mother of Christ, because her vow, being a free act, was made with the clear foreknowledge of its consequences. It was the product of her profound humility and of a deep, settled conviction that she was not worthy of the supreme honor of the divine maternity; and hence a jealous thought of her who would be the favored recipient of so signal and surpassing a dignity could not even shadow, much less enter her mind.

Such humility God will reward munificently. Mary's self-extinction—prepared her for the reception of the unspeakable gift of the divine motherhood—actually made her the Mother of God: *"He hath regarded the humility of His handmaid"* (Luke 1:48). "Mary," says St. Bernard, *"pleased God by her virginity, but she conceived Him by her humility."*

How unsearchable are the ways of God! He often chooses means which, humanly speaking, are inadequate to accomplish their ends. What a luminous illustration of this truth is the fact that He demanded, though the Jews lacked all sympathy with it, the state of virginity in her who was to be the Mother of His Divine Son, and made the renunciation of the divine maternity the price of its possession.

Like our Mother, we should never desire to be great before God or even before our fellow-man. "To whom shall I have respect but to him that is poor, and little, and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at My words?" (Isaias 66:2); "Every proud man is an abomination to the Lord" (Proverbs 16:5); "He hath had regard to the prayer of the humble, and He hath not despised their petition" (Psalm 101:18); "Nor from the beginning have the proud been acceptable to Thee, but the prayer of the humble and the meek hath always pleased Thee" (Judith (9:16). God loves to build on nothing. "What hast thou that thou hast not received? And if thou hast received, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (1 Corinthians 4:7).

Once we realize our nothingness, and consequently our unprofitableness, God will work such miracles of grace within us as will raise the edifice of our sanctity to supreme heights. We should not anticipate the designs of God, but should wait patiently until He decides to use us as instruments to advance His interests on Earth. Nor should we be surprised if He adopts means wholly repugnant to flesh and blood. The greater glory of God through total forgetfulness of ourselves must be the end and aim of our lives.

THIRD MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "MARY'S ESPOUSAL TO JOSEPH"

Mary's vow of virginity was without precedent, and a secret between her and her God. It is hardly likely that her parents, if they were still alive, had the least inkling of it, for the obvious reason that, conditioned by the Jews' love of motherhood, they would indubitably have opposed it. To conceal the miraculous conception and birth of His Divine Son, the Eternal Father inspired Joseph who, like Mary, was of the tribe of Juda and the family of David, to marry this specially favored child of Heaven. Her parents consented, and Mary and Joseph were not only betrothed but probably married before the Annunciation by the archangel Gabriel.

Before entering upon her new state of life, the Blessed Virgin was forced to reveal to Joseph

her consecration to God, and to ask him to respect it. Being a just man, and thus given to the practice of virtue in its most comprehensive sense, Joseph espoused Mary and lived with her a life of spotless virginity.

In this critical circumstance of her life, that she might be without misgiving as to the keeping of her vow, and might at the same time manifest to Joseph an attitude gracious, cordial and symbolic of the marital relationship, the Blessed Mother did not trust to the fidelity of a mortal, but abandoned herself to divine providence. Her love of the virtue that makes man like an angel, was the measure of her abandonment. With absolute confidence in the protection of God, for "he that dwelleth in the aid of the Most High, shall abide under the protection of the God of Heaven" (Psalm 90:1), and absorbed by the concentrated contemplation of Him, she implicitly entrusted herself to her chaste spouse as to God Himself, supremely confident that the Holy Spirit Who had inspired the consecration of her virginity to God, would, with the invigorating power of His grace, enable her to preserve her purity in all its brilliant splendor.

What an example for us! Like Mary, we must never question, no matter how trying the test, but must make the will of God the pivot of our lives. How slow we are to realize that nothing happens except through God's ordination or permission. Knowing what is best for us, since He is infinitely wise, and loving us with an everlasting love, He ever consults our dearest interests. A life of strong, living Faith is a life of unwavering submission to divine providence. Convinced of this truth, we will never permit the dictates of human prudence to enter into the equation of our conformity to the divine will.

The inspiration of grace, confirmed by lawful authority, will be our only guide. Had Mary yielded to self-will, she would not have espoused Joseph. Had she listened to fallible reason, she would have necessarily concluded that such a union would mean the breaking of her vow, and so she would have rebelled against the divine will. With the future shrouded in mystery, utterly

unable to forecast the outcome of her espousals with Joseph, powerless even to imagine or guess by what conjuncture of circumstances God would accomplish His will in her regard, she stifles all, thought of herself, sacrifices reason to Faith, and commends herself with childlike trust to Him Who "reacheth from end to end mightily and ordereth all things sweetly" (Wisdom 8:1).

In doing the will of God, which is for us the end of life, we must, after the example of our Mother Mary, be enlightened not by human wisdom but by divine Faith. The supernatural life of the soul, created by Baptism, is as real as the natural life of the body.

This truth, which we are very prone to forget, St. Paul emphasizes when he writes to the Romans: "We are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh, you shall die: but if by the Spirit you mortify the deeds of the flesh, you shall live. For whosoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (Romans 8:12-14). Again he says: "They that are Christ's have crucified their flesh with the vices and concupiscences" (Galatians 5:24).

Unlike the light of weak, finite reason, which of itself alone cannot further our progress in virtue, the light of divine Faith will, if we live in its reflected splendor, enable us to conquer the cravings of the flesh and to escape life's pitfalls; in fine, it will conduct us safely to the God Who has made us for Himself.

FOURTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "MARY GREETED BY GABRIEL"

Within a humble home in an obscure corner of the Earth, Nazareth in Galilee, the most insignificant and poorest part of Judea, the Holy Ghost will perform a miracle that will be the masterpiece of infinite power, the Incarnation of the Son of God. It is by one of His glorious archangels that God sends this most momentous message ever delivered to man, announcing the advent of the Savior of the world and the selection of the Virgin Mary, the humblest of all creatures, to be His Mother.

Thus is fulfilled the promise that Christ will be born of the family of David; but not until that family is impoverished and has sunk into utter insignificance. A poor artisan is chosen to be the spouse of Mary and the foster-father of the Redeemer of men.

How striking the contrast between the circumstances surrounding the birth of the Messiah and the glowing pen-pictures heralding the glory of His reign! Isaias had prophesied: "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, from henceforth and forever" (Isaias 9:6-7); "Rejoice and praise, O thou habitation of Sion, for great is He that is in the midst of thee, the Holy One of Israel" (Isaias 12:6).

The glory and the grandeur, the might and the magnificence of His reign shall spring not from Earth but from Heaven, for His kingdom will not be of this world. The contempt of men will show His greatness before God. His parents must be unhonored and unknown, and their humility must be even greater than their poverty.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore with heavenly homage, the angelic ambassador salutes Mary with the divinely eloquent words: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women" (Luke 1:28).

Never before this did angel greet man with the word "Hail"; but unlike the rest of mortals, Mary has a pre-eminent humility which is proof against the least suggestion of pride arising from such a salutation. She is declared by the mouthpiece of God to be "full of grace." But she is far from puffed up by this unheard-of eulogy; on the contrary, her humility sinks to immeasurable depths, for while admitting the truth of the words, she attributes it to God alone working wondrously within her.

"The Lord is with thee," continues the heavenly herald; yes, He is with thee by His grace, and soon He will be with thee by His corporeal Presence, for He will be bone of thy bones, and flesh of thy flesh (cf. Genesis 2:23). Under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, Gabriel waxes still more eloquent: "Blessed art thou among women" (Luke 1:28). Mary's blessedness is due to her supreme sanctity. She will be hailed by all generations as blessed above all other women because she is the Mother of God and at the same time a spotless Virgin. The love of virginity that urges her not to accept the proffered dignity, God will reward with the most precious gift of Heaven.

Her humility was so profound that Mary could hardly believe the commendation of the angelic envoy. And O how pleasing was her humility to God! He read her heart. He saw that she would not yield to the subtle and very strong temptation to pride flowing from the bestowal of His praise by His delegated messenger. The more her humility was tried, the more lowly she became in her own estimation.

Never must we yearn for the special graces given to the saints as a reward for their virtue. We should never aspire to nor anticipate them, but like the Blessed Mother, render ourselves as worthy of them as possible by a humility which will make us realize that, as far as God is concerned, when we have done all things well, we are only unprofitable servants. It is the most cogent proof of our overweening pride to think that God gives us His best gifts just because we hanker after them.

Humility is the price of God's most precious favors. "Every proud man is an abomination to the Lord" (Proverbs 16:5); "God resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble" (James 4:6); "The Lord will destroy the house of the proud" (Proverbs 15:25); "God hath overturned the thrones of proud princes, and hath set up the meek in their stead" (Ecclesiasticus 10:17); "Before destruction, the heart of a man is exalted; and before he be glorified, it is humbled" (Proverbs 18:12); "God hath abolished the memory

of the proud, and hath preserved the memory of them that are humble in mind" (Ecclesiasticus 10:21). How unworthy of divine benevolence is the mortal who, through his ambition for them, perverts God's most signal blessings into an obstacle to salvation.

FIFTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "MARY'S ANNUNCIATION"

How marvelously great was the message of the archangel! "Behold," said Gabriel, "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 forever. And of His kingdom there shall be no end" (Luke 1:31-33). How well calculated was this message to inspire with excessive pride any child of Adam but Mary, whose self-extinction so endeared her to God! How sublimely magnificent the promise:

The Son of God shall be the Son of Mary. He shall sit, not on the material throne of David His father, but on a spiritual throne of which David's was but the poorest symbol.

He shall rule not merely over the temporal interests of men, but His sovereign sway shall extend into regions where earthly monarchs dare not enter; His jurisdiction shall be over immortal souls made to the image and likeness of the Triune God.

He shall change the face of the Earth and be the Founder of Christian civilization. His kingdom shall witness the destruction of empire after empire; it shall behold dynasty after dynasty prostrate in the dust because, like Him, its Divine Founder, His kingdom shall be eternal: "Of His kingdom there shall be no end."

He shall reign over His true followers, and shall lead them in the way of justice, holiness and truth. He shall not teach the varying, unstable opinions of men, but shall herald forth to the whole Earth the eternal verities of God's word. Under the energizing power of His teaching,

men dreaming on in the world's slumber shall awake and be alive unto God. "He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High." Immeasurably inferior will be the human, temporal grandeur of the kings of this world when compared with the divine, eternal glory of Him, the omnipotent Ruler of Heaven and Earth, the King of kings and the Lord of lords; Such was the burden of the mightiest message ever sent by God to man.

The delicately sensitive and unspeakably humble Virgin, rapt in silent communion with her God, trembled at the words of the heavenly messenger. But Gabriel comforted her: "Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace with God" (Luke 1:30). Grace so great did she, by her humility, find with God that she was chosen to co-operate with His Divine Son in restoring man to a dignity far superior to what he had lost by sin.

Her exaltation above all other creatures, described by the angel, failed to awaken within her impassioned thoughts, high aspirations, sublime imaginings. She indulged no such luxury of feeling. Inwardly distressed and outwardly agitated by a message so mysterious, she was under the spell of the urgent persuasions of excited fear. She could not reconcile motherhood with virginity. "How," she exclaims to the angelic envoy, "shall this be done, because I know not man?" (Luke 1:34).

Mary's pertinent question betrayed no distrust of the omnipotence of God. She was anxious, not indeed to pry into the secrets of God, but to reveal the human inconsistency that surprised and shocked her, the difficulty of squaring the observance of her vow with the divine maternity. The preservation of her virginity was her deep concern.

Severed as she was from the world of sense, her heart all impressed with a heavenly character, her thoughts and her words were completely under the influence of the supernatural because of her constant, unswerving fidelity to grace. Her question was inspired by the Holy Ghost, and led the way to His further revelation

when Gabriel apprised her how her stupendous vocation would be accomplished.

Full of grace as she was, her words did not proceed from any tendency to separate God's favors from His divine will, and to dwell on the former at the expense of the latter. It is indeed a lesson that we can never learn too well that, not the most lavishly generous tokens of divine munificence, but the virtue issuing from our loving correspondence with His grace, will enable us to give glory to our Creator, and thus, by making us ring true to the purpose of our creation, render our souls eternally precious in His sight.

The sacraments, for example, those masterpieces of divine ingenuity, were instituted not only to dower our souls with the riches of Heaven, but also to smooth for us the path of Christian righteousness so that we might run the way of God's commandments with enlarged hearts and with a joy that Earth knows not. If they fail to detach us from the world, if they do not make us "labor for the meat which endureth unto life everlasting" (cf. John 6:27), if they do not annihilate our natural selves and make us ardent lovers of Christ crucified, they will be for us the means of our eternal condemnation.

But Mary needed not this lesson. Her esteem of virginity was not grounded on self-love but was the work of God Himself. And had she been wholly preoccupied with the contemplation of her ineffable prerogative, and forgetful of her earlier obligations as a result of her vow of virginity, God would not have selected her for the part that she played in the most memorable manifestation of love and mercy ever witnessed on Earth.

SEVENTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "MARY OVERSHADOWED"

By the Holy Ghost, the heavenly legate relieved Mary's distress of mind, and directed her disturbed feelings into another channel with the comforting words: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee" (Luke 1:35). The Holy Spirit, he tells her, shall work in her the greatest work of

His omnipotence. He shall depart from nature's laws and shall perform a prodigy that shall make even the angels mute with bewildered wonder. By His almighty power He shall form and fashion the body of the Savior of the world, and the Divine Son will unite it to Himself forever.

What an astounding manifestation of God's omnipotence is the accomplishment of this marvelous miracle! All rational speculation on the overpowering mystery would necessarily range off into the twilight and darkness of the unknowable. Even the simple things of nature, enveloped as they are in divine mystery, baffle and confound human understanding. The more a mind trained to hard and close thinking tries to know the universe, the more conscious it becomes of its limitations and the more it realizes the mystery shrouded in darkness behind the phenomena, no matter how luminous, that reveal its existence.

Incomprehensible to men and angels, belief in so wondrous an exhibition of God's power demands of Mary an act of the sublimest Faith. She naturally inquires into the achievement of the impenetrable mystery, and though Gabriel's answer is beyond her grasp, she opens her reason to the flooding light of Faith and humbly submits to the power of Him Who cannot be limited in His works by man's constricted mental horizon.

And O how God rewards the humble submission of her deep, living Faith! "And therefore also," continues the archangel, "the Holy, which shall be born of thee, shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). He, Who shall be born of thee, shall be holy with the unutterable holiness of God, for His flesh shall be the flesh of the Son of God. His human soul and His human body will be substantially and indissolubly united to His divine nature so as to form one Person, His soul and body being respectively the soul and body of God Incarnate. How becoming, then, it was that the Mother of the God-Man should have been immaculate from the first instant of her conception.

And wishing to demonstrate the consummate ease with which the Holy Ghost can perform this overwhelming miracle, the celestial messenger exclaims: "Behold thy cousin Elizabeth, she also hath conceived a son in her old age; and this is the sixth month with her that is called barren. Because no word shall be impossible with God" (Luke 1:36-37); in fine, the Holy Spirit, Who is God, and hence the Author of nature and of nature's laws, can and shall, without changing these laws, suspend them by a single act of His all-powerful will.

It is, then, futile for us to try to forecast the crosses that God, in His wisdom and love, may see fit to send us; for, "O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are His judgments, and how unsearchable His ways! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been His counsellor?" (Romans 11:33-34).

Vain too it is for us to strive curiously to divine how He will enable us to bear them with absolute surrender of ourselves, and thus to advance in the science of the saints and glorify Him Whom all creation is bound to serve. "The just man liveth by Faith" (Galatians 3:11); "She is an infinite treasure to men, which they, that use, become the friends of God, being commended for the gift of discipline" (Wisdom 7:14); "It is she that teacheth the knowledge of God, and is the chooser of His works" (Wisdom 8:4); "They that fear the Lord will not be incredulous to His word" (Ecclesiasticus 2:18).

Despite our senses and our arrogant reason, we must never doubt Him Who cannot deceive, and Whose power is incomprehensible because it is infinite. When the exterior voice of the Church coincides with the interior voice of conscience, we are certain that God has spoken. We must, then, believe and obey.

EIGHTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "MARY'S ACCEPTANCE OF GOD'S WILL"

Without any excitement or agitation; Mary serenely submits to the will of God. In so doing, she utters the most gracious act of humility that

ever fell from human lips: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38).

Great truths worthy of our attentive study are found beneath the Virgin's whole-hearted conformity to the divine will. First of all, God sent one of the highest ministers of His heavenly court to solicit the consent of her whom He had chosen to be the Mother of His Divine Son. What courteous consideration of the creature! What divine deference to the will of man! God rules His rational creatures by love. He does not coerce them.

On the contrary, He not only asks them to concur with Him in the accomplishment of His designs, but lovingly listens to their objections. The ineffable dignity conferred on Mary demanded of her the greatest sanctity. Now, sanctity is only another name for suffering. "If any man will follow Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me" (Mark 8:34).

The divine motherhood meant for Mary sheer self-extinction through total abandonment to the will of God. It implied her acceptance of the bitterest suffering. It forecast mental pain that would almost consume her, its victim. T

o become the Mother of God augured for Mary a knowledge of and a share in the passion of Christ that would plunge her into the depths of a sea of lonely desolation for souls and make the tempest overwhelm her. Suffering being the measure and the very law of love, we cannot adequately conceive the height and depth, the length and breadth, of her love for us, her children.

By becoming the Mother of God and our Mother, Mary became a holocaust to the divine will, the Queen of Martyrs, the most perfect imitator of Him Whom Lacordaire has called "a Victim to be destroyed for sin, but a living and a dying Victim Whose sacrifice was never interrupted, Jesus Christ."

To suffer so much, the Blessed Virgin supremely needed help from on high. This truth, worthy of our most serious thought, we are apt to overlook. It is peculiarly and essentially human to stress the sublimity of Mary's exaltation and forego entirely any reckoning of its awful price.

To give to the world its Savior, it was imperative for Mary to exemplify, in magnificent terms, a supernatural heroism manifested by a spirit of self-sacrifice to which a careless, a sensual, an unbelieving mind is alien.

A mind destitute of the love and fear of God, with narrow views and earthly aims, a low standard of duty and a benighted conscience, a mind contented with itself and unresigned to God's will, cannot but be so fascinated with the incomparable dignity of the Mother of God as to be without pained apprehension of the withering sorrow associated with the acceptance of that dignity. To become the Mother of Christ, Mary had to drain with Him the bitter chalice of His passion to its very dregs. It meant for her virtually the annihilation of nature.

For Mary to endure such suffering, her virtue had to be built on the rock of humility. The immeasurable humility of the Mother of God is a truth whose content is inexhaustible. The very moment of her exaltation, the highest to which God could raise a creature, finds her sunk in the abyss of her own nothingness and exclaiming to the archangel: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord" (Luke 1:38). Thus fully acknowledging her unworthiness to be the Mother of Christ, she accepts the inestimable privilege only in obedience to the divine will: "Be it done to me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38).

At the very apex of her glory, not her elevation above all other creatures but her own nothingness absorbs her. She calls herself the servant of Him Who for thirty years will be subject to her. She receives God's greatest gift in perfect accord with the mind of the Divine Donor. What a lesson in humility she teaches us! Too often the reception of God's gifts ministers to our self-love and vanity; whereas the abiding conviction

of our unworthiness to receive them — this, and this alone, constitutes our true greatness in His sight.

NINTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY “MARY CONCEIVES CHRIST”

In the simplest language, St. John announces the most important fact of history. “The Word was made flesh,” says the Apostle of Love, “and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The instant that Mary gave her consent to the archangel, the Holy Ghost overshadowed her, and wrought in her most chaste womb the Incarnation of the Son of God. The humble Virgin is absolutely silent on the subject of this stupendous miracle wrought within her by the divine power, this mystery incomprehensible even to the angels. Nor does she speak of the rapturous heavenly joy that floods her pure soul.

Such silence, born of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the conviction of one’s own nothingness, and appealing to us with the eloquence of God, should be the divine principle of our conduct when God favors us with His extraordinary graces. When conscious of these wondrous communications, we should reveal them only to our spiritual director. He will tell us whether they have any ecclesiastical or Scriptural warrant or are the work of the foul enemy of souls. Christ warns us to “beware of false prophets” (Matthew 7:15) ; and St. John says to us: “Believe not every spirit: but try the spirits, if they be of God” (1 John 4:1).

As we are not sufficient of ourselves, we should not even reflect on these rare revelations, much less analyze their effect. We are so permeated with self-love that we unfortunately yearn for whatever will foster it. Thus, instead of gaining power over ourselves by allowing these unique graces to flow freely into our souls without curious investigation of their reason, we neutralize, through pride, their divine influence and willingly succumb to temptations to vanity.

Under the spell of this insidious vice, we compare ourselves with others much more advanced than we in the way of God. We put ourselves on

a level even with the saints, and fruitlessly try to understand their close relationship with God, or we peruse authors who undertake to expound mysteries that demand adoration rather than discussion.

Holy Scripture does far otherwise; and in this respect, as in all others, it is our best teacher. Of the Fall, for example, the Sacred Writer only states: “She took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave to her husband who did eat” (Genesis 3:6). Of the Death eternal in its consequences, the volume of inspiration merely records: “They crucified Him” (Mark 15:25). V

ain curiosity springing from intellectual pride so contracts the mind and soul as to render them incapable even of investigating, not to speak of maintaining, divine truth. God’s revelation is not meant to pander to our self-love and our self-conceit. Here, we live by Faith; hereafter, God will lift the veil and we shall know even as we are known.

Too meticulous an examination of what we must believe on the authority of God argues a woe-ful lack of Faith. For the just man it is enough that God has spoken, because “the just man liveth by Faith” (Romans 1:17). The saints raised themselves to their high estate of holiness, not by searching scrutiny of God’s truth, but by squaring their lives with it. They were “wise unto sobriety” (Romans 12:3).

If we are to follow in their footsteps, we must not delve into the secrets of divine revelation, but practise what it teaches. To do this, we must mortify ourselves. The devil, who is a consummate strategist, knows with the intelligence of an angel how powerful an ally he has in our loathsome self-love. At times he beguiles a soul with the fatal delusion that, to become a saint, she must do the extraordinary.

Once he has indoctrinated her with this falsehood, he inspires her to read authors who present their own false notions instead of the true doctrine of the masters of the spiritual life. And so they blind her with vanity in order that the

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beauty of holiness may no longer attract her, and in a moment of petulance and despondency, yielding to discouragement, she convinces herself that the pursuit of sanctity is wearisome, the yoke of the Lord galling and His burden intolerable.

Mary teaches us how to overcome this subtle temptation. Her wisdom kept pace with her humility. She could truthfully say: "I make doctrine to shine forth to all as the morning light, and I will declare it afar off. I will penetrate to all the lower parts of the earth, and will behold all that sleep, and will enlighten all that hope in the Lord. I will yet pour out doctrine as prophecy, and will leave it to them that seek wisdom, and will not cease to instruct their offspring even to the holy age" (Ecclesiasticus 24:44-46).

Mary surpassed all others in wisdom because her intimate union with Christ was the measure and sum of her enlightenment. She is truly the Seat of Wisdom because she was the living tabernacle of the God of Infinite Wisdom. "But Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

And O how impressive and efficacious was her eloquence of silence! By her remarkable and reverent reserve, she did more to "make doctrine shine forth to all as the morning light" (Ecclesiasticus 24:44) than she could have done by the most vivid revelation of the wonders that God had wrought within her and of the treasures of wisdom with which He had enriched her.

TENTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "MARY BECOMES THE MOTHER OF GOD"

Conscious, after having received Christ, of being rooted in her God, Mary's sanctity was characterized by a heavenly sublimity beyond understanding. She was not only full of grace, but she bore the Author of grace. She was wholly under the influence of Christ's divinity. In r

eturn for the natural strength that Mary gave Him, He invigorated her with His divine strength. Marvelous interchange! Closest of all unions both naturally and supernaturally! O the divine

impress of Christ upon Mary, for both Mother and Child are physically one! And they are morally one. Mary's thoughts and desires are, then, those of her Divine Son. Her heart beats in unison with His heart.

So hardly won is every step in our Christian course, so supine and sluggish is our correspondence with grace, that we can form but a very vague and imperfect idea of the interior spirit of the Mother of the Incarnate Word during the period that she physically possessed her God. Suffering the varying circumstances of every day to sway us, we would have to be entirely loosened from the world to appreciate with any degree of accuracy her gift of prayer, both mental and vocal, while she was the living tabernacle of the Eternal Word.

He, Who had become bone of her bones and flesh of her flesh, was the divine principle of her life. In order to pray, she had no need of frequenting the temple made with hands. The temple not made with hands, her soul, was the most marvelous, house of prayer ever created by God's omnipotence.

The efficacy of Mary's prayer can be fully understood only through a complete comprehension of the intimacy of her union with her Divine Son. Her prayer was the prayer of Christ. Astounding mystery! Thou, O God, Who dwellest in the bosom of the Father from all eternity, dost condescend to repose in the chaste womb of Thy mortal creature! Transported with love, joy and gratitude, St. Epiphanius exclaims: "Hail full of grace, thou who art the golden urn containing the manna from Heaven!"

We cannot rise to the lofty heights of Mary's holiness because we cannot grasp the intimacy of her union with Christ when she became His Mother. But we can discover the reason why her sanctity soared higher and higher during the time Christ dwelt within her. Mary had conceived Christ by her humility. "He hath regarded the humility of His handmaid" (Luke 1:48).

On becoming the Mother of the God-Man, she stifled all thought of herself for she was so absorbed with the contemplation of her God that she could think only of Him. Now that He had taken up His abode within her, He enlightened her to understand, as she never had or could heretofore, the greatness of God and the nothingness of man. He taught her that the Eternal Father could be adequately adored and praised, propitiated and thanked, only by the inconceivable humiliations of a God made Man.

With her mind thus illumined with divine light, she realized that her homage was of itself valueless, not even worthy of acceptance. Having learned the lesson of humility perfectly, Mary disappeared from her own eyes and glorified God through her Divine Son. She was lost in the ocean of infinity within her. Bearing the Savior annihilated for sinners, she effaced herself entirely. As we cannot measure the depths of her humility, we can have no true notion of her spiritual exaltation.

Self-knowledge is at the root of all real growth in holiness. We can no more advance in the path of sanctity without humility than we can live without air. Humility is the heart and soul of virtue. It is humility that gives power and efficacy to all we do for God. The fact that Christ became "a worm and no man, the reproach of men and the outcast of the people" (Psalm 21:7) in order to teach us humility, impressively proves the absolute necessity of this fundamental virtue in the divine economy of salvation.

To drink in the largest measure the power and fullness of God's Spirit, we must imitate Christ Who, "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10), "emptied Himself" (Philippians 2:7). Without humility, we cannot bring ourselves into the remotest resemblance to our Savior or even to Mary, whose humility not only merited for her the surpassing dignity of Mother of God, but actually made her His Mother.

If, through pride, we become destitute of every element of attractiveness winning the acceptance of men, what objects of detestation we

must be in the sight of God Who, to inculcate, nay more, to make us ardently love, this indispensable virtue, took "the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:7) by clothing Himself with our frail flesh, becoming like us in all things save sin, and dying in our fallen nature. O wondrous, incomparable humility!

ELEVENTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "MARY'S VISITATION"

Informed by the archangel that St. Elizabeth would soon become a mother, Mary, with her mind enlightened, her sympathies quickened and her heart of fire with divine charity, hastened to visit her cousin in order to congratulate and to serve her. But God's ultimate purpose, though unknown to the humble Virgin, was to sanctify, by the visit of His Mother, His great precursor, and thus to prepare him for his unique mission.

Most fruitful of salutary lessons is this long, fatiguing journey of the Mother of God. With what consummate grandeur does Mary thereby hold mirrored before us her distinctive virtue, humility! Had she followed the persuasions of human reason, she would have tendered both her congratulations and her services through an intermediary because, though much younger than her cousin, she was inestimably superior to her in dignity.

Impelled by natural inclinations Mary, realizing her pre-eminence among men and angels, would have considered such a visit at variance with the majesty and sublimity of her high estate. But she was too thoroughly grounded in humility to entertain so proud a thought. This virtue, her chief glory, made the visit her bounden duty.

It was the archangel, not Elizabeth, who informed her of her cousin's condition. Yet Mary was not influenced by human motives, which in view of this fact would have rightly concluded that her cousin would not be offended by her failure to visit her.

Nor, on the other hand, was she in the least disturbed because Elizabeth had not told her she was an expectant mother. Mary's visit, like every

other act of her life, was inspired by the supernatural. Her humility, rising above the natural, made the long, hard journey a mission of love.

If we profess to be true children of our heavenly Mother, we will not yield to our natural desires, but will ever follow the promptings of grace. We will then discharge every duty, no matter how insignificant, to our neighbor. To be negligent in this respect is to have a distorted notion of piety.

While true religion forbids idle gossip with the world, it does command us to pay due regard to the ties of relationship and to the canons of civility. Devotion suffers only by forgetfulness of God and of our neighbor. Mary, during her difficult and painful journey, forgot herself entirely and thought but of God and of her cousin, the image of God.

In following the inspirations of grace, purity of intention which makes God the beginning and the end of all our activity is bound to animate us. Divine providence often uses our human contacts for a supernatural end. For the soul wholly under the dominion of the spiritual, every slightest task and duty is of notable import even though the designs of God are completely hidden.

To the superficial observer, the visit of Mary to her cousin may seem a very ordinary event in her life. But how momentous it was to God the Father, Who, through the presence of His most favored daughter, wished to sanctify the precursor of His Divine Son! Though not knowing the mind of God in this eventful visit, Mary, under the quickening power of grace, was a most willing instrument in the execution of His designs. Had she not followed the urgings- of grace, she would have frustrated the divine plan.

This truth has a practical bearing. An apparently commonplace circumstance in our lives may be the means of the salvation of our neighbor. Though, for the moment, we cannot see the connection between our conduct and this effect, we should at least divine its possibility. We must therefore make our social intercourse some-

thing more than the satisfaction of the forms prescribed by polite society. Limitless are our opportunities for doing good in this world's wilderness of sin. In our daily relationships, we are unconsciously influencing our fellow-men.

This is a fearful responsibility, and one we cannot escape. We can change the course of a life by a kind word or a generous deed; by our example we can lead souls either to Heaven or to Hell.

We profess to be followers of Christ, but the test of our discipleship is practical charity, that is, the diffusion of the good odor of Christ in our daily dealings with others. Though frail, dependent mortals, weak vessels of clay, what mighty moral powers we are; how unspeakable in magnitude, how far-reaching and how lasting, under the guidance of grace, is our influence for good; what food we can, by the power of our example, furnish to souls spiritually starving!

If we live what we believe, if we labor solely for the honor and glory of God, if, in fine, we are God's devoted creatures, we will enrich and ennoble with our heavenly store every mortal whose life we touch.

TWELFTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "MARY GREETES ELLIZABETH"

How telling was the meeting of the Mother of God and the mother of St. John! What prodigies Christ wrought through Mary's colloquy with Elizabeth! With no visible disclosure of His divine action, He freed His precursor from original sin, enriched him with grace and made him leap with joy at the sound of Mary's voice. "And it came to pass that when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the infant leaped in her womb" (Luke 1:41).

The mother of His herald He simultaneously filled with His Holy Spirit and made her understand the reason for her child's ecstasy. In the veiled presence of her God, Elizabeth confessed that Mary was the Mother of Christ. "And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost. And she cried out with a loud voice and said: Blessed art thou among

women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb" (Luke 1:41-42). She declared Mary blessed among women because she is the most holy dwelling of the Eternal God, Christ our Lord.

All this she had learned from the child she was bearing who, in turn, was taught by the Word Incarnate in the womb of Mary. What tremendous significance, then, God attached to what appeared to be an ordinary visit demanded by the laws of propriety and courtesy!

Lovingly docile to God's will, Mary was the victim not of pain but of joyous surprise when she discovered that the Holy Spirit had revealed to Elizabeth what she had resolved to keep a secret between herself and God. Not knowing that the Divine Child within her had illumined St. John, the Blessed Mother was at a loss to discover how her cousin had acquired her information.

Elizabeth's open profession of Faith followed when, inspired by the Holy Ghost, she exclaimed: "Whence is this to me, that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43). Thus did she establish the reality of the amazing favor that God had conferred on Mary. The humble Virgin did not ask for its confirmation, but God gave it to her when she had least expected it.

Full of meaning is this phase of Mary's life for the soul that God directs in an extraordinary way. Often diffidence of self-issuing from doubt about her interior state follows or even coexists with such a soul's abandonment to divine providence. This is due either to a gradual weakening of her first fervor or to the wiles of Satan, who throws her into a turmoil by focusing her vision too inordinately on her internal condition.

In her perplexity, she should not ask a sign from Heaven, but with filial trust in God, she should await the divine comfort with which He will allay her fears and dispel her anxiety at the time best suited to further her spiritual progress.

God will never forsake a soul that needs His

help. In her distress, He will initiate her by degrees into a clear understanding of the workings of grace within her. When He does not condescend to satisfy her yearning to hear His voice, she must intensify her Faith and blindly obey her spiritual director.

Were God to speak whensoever she desired, He would only accentuate her own self-sufficiency, and thus drive her far from Him. Mary, being dead to herself, never longed for God to speak to her until He deemed it necessary for the accomplishment of His designs in her regard.

It is Mary's intense Faith that Elizabeth blesses, for she says to her: "And blessed art thou that hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to thee by the Lord" (Luke 1:45). How she would be a mother and at the same time remain a virgin did not enter into the equation of Mary's Faith. She implicitly believed the word of God as announced to her by His messenger.

God always rewards strong Faith lavishly. It is the sign of the highest virtue to retain belief unshaken when agonizing doubts strive to weaken its initial strength. But it is the most convincing evidence of the Faith that moves mountains to continue to believe most firmly when God appears to work for the frustration of His plans or when difficulties arise apparently contradicting His original revelation.

THIRTEENTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "MARY UNDER SUSPICION"

Mary's visit to Elizabeth occupied almost four months. On her return to Nazareth, her condition was very manifest to Joseph, and naturally roused his suspicions. Ignorant of the message of the archangel and the succeeding miracles, he could not know that in permitting these very suspicions on his, Joseph's, part, the Incarnate God was subjecting His Virgin Mother to one of the many pangs of her earthly martyrdom.

Knowing that Mary had dedicated herself unreservedly to God by her vow of virginity and would not have espoused him, Joseph, unless he had

solemnly pledged himself to respect it, knowing too his own fidelity in keeping his pledge, he could not but suspect, with the visible evidence before him, that she had sinned.

His suffering was equal to the intensity of his affection for her, whom he loved so ardently. Tortured by agonizing doubt, he knew not what to do, nor where to turn.

While he maintained a holy silence, his countenance mirrored the anguish that inwardly convulsed him. The conviction that she was the blameless cause of his sharp suffering oppressed the immaculate heart of Mary beyond words.

What a painful trial for these two favored creatures of God! Mary could have dispelled Joseph's doubts and stilled the storm of his sensitive soul. Had she informed him of the miracle wrought within her, had she narrated to him the wonders worked in the house of Elizabeth, he would have fallen down before her, the living tabernacle of the Eternal God.

But regardless of the consequences of silence, though death might have been its penalty, she did not speak. Her lips were sealed with a divine seal because she was guarding a divine secret. According to the law, Joseph could have disgraced her before both priests and people by consigning her to an ignominious death for the crime of which she seemed guilty.

Had Mary yielded to her natural inclination, she would have spoken, to vindicate her character, to pacify Joseph and to defend the honor of God which was so inextricably bound up with her own. But she did not utter a word. Wholly under the influence of the supernatural, she stifled all thought of self and kept an inviolate silence, fully realizing in her profound humility that God would reveal His own secret in His own time.

Oftentimes God's favors to us awaken the studied hatred and the cruel persecution of others. And frequently we yearn-to justify ourselves, almost entirely losing sight of the eternal truth that

"through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:21).

In all such distressing trials, if we obey the promptings of self-love, we will seek to exonerate ourselves in order, at least, to conciliate our tormentors. We reason that it is unjust to leave our neighbor under a false impression and perhaps therefore to scandalize him by allowing him to indulge his wrong notions about God's goodness to us. This, we convince ourselves, we are bound to avoid doing, not only to defend but also to increase the honor and glory of God. All such false reasoning is born of our worst enemy in the warfare for salvation, our self-love.

What a rebuke to this arch-enemy of our souls is found in the conduct of Mary! She kept a holy silence and calmly awaited her justification by God. In the stress of searching anguish, her soul was at peace. She used her trial to intensify her humility by extinguishing all thought of herself. No one knew better than Mary God's estimate of the fundamental virtue of Christianity. She thoroughly understood that by dying to herself she would contribute most to the honor and glory of God.

FOURTEENTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY "MARY IS JUSTIFIED BY GOD"

Joseph's distress, which she felt keenly, did not rob Mary of her peace of soul. Nor was she in any way disturbed because God did not immediately vindicate her innocence. Far from resorting to legal measures against her, Joseph treated her with the utmost kindness. Though suspicion clouded his mind, Mary's virtue was too evident to justify him in invoking upon her the full penalty of the law. He still revered the angelic sanctity of his singular spouse, and following the inspiration of grace, he refrained from exposing her publicly. But in order to protect her reputation as well as his own, he decided to put her away secretly.

Fully determined not to tarnish her good name and at the same time to defend himself from the imputation of complicity in her apparent guilt, he was about to proceed with his plan. But God, hav-

ing tried and proved his virtue, came to his assistance in his hour of sorest need and changed his bitter sorrow into thrilling happiness. "While he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in his sleep, saying, Joseph, son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a Son, and thou shalt call His name Jesus. For He shall save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).

This overpowering disclosure dispelled with joy immeasurable the sorrow that had crushed the heart of Joseph. What a revelation to him that he was the spouse of her who was at once a spotless Virgin and the Mother of God! He had schooled his mind, under the influence of grace, into a charitable and forbearing temper, and O how God rewarded him!

Speechless gratitude welled up spontaneously from every fiber of his acutely sensitive nature. The depths of his holy feelings cannot be fathomed by human intelligence. He obeyed the command of the angel with unquestioning promptitude, for we are told, "Joseph rising up from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took unto him his wife" (Matthew 1:24).

We may infer, though Holy Scripture does not state it, that Joseph informed Mary of his vision in order to comfort her who had suffered desolation untold because, though supernaturally sympathetic with him in his blighting grief, she was unable to calm the agitation of his afflicted soul.

These two magnanimous saints, shaping their actions by God's will rather than by the rule of the world, had tasted the full bitterness of the most corroding sorrow. But how quickly the God of all consolation changed their anguish into the holiest supernal joy!

Joseph's love for Mary now knew no bounds. Mary now revered Joseph's virtue more than ever, and the trial that would, had she preferred man's fallible judgment to God's unerring will,

have hopelessly severed their union, only served to strengthen it.

Our lives are filled with alternating joy and sorrow. Both contribute to the greater glory of God and the sanctification of our souls. In every painful circumstance of life's hard journey, if we are fully resigned to His will, He cannot, because of our union with Him, forsake us, but will, with divine generosity, lighten our burden. Conformity to the divine will is the supreme end of life. But alas! through fear of the world's judgment or expectation of worldly advantage, we often do, not God's will, but our own.

What a rebuke to our disloyalty, to our trampling underfoot the substance and real excellence of religion, is the conduct of Mary and Joseph! Abandonment to the divine will — this was their one distinct rule of action. In accordance with this truly Christian principle, Mary would not reveal her divine secret to Joseph even though the revelation would have completely banished his suspicions; and rather than contravene this principle, Joseph did not question his saintly spouse. Thus did they glorify God by resignation to His will, and He, in turn, made their virtue shine forth with heavenly luster.

We cannot choose between joy and sorrow. We must suffer because we are sinners. If, after the example of Mary and Joseph, we are patient under trial, if we accept it in the true Christian spirit by not longing to prevent or curtail it, God will not fail to comfort us. "According to the multitude of my sorrows in my heart, Thy comforts have given joy to my soul" (Psalm 93:19); "If I shall walk in the midst of tribulation, Thou wilt quicken me; and Thou hast stretched forth Thy hand against the wrath of my enemies; and Thy right hand hath saved me" (Psalm 137:7).

The way of the cross is the only pathway to peace of mind here and to eternal peace hereafter. The realization of this truth will help us to overcome our natural antipathy to life's sufferings. Only in the school of the cross can we learn the truest wisdom, the knowledge of Jesus Christ and Him crucified: and "this is eternal life, that they may

know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, Whom Thou hast sent” (John 17:3).

Now to know Christ is to suffer with Christ, and to suffer with Christ is to reign with Him forever. “Why then do you fear? Take up the cross which opens to you the way to the kingdom! In the cross is salvation; in the cross is life; in the cross is protection against the enemy. In the cross is infusion of heavenly sweetness; in the cross is strength of heart; in the cross is joy of spirit. In the cross is the treasure of virtues; in the cross is perfection and holiness. There is no salvation of soul nor hope of eternal life, except in the cross. Take up therefore your cross and follow Jesus, and you will enter into life everlasting” (Imitation of Christ, Bk. II. ch. 12, 6-11).

FIFTEENTH MEDITATION ON THE NATIVITY “MARY DEPARTS FOR BETHLEHEM”

To accomplish the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David, God did not work a miracle, but made use of the edict of a pagan emperor. Caesar Augustus, in order to apportion the taxation of his subjects justly, had determined that the whole world should be enrolled. The decree ordered every family to journey to the city or town of its ancestors.

Judea being under the vast jurisdiction of Rome, “Joseph went up from Galilee, out 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” (Luke 1:4-5).

“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” (Isaias 55:8-9).

From a human angle the edict of a pagan emperor and the birth of Christ were as far apart as the two poles. But from God’s point of view they were very closely connected because divine providence, through the decree of Caesar,

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brought about the birth of the Divine Babe in Bethlehem, and thus verified the words of the prophet:

“And thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, art a little one among the thousands of Juda: out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be the Ruler in Israel: and His going forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity” (Micheas 5:2).

What looked to be the mere whim of chance was the accomplishment of the infallible will of God. Following the inspiration of grace, Mary and Joseph, in obeying the emperor, indirectly obeyed God.

The conscious conviction of the Blessed Virgin and her chaste spouse that the decree, of an idolatrous prince was the revelation of God’s will, teaches us a very fundamental truth. Because we cannot understand the infinite action of God on His world, we often wrongly associate the element of chance with the designs of the Creator. But did we know the mind of the Lord, were we able to unravel the perplexing and puzzling interlacings of the manifold lines of His providence, we would live by knowledge, not by Faith.

In trying, then, to understand so deep a mystery, we only waste time and impede our normal growth in holiness. Rather let us conform to the divine will, which is the end of life. Human events are not due to chance. God either ordains or permits them.

Though we cannot comprehend the working of God’s will in the government of His creation, we are not therefore to divorce ourselves from Him by doing only our own will. Blind submission to the divine will in all things is unquestionably the touchstone of strong, living Faith.

Accordingly, it is self-evident that God’s will must be the compass of our lives in temporal no less than in spiritual concerns; otherwise we will never die to ourselves and live solely to God. We belong to Him absolutely and entirely. Upon our submission to His will, therefore, depends

our salvation, and He will further our dearest interests only if we totally abandon ourselves to Him.

How important, then, is the lesson that Mary and Joseph inculcate by their obedience to the command of an earthly sovereign. Nazareth, where they dwelt, was, in the natural course of events, the town in which Christ should have been born. But they did not demand of God a miracle as indisputable proof that Bethlehem was the divinely chosen birthplace of the Messias. They saw God's will in the ordinance of the emperor.

When we ask God to accomplish His will in our regard by extraordinary means, we are but gratifying our pride. In executing His will, God rarely deviates from the natural order. Hence, what presumption it is on our part to expect Him to do for us what He did for His Blessed Mother and St. Joseph only in extreme urgency.

After Christ, no one has taught as eloquently as Mary how we must act when God wills us to bear the cross. She was in destitute circumstances, and in her critical condition, to repair to a distant and strange land, in winter, and without even the necessities of life for herself or her Child, required an act of the highest moral courage.

But she murmured neither against God nor against the edict of Caesar Augustus, though the divine will as manifested by the decree of the civil ruler entailed for her distressingly bitter suffering. She did not question the designs of providence, but hastened to accomplish them. Nor did she complain because God had sent her a cross entirely at variance with her wondrous dignity as Mother of Christ.

Her confidence in God matched her love of Him, and she departed calmly to seek a home among strangers for the Creator of the world, her soul enraptured with the peace of God.

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THE ROSARY

15 Meditations on Nativity

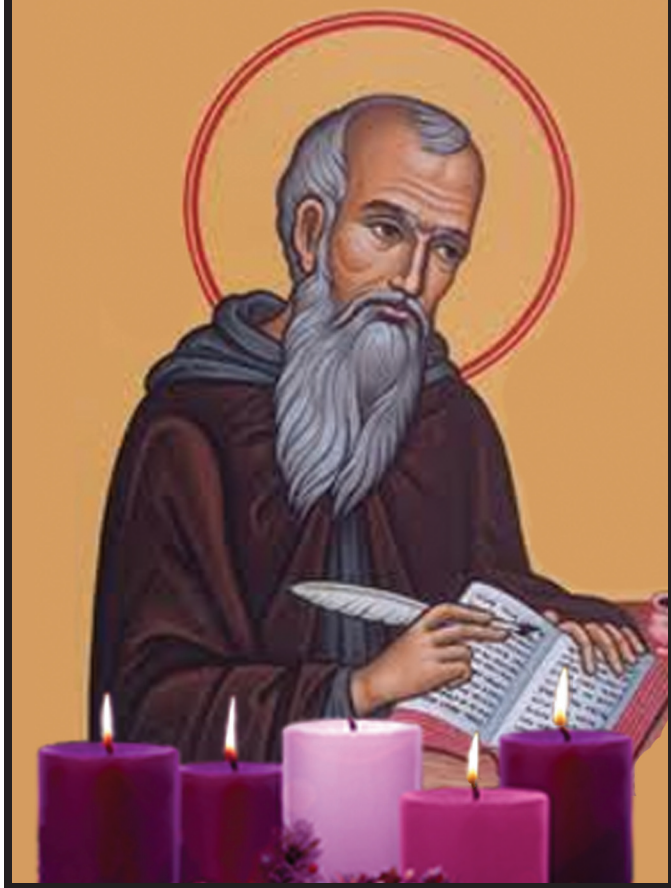
**"But Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart."
(Luke 2:19)**



WHAT PRESENT
WILL YOU GIVE
JESUS THIS
CHRISTMAS?

WHAT DOES HE
WANT THE MOST?

ST. JEROME



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4. CHRISTMAS EVE MEETING OF SAINT JEROME & CHRIST

from devotiontoourlady.com

JEROME MEETS JESUS IN BETHLEHEM

The well-known story of St. Jerome should be an encouragement to us. About four centuries after the birth of Christ, after many years spent in Jerusalem translating the Word of God from various different Bibles into what would be later known as the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible, St. Jerome had finished his grand project just days before Christmas. To celebrate this great forty-year long accomplishment, Jerome decided to spend Christmas Eve in nearby Bethlehem. He comes as a pilgrim to Bethlehem. He longs to venerate the place where Christ was born. He comes to the cave of the Nativity, where he humbly prays. He himself speaks later on about the divine experience he had.

According to the ancient account, sometime around midnight Jesus appeared to him, saying: *“Jerome, what will you give Me for My birthday?”*

Immediately and enthusiastically, Jerome declared, *“Lord, I give You my translation of Your Word!”*

But instead of congratulating him, Jesus simply replied, *“No, Jerome, that is not what I want.”*

St. Jerome was speechless. Then he began to complain and remonstrate with Jesus, asking why He had let him go on for forty years, far from home, laboring at something other than what God most wanted from him. But Jesus remained silent. Jerome started suggesting other ways of honoring Jesus’ birthday—fasting, becoming a hermit, giving his possessions to the poor.

To each of these Jesus replied, *“No. Jerome. That is not what I want most.”*

St. Jerome then pleaded: *"Oh Lord, You know that it is for You I have abandoned everything ... both the court of the rulers, and the majesties of Rome, and the pleasures and the riches... and at this time my mind, my whole heart, my thoughts and even my life, everything belongs to You! What else could I give You? I don't have anything else to give you today on Your on this feast day of Your birth!"*

Jesus replied: *"You still have something to give Me, Jerome! You have something which you have forgotten and today I want you to place it at My feet."*

Finally, Jerome protested, *"What is that, my Lord? Please tell me! Do I truly have something else to give you? Would I be so evil as to keep something for myself! Tell me, dear Lord, what is there that I can still give You?"* Tell me, Lord! Tell me what would give You the most joy on Your birthday, and You shall have it!"

"Do you promise, Jerome?" asked Our Lord.

"Yes, Lord, anything at all!" cried Jerome.

Jesus replied, *"Give Me your sins!"*

"My sins, O Lord? What would You do with my sins?" asked a bewildered Jerome.

"Jerome, give Me all your sins, so that I can forgive them all."

Hearing this, St. Jerome broke down into tears of emotion, happiness and love at the merciful words of Jesus.



"Give me your sins." In His limitless humility, more than any service we can render Him, the Lord considers it a gift that we "allow" Him to take away our sins. Why? Precisely because He thirsts for us, because He longs for union with us, and the only obstacle to that union is our sin — which, in His eyes, then, becomes the most precious gift we can offer.

Hope and Confidence in God

Sometimes, the sight of our many sins can induce despondency, or even despair. That is not

the work of God, but of the devil. God loves the sinner, but hates the sin. If you can arrive at that same hatred of sin, then there is nothing to worry about—no matter how great or frequent those sins may have been! Our Lord Himself said: *"For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost!"* (Luke 19:10; Matthew 18:11). *"But the Pharisees and Scribes murmured, saying to His disciples: Why do you eat and drink with publicans and sinners? And Jesus answering, said to them: 'They that are whole need not the physician, but they that are sick. I came not to call the just, but sinners to penance!'"* (Luke 5:30-32).

There Is No Sin That Cannot Be Forgiven

"If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow: and if they be red as crimson, they shall be white as wool" (Isaias 1:18). All God wants is repentance and sorrow for past sin. *"If the wicked do penance for all his sins which he hath committed, and keep all My commandments, and do judgment and justice, living he shall live and shall not die. I will not remember all his iniquities that he hath done: in his justice which he hath wrought, he shall live. Is it My will that a sinner should die, saith the Lord God, and not that he should be converted from his ways, and live?... Because he considereth and turneth away himself from all his iniquities which he hath wrought, he shall surely live, and not die Be converted, and do penance for all your iniquities: and iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, by which you have transgressed, and make to yourselves a new heart and a new spirit"* (Ezechiel 18:21-31).

Rise to a New Life

The Sacrament of Confession casts away our transgressions and gives us a new heart and a new spirit. It is a spiritual resurrection. We enter the "tomb" of the confessional and leave our sins and guilt there, emerging as a new person, having put off the "old man" and put on the new—as St. Paul says: *"To put off ... the old man, who is corrupted according to the desire of error, and be renewed in spirit of your mind: and put on the new man..."* (Ephesians 4:22-23).

The Mercies of God Are Above all His Works

It is of capital importance that we never ever let our past sins—no matter how great or filthy they may have been—come between God and ourselves, or make us in any way doubt God’s love, friendship and mercy. As the Psalmist says: *“The Lord is gracious and merciful: patient and plenteous in mercy. The Lord is sweet to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works”* (Psalm 144:8-9). God does not do things by halves. When He forgives sins, He forgives completely. Their guilt is blotted out entirely and He will not reproach us with them again. Yet, His generosity goes even further. When a soul falls into mortal sin, all the merits from its past life are lost. If, however, the soul repents and obtains pardon, these merits revive again. Such is God’s generosity and love.

This is a point of great importance. There is always a great temptation to discouragement and distrust, even after our sins have been forgiven. We feel that God still holds our sins against us; that His providence will be less favorable to us in the future; we feel that He no longer trusts us and that He will be reserved and sparing in His granting of graces. We imagine, too, that no matter how great our progress may be in the future, the ultimate result will always be spoiled by that unfortunate past.

All that is natural—but it is also quite wrong! It is based upon a wrong notion of God. God loves to bring good out of evil. He did so with St. Paul, with Mary Magdalen, with St. Augustine, with St. John of God, with the Venerable Matthew Talbot and many, many more. It is our lack of confidence that places obstacles in the way. Many sins were forgiven Mary Magdalen, because she loved much. If we love Him as she did, our sins will be forgiven us; and we can be more pleasing to God by a life of ardent love after our sin, than the lukewarm life of our previous innocence. Truly God can bring good out of evil!

To Obtain Mercy, We Must Show Mercy

At the sermon on the Mount, Our Lord stated: *“Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy”* (Matthew 5:7). If we want mercy, we

have to show mercy. *“The just are merciful and show mercy”* (Proverbs 13:13).

We pray: *“Forgive us our trespasses”* but perhaps wish that we could omit the next part: *“as we forgive those who trespass against us.”* The perennial human problem is not *“What is good for the goose is good for the gander”*, but rather *“What is good for me, is not good for anyone else—unless I say so!”* We want mercy badly, but we are often bad about showing mercy to others. But Scripture says: *“Judgment without mercy to him that hath not done mercy”* (James 2:13). The parable of the Unmerciful Servant, serves as warning to us. Just before this parable, *“Peter came unto Him and said: ‘Lord, how often shall my brother offend against me, and I forgive him? Seven times?’ Jesus said to him: ‘I say not to thee, seven times; but seventy times seven times.”*

“Therefore is the kingdom of Heaven likened to a king, who would take an account of his servants. One was brought to him, that owed him ten thousand talents. And as he had not wherewith to pay it, his lord commanded that he should be sold, and his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. But that servant falling down, besought him, saying: ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all!’ And the lord of that servant being moved with pity, let him go and forgave him the debt.”

“But when that servant was gone out, he found one of his fellow servants that owed him an hundred pence: and laying hold of him, throttled him, saying: ‘Pay what thou owest!’ And his fellow servant falling down, besought him, saying: ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all!’ And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he paid the debt. Then his lord called him; and said to him: ‘Thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all the debt! Shouldst not thou then have had compassion also on thy fellow servant, even as I had compassion on thee?’ And his lord being angry, delivered him to the torturers until he paid all the debt. So also shall My heavenly Father do to you, if you forgive not every one his brother from your hearts” (Matthew 18:21-35).

**“For the Son of man
is come to seek
and to save
that which was lost!”**

(Luke 19:10; Matthew 18:11).

I'M SORRY!

I'LL CHANGE!

**I WILL DO
PENANCE!**



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5. EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

from devotiontoourlady.com

Though some will have gone to Confession the previous weekend, or during the week, while others may be planning to go to Confession before the Midnight Mass or the Christmas Day Mass—it is worthwhile and wholesome to spend some time pondering over our entire life’s sins before midnight and Christmas arrives. This could be done as a family, or individually. However, to avoid the exercise drifting-off into day dreaming because of insufficient preparation, it would be a good thing to furnish each person with a printed examination of conscience (catering, of course, to their age).

Before beginning the examination of conscience, the following passages could be read aloud, in order to create the grave tone necessary for a fruitful examination of conscience. St. Peter tells us: *“Be penitent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out ... That everyone may convert himself from his wickedness”* (Acts 3:19, 26). Though Peter says *“convert himself”*, this conversion cannot take place without God’s help—we merely work with the grace of God to ‘convert ourselves.’ God gives us the inspiration, the movement to sorrow for sin, yet He leaves us to use that grace and *“work out our salvation in fear and trembling”* (Philippians 2:12), *“bringing forth fruits worthy of penance”* (Luke 3:8). *“For after Thou didst convert me, I did penance”* (Jeremias 31:19). This penance is so crucial, that Our Lord says: *“Unless you shall do penance, you shall all likewise perish!”* (Luke 13:3).

Before we speak of conversion, tell me who has assured you that you will live to the time you have appointed for your amendment. Do you not know how many have been deceived by this hope? St. Gregory tells us that *“God promises to receive the repentant sinner when he returns to Him, but nowhere does He promise to give him tomorrow.”*

St. Gregory continues: I cannot but think that the number of souls lost in this way is infinite. It was the cause of the ruin of the rich man in the Gospel, whose terrible history is related by St. Luke:

"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?'" (Luke 12:16-21). What greater folly than ignore the future, as if time were our own!

Have No Fear! Have Confidence!

"If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow: and if they be red as crimson, they shall be white as wool" (Isaias 1:18).

All God wants is repentance and sorrow for past sin. *"If the wicked do penance for all his sins which he hath committed, living he shall live and shall not die. I will not remember all his iniquities that he hath done! Is it My will that a sinner should die, saith the Lord God, and not that he should be converted from his ways, and live? Cast away from you all your transgressions, by which you have transgressed, and make to yourselves a new heart and a new spirit" (Ezechiel 18:21-31).*

Start Anew!

The Sacrament of Confession casts away our transgressions and gives us a new heart and a new spirit. It is a spiritual resurrection. We enter the "tomb" of the confessional and leave our sins and guilt there, emerging as a new person, having put off the "old man" and put on the new—as St. Paul says: *"To put off ... the old man, who is corrupted according to the desire of error, and be renewed in spirit of your mind: and put on the new man..." (Ephesians 4:22-23).*

Flee the Ugliness of Sin

Some are tempted to flee from the presence of the diseased, the crippled, the handicapped, etc., because they see a certain lack of physical perfection that they cannot cope with. Yet such diseases and handicaps are nothing compared to the soul crippled by sin. Others have the same desire to flee when faced with the worst and vilest of criminals. The lack of moral perfection repels them. Imagine what a wife or a husband becomes in the sight of their once loved spouse and children, once they have committed adultery—a filthy wretch who has betrayed trusting love and scandalized innocent children. How much more despicable is the terrible act of spiritual adultery that we commit, when we turn away from God in order to commit sin. There is no greater evil than sin and there is nothing so ugly as a soul in the state of mortal sin.

Flee to the Refuge of Sinners

Shamefully place yourself at the feet of the Blessed Mother, the Refuge of sinners. Turn to her like Mary Magdalen turned to Christ. A mother can put up with the most gruesome sights and situations, when the good of her child is at stake. Mary will receive you, like a prodigal child, the moment you realize what you have done by your sins. She will console you with the thought of the new spiritual birth, for which you are now preparing. She will tell you that, as the Mother of Mercy, she has a special role to play in the conversion of sinners and in bringing about their reconciliation with God.

The Greatest Sinners Can and Must Become the Greatest Saints

The greater the sinner, the greater the achievement there will be when he eventually becomes a saint—and there have been some great sinners who have become great saints: St. Mary Magdalen, the Good Thief on the cross, St. Augustine, St. John of God, St. Matthew Talbot and many, many more. What God did for them, He will also do for us—if only we let Him. You need Mary like you need mercy. For she is the Mother of Mercy.

**“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).**



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6. PRAYERS AND RITUAL FOR BLESSING THE CRIB

from devotiontoourlady.com

Leader: Our help is in the name of the Lord.

All: Who hath made Heaven and Earth.

All with Leader: O great mystery and wonderful sign, dumb beasts saw the newborn Lord lying in a crib.

The Magnificat (divide group and alternate reading the lines)

Group 1 : My soul doth magnify the Lord.

Group 2 : And my spirit doth rejoice in God my Savior

Group 1 : For He hath regarded the humility of His handmaid;

Group 2 : for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

Group 1 : Because He that is mighty hath done great things to me; and holy is His name.

Group 2 : And His mercy is from generation unto generation, to them that fear Him.

Group 1 : He hath showed might in His arm:

Group 2 : He hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.

Group 1 : He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble.

Group 2 : He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich He hath sent empty away.

Group 1 : He hath received Israel His servant, being mindful of His mercy:

Group 2 : As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to His seed forever.

Group 1 : Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

Group 2 : As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

ALL: O great mystery and wonderful sign, dumb beasts saw the newborn Lord lying in a crib.

READER (perhaps the oldest child) : The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke, chapter 2, verses 15 through 20:

At that time, 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 us!”* And they came with haste; and they found Mary and Joseph, and the Infant lying in the manger. And seeing, they understood the word that was 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.

ALL: Praise be to Thee, O Christ.

LEADER: The Word was made flesh. Alleluia.

ALL: And dwelt among us. Alleluia.

LEADER: O Lord, hear my prayer.

ALL: And let my cry come unto Thee.

LEADER: The Lord be with you.

ALL: And also with you.

LEADER: Let us pray. Bless, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, this crib which we have prepared in honor of the new birth in the flesh of Thine only begotten Son, that all who devoutly contemplate in this image the mystery of His Incarnation may be filled with the light of His glory, Who, with Thee liveth and reigneth in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, world without end. Amen.

(The crib is sprinkled with holy water.)

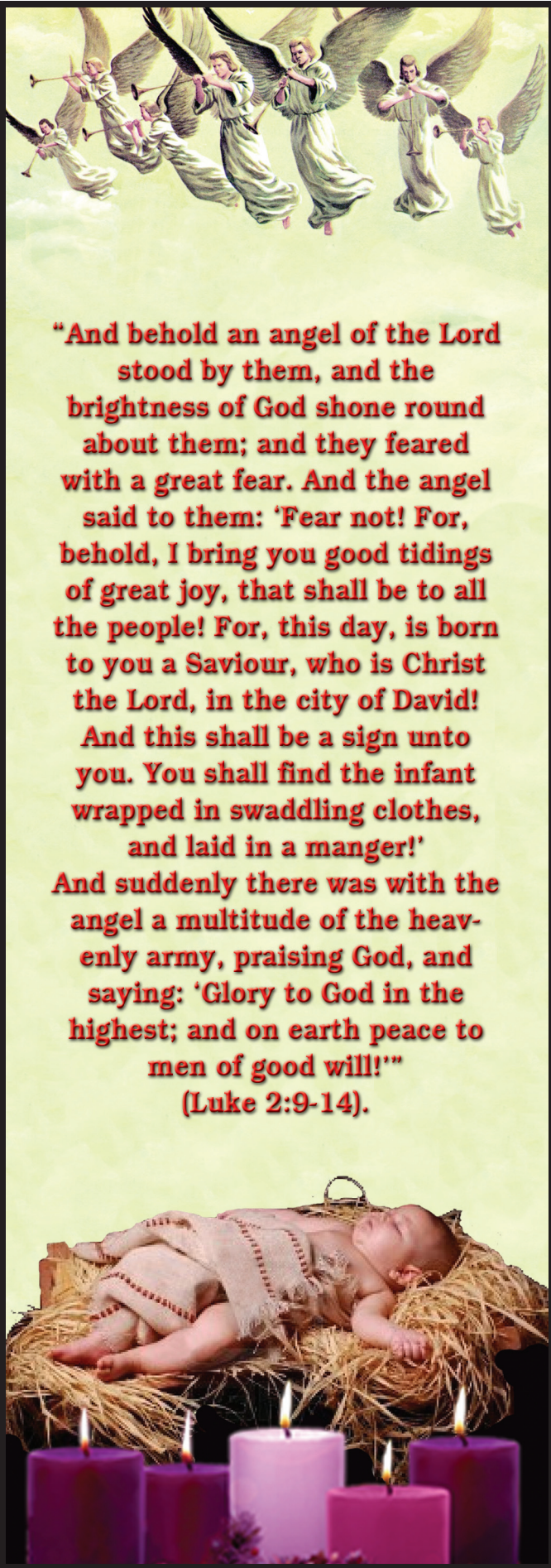
This is the most solemn vigil of the year, except for the Paschal Vigil. Self-denial at supper is to remind us that this night Mary and Joseph sought lodging in a sheep cave, prayed, and waited. Then it happened. In the dark silent cavern in the side of the hill, the Savior of the world was born, hidden from men by God and the earth He had come to redeem.

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“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).





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7. PROCLAMATION OF CHRIST'S BIRTH

from the Church's Martyrology for Christmas Eve

from devotiontoourlady.com

The LEADER reads aloud the following:

In the five-thousandth, one hundred and ninety-ninth (5199th) year from the creation of the world, when in the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth;

In the two-thousand-five-hundred-and-fifty-ninth (2959th) year from the flood;

In the two-thousand-and-fifteenth (2015th) year from the birth of Abraham;

In the one-thousand-five-hundred-and-tenth (1510th) year from the going forth of the people of Israel out of Egypt under Moses;

In the one-thousand-and-thirty-second (1032nd) year from the anointing of David as King;

In the sixty-fifth (65th) week according to the prophecy of Daniel;

In the hundred-and-ninety-fourth (194th) Olympiad;

In the seven-hundred-and-fifty-second (752nd) year from the foundation of the city of Rome;

In the forty-second (42nd) year of the reign of the Emperor Octavian Augustus;

In the sixth (6th) age of the world;

While the whole Earth was at peace;

Jesus Christ, Himself Eternal God and Son of the Eternal Father, being pleased to consecrate the world by His most gracious coming, having been conceived of the Holy Ghost, and when nine months were passed after His conception, **(all kneel down & remain kneeling)** was born of the Virgin Mary, at Bethlehem of Juda, being made Man, Our Lord Jesus Christ was born according to the flesh.

EVERYONE says : We adore Thee, O Christ, and we bless Thee! For Thou hast come to redeem the world from sin! (all rise after saying the verse).

The Proclamation of Christ's birth is followed with Psalm 148, *Laudate Dominum de caelis*, the verses can be alternated between two groups.

GROUP 1 : Praise ye the Lord from the Heavens: praise ye Him in the high places.

GROUP 2 : Praise ye Him, all His angels: praise ye Him, all His hosts.

GROUP 1 : Praise ye Him, O sun and moon: praise Him, all ye stars and light.

GROUP 2 : Praise Him, ye Heavens of Heavens: and let all the waters that are above the Heavens praise the Name of the Lord.

GROUP 1 : For He spoke, and they were made: He commanded, and they were created.

GROUP 2 : He hath established them forever, and for ages of ages He hath made a decree, and it shall not pass away.

GROUP 1 : Praise the Lord from the Earth, ye dragons, and all ye deeps:

GROUP 2 : Fire, hail, snow, ice, stormy winds which fulfill His word:

GROUP 1 : Mountains and all hills, fruitful trees and all cedars:

GROUP 2 : Beasts and all cattle: serpents and feathered fowls:

GROUP 1 : Kings of the Earth and all people: princes and all judges of the Earth:

GROUP 2 : Young men and maidens: let the old with the younger, praise the Name of the Lord:

GROUP 1 : For His Name alone is exalted.

GROUP 2 : The praise of Him is above Heaven and Earth: and He hath exalted the horn of His people.

BOTH GROUPS TOGETHER : A hymn to all His saints: to the children of Israel, a people approaching to Him. Alleluia.

CHRISTMAS EVE RITUAL from devotiontoourlady.com

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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)



**“I am the light of the world: he that followeth Me, walketh not in darkness, but shall have the light of life”
(John 8:12)**



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8. PRAYERS & READINGS FOR THE LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

from devotiontoourlady.com

THE PRAYERS ARE FOLLOWED BY THE EXPLANATION

O God, our loving Father, Thou didst send into this world of darkness, Thy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, as the Light of the world and counter all the forces of evil: sin, suffering and death. Jesus called Himself the *“Light of world”* (John 9:5) and told us that we must also be the *“light of the world”* (Matthew 5:14). Grant that through Him, with Him and in Him, we may overcome evil with the force of good; destroy hatred with the power of love, and bring light to those in darkness by the power of the Faith that has been given to us.

Jesus came to cast fire on Earth and wished that it would be kindled everywhere. Enkindle in us the fire of Thy love; enlighten the darkness of our minds with the light of Thy wisdom; and help us in bringing Thy light into this world, the light that is Thy Son, born of the Virgin Mary, in Bethlehem. Let us not just love only in word alone, but by our deeds too. Help us to be zealous instruments of Thy light and love throughout this coming New Year, by showing special acts of kindness to those around us and by being Thy special instrument of reconciliation to bring sinners back to Thee, while inflaming the hearts of the lukewarm.

May the Christ Candle we light, symbolize our desire to bring light into a world of darkness and hope into a world of despair. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

CHRISTMAS STARTS WITH ADAM & EVE

For this purpose you could read the story of Original Sin in Genesis in the Old Testament. Reading in Genesis, we find that God the Father makes the first prophecy of the Messiah immediately after the Fall. In it He points to Bethlehem — to Christmas — because the Woman and her Seed that God promises are going to be Mary and her Son.

They understand clearly what they have done: disobeyed God, wrought a debt they can never pay, brought sin and death into the world, destroyed the harmony of the universe. Worst of all, they have lost that divine life they shared so intimately with God: sanctifying grace. Jesus was born on Christmas to repay man's debt to His Father, to open the gates of Heaven, to defeat death, by purchasing for us eternal life, and to institute a means by which we might share God's life again, as Adam did.

While we live here in our exile from Heaven, the object of His birth, in the stable in Bethlehem, is our oneness of life with Him in His Mystical Body, the Church, and through it the unbelievable intimacy of our soul's life with the indwelling Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus did Christ restore what Adam lost. Well might Adam weep. Original sin was a terrible thing.

“And the Lord God took man, and put him into the paradise of pleasure, to dress it, and to keep it. And He commanded him, saying: ‘Of every tree of paradise thou shalt eat! But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat. For in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death!’ ...

“Now the serpent was more subtle than any of the beasts of the Earth which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman: ‘Why hath God commanded you, that you should not eat of every tree of paradise?’

“And the woman answered him, saying: ‘Of the fruit of the trees that are in paradise we do eat: but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of paradise, God hath commanded us that we

should not eat; and that we should not touch it, lest perhaps we die!’

“And the serpent said to the woman: ‘No, you shall not die the death! For God doth know that in what day soever you shall eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened: and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil!’

“And the woman saw that the tree was good to eat, and fair to the eyes, and delightful to behold: and she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave to her husband who did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened: and when they perceived themselves to be naked, they sewed together fig leaves, and made themselves aprons.

“And when they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in paradise at the afternoon air, Adam and his wife hid themselves from the face of the Lord God, amidst the trees of paradise. And the Lord God called Adam, and said to him: ‘Where art thou?’ And he said: ‘I heard Thy voice in paradise; and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself!’

“And God said to him: ‘And who hath told thee that thou wast naked, but that thou hast eaten of the tree whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldst not eat?’ And Adam said: ‘The woman, whom thou gavest me to be my companion, gave me of the tree, and I did eat!’

“And the Lord God said to the woman: ‘Why hast thou done this?’ And she answered: ‘The serpent deceived me, and I did eat!’

“And the Lord God said to the serpent: ‘Because thou hast done this thing, thou art cursed among all cattle, and beasts of the earth: upon thy breast shalt thou go, and earth shalt thou eat all the days of thy life. I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel (Christ!)’” (Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-15).

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THE CHRIST CANDLE

You could use a liturgical candle (at least 51% beeswax) about one to two feet long which can be purchased in most religious goods shops. If not, ask the sacristan at the parish church if the parish could sell you one that is kept on hand for Mass.

You could paint designs on the candle, or simply leave it as it is. For painting the designs, use a small pointed brush of good quality, oil paints, a little turpentine for thinning, and a cloth with turpentine for wiping off mistakes (but don't be too fussy — they rarely look like mistakes to anyone but you). After the paint is dry, you can shellac the designs again as protection against too much handling.

One does not have to be a fine artist to decorate a candle. Even clumsy attempts when finished are beautiful, and the effect of the whole is rich and colorful. More important than technique is love and enthusiasm. Remember that it is not just the handwork, but the reading and thinking and conversations that go with it that make the completed work valuable.

If you are painting figures of the forerunners of Christ, if you can't draw them "out of your head" you will find many small figures to trace — in this instance tracing is allowed (rarely otherwise!). Keep them simple, not bothering with fingers, toes, complicated features: stress the action boldly so that they tell their story.

Paint in bold bright colors without fussing: this helps to give the final work crispness if the figures are outlined in dark brown — a sienna or umber. Simple patterns of dots, stripes, little crosses, bands of decoration add interest and contrast to the garments.

Ideas for some figures could be Adam and Eve dressed in animal skins. Noe's ark with the dove and the olive branch on top. Noe is a type of Christ. God sent the Deluge to destroy all the wicked on Earth, but preserved Noe because he was holy, and through him the human race is born again; just as through Christ, Who, from

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the cross, poured forth grace into His Church, and through His sacraments we are born again to divine life. Noe, sheltering in the ark his family, from whom would spring a new generation (Semites from his son Sem, Gentiles from the others), is a type of Christ sheltering His new-born people in the ark of the Church.

Another set of figures could be Abraham and Isaac walking hand in hand up the mountain to the place of sacrifice.

Abraham has a torch for the fire in one hand and a sword for the sacrifice in the other. Isaac has a bundle of wood on his back.

Again we see that they are types: Abraham, chosen by God to be the Father of the Jews out of whom would come the Messiah, is a type of God the Father leading His Son to sacrifice; Isaac is a type of Christ the Son, the Victim.

The wood a symbol of the cross. There is a line in this story of obedience, faith, and sacrifice which pierces to the heart. Isaac asks: *"But where is the victim?"* And Abraham replies: *"God will provide the victim."*

For Abraham He provided a ram caught in the brambles; and for us He provided His beloved Son, born in a stable, died on a cross.

Then comes Jesse in a crimson robe with a golden crown, holding an ancient musical instrument that looks like a cello. Try as we might, we can find no explanation for the cello; it simply appeared with Jesse in an old illuminated manuscript.

Jesse is one of Our Lord's grandfathers and is familiar to us in the genealogy of Our Lady known as the tree of Jesse; she is referred to as springing from the Root of Jesse.

There is another interesting thing about Jesse: his grandmother was Ruth, the lovely widow who returned to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law Noemi, although by birth she was not a Jewess. *"Thy people shall be my people; thy God*

my God,” she said. Most people never stop to think what that meant: Our Lord had, among His antecedents, a Gentile grandmother!

Next is the son of Jesse, King David. He sits holding his harp to remind us of his beautiful songs, the Psalms, and wears royal purple and a golden crown. *“Jesus, son of David” . . . “Out of the house of David” . . . “Mary and Joseph of the house of David.”*

All these point to Bethlehem, *“the city of David.”* Indeed the very name, Bethlehem, means *“house of bread,”* which lifts our minds to still another meditation on this *“son of David.”*

Then — Mary. She is beautiful in a blue mantle with white stars and a gold crown with stars about it. It is easy to see the point of her title *“Gate of Heaven.”* Through her He came, and it is through her we go to Him.

Eve weeps at the top of the candle with Adam. Mary rejoices at the bottom. Below Mary in swaddling bands, a snug white cap on His head, a gold cruciform nimbus behind Him, is Jesus. And at the bottom in gold, as though it were shouting and singing and dancing, is GLORIA.

If the children are small the figures are best painted by the grown-ups with the little ones held firmly at bay. They jiggle around and upset things. It will also help if the candle is lodged firmly in its box and painted there.

But the planning, the talking, the awe and wonder of reading and conversation about these great things are for all the family; and as the children grow older they can help with the painting, each one doing a bit so that it is really a family affair.

What if it takes all of Advent to do it? It is a beautiful preparation for Christmas. Without once saying: *“Christmas isn’t all presents, dear; Christmas isn’t just Santa Claus,”* we begin to teach them what Christmas is.

The feast of Our Lord’s birth in the stable at Bethlehem is more than the most joyful and happiest event of the winter.

It celebrates the beginning of the Redemption, the story of God’s love after man’s disobedience, of God’s desire that man shall be with Him in Heaven.

It contains the seed of all the truths of the Faith, of the doctrines they must learn about the Church, the sacraments, the Mass.

It explains how we must love one another, why we must love one another, why we get presents at all on His birthday.

The greatest gift of all at Christmas is ours: the Son of God was sent to buy us back with love.

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“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 ... And this shall be a sign unto you. You shall find the Infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger ... And they came with haste; and they found Mary and Joseph, and the Infant lying in the manger.”

(Luke 2:7; 2:12; 2:16)



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9. PRAYER FOR PLACING CHRIST IN HIS CRIB

from devotiontoourlady.com

A selected person—preferably the mother of the family, since it is Our Lady, the Mother of God, who brings Jesus into the world, though anyone else can also perform the function—places the Infant Jesus in the crib or manger, and then sprinkles the statue three times with Holy Water. Then everyone recites the following prayer:

PRAYER TO JESUS IN THE MANGER

O Divine Redeemer Jesus Christ, prostrate before Thy crib, I believe Thou art the God of infinite Majesty, even though I do see Thee here as a helpless babe.

I humbly adore and thank Thee for having so humbled Thyself for my salvation as to will to be born in a stable. I thank Thee for all Thou didst wish to suffer for me in Bethlehem, for Thy poverty and humility, for Thy nakedness, tears, cold and sufferings.

Would that I could show Thee that tenderness which Thy Virgin Mother had toward Thee, and love Thee as she did. Would that I could praise Thee with the joy of the angels, that I could kneel before Thee with the faith of St. Joseph, the simplicity of the shepherds.

Uniting myself with these first adorers at the crib, I offer Thee the homage of my heart, and I beg that Thou wouldst be born spiritually in my soul. Make me reflect in some degree the virtues of Thy admirable nativity. Fill me with that spirit of renunciation, of poverty, of humility, which prompted Thee to assume the weakness of our nature, and to be born amid destitution and suffering. Grant that from this day forward, I may in all things seek Thy greater glory, and may enjoy that peace promised to men of good will. Amen.

AN EXPLANATION OF THE PRAYER TO JESUS IN THE MANGER

In this prayer, we acknowledge that the Christ Child that we see in the manger, represented in our nativity scenes, is fully and completely God, the Creator of all. We see in this scene Christ as True God and True Man, and we recognize that the Son of God had to humble Himself to become man like us, and to live and suffer among us. We place ourselves in the scene with the angels and shepherds, with Mary and Joseph, and try to see Christ as they saw Him. In doing so, we unite ourselves more fully to Christ, and ask Him to help us conform our lives to His.

“I believe Thou art the God of infinite Majesty, even though I do see Thee here as a helpless Babe.” Appearances deceive! What appears to be a mere babe, is really almighty God. The same is true of the Holy Eucharist—what appears to be mere bread, is actually almighty God, Our Lord Jesus Christ. It takes eyes of Faith to see this and it takes humility to kneel before that ‘appearance’ of bread and adore God,

“I humbly adore and thank Thee for having so humbled Thyself for my salvation as to will to be born in a stable.” Our Lord would later say, *“Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart!”* Humility is the foundation of the spiritual life. It has to come first. Our Lord therefore shows His humility from the very first moment. His is not born in a palace, not even in a house, not even in the town, but outside all of those places—He is born in a cave.

“I thank Thee for all Thou didst wish to suffer for me in Bethlehem...” Jesus came not to party and play, but to do penance and pray. He came not to sing and dance, but to suffer and die! He came, as He said, *“to call sinners to penance”* not to a dance!

“I offer Thee the homage of my heart, and I beg that Thou wouldst be born spiritually in my soul.” Our soul is the cave, our heart is the manger, our minds should be spiritual. We

want Him to be born into our souls—but it is not that we might make Jesus into what we are ourselves; but that Jesus might make us like unto Him. As one saint says, *“He became man that He might make us like unto God!”* Or as God Himself says: *“I am the Lord your God: be holy because I am holy”* (Leviticus 11:44).

DEFINITION OF WORDS USED IN THE PRAYER TO JESUS IN THE MANGER

Prostrate: face down—usually this means “lying flat on your face on the ground”, but in this case, as you are reading a prayer, it can only be done kneeling before the manger.

Simplicity: in this case, the quality of the shepherds that made them close to nature.

Adorers: those who worship or venerate someone or something—in this case, Christ.

Homage: public honor or respect paid to someone important—in this case, Christ.

Renunciation: rejecting something either bad or good for the sake of something better.

Destitution: extreme poverty.

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A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Stent night, holy night,
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin mother and child,
Holy infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Stent night, holy night,
Shepherds quake at the sight,
Glories stream from heaven afar,
Heavenly hosts sing alleluia;
Christ the Savior, is born!
Christ the Savior, is born!

Stent night, holy night,
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

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10. LITURGICAL HYMNS & CAROLS

(to sing, read or recite)

from devotiontoourlady.com

O COME, ALL YE FAITHFUL (18th Century)

O come, all ye faithful,
Joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
Come and behold Him
Born, the King of angels;

(Refrain)

O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
Christ, the Lord.

God of God,
Light of Light,
Lo! He abhors not the Virgin's womb;
Very God,
Begotten, not created;

(Refrain)

O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
Christ, the Lord.

Sing, choirs of angels,
Sing in exultation,
Sing, all ye citizens of Heaven above;
"Glory to God
In the highest"

(Refrain)

O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
Christ, the Lord.

Yea, Lord, we greet Thee,
Born this happy morning;
Jesus, to Thee be glory given;
Word of the Father,
Now in flesh appearing;

(Refrain)
O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
Christ, the Lord.

SILENT NIGHT **[Joseph Mohr, 1818]**

Silent night! Holy night!
All is calm, all is bright:
Round yon virgin mother and child,
Holy infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night! Holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight:
Glories stream from heaven afar,
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia.
Christ, the Savior is born!
Christ, the Savior is born!

Silent night! Holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth,
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth.

THE FIRST NOEL **[The First Nowell, 1833]**

The first Noel the angels did say,
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep
On a cold winter's night that was so deep.

(Refrain)
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,
Born is the King of Israel.

They looked up and saw a star,
Shining in the east, beyond them far;
And to the Earth it gave great light,
And so it continued both day and night.

(Refrain)
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,
Born is the King of Israel.

And by the light of that same star,
Three Wise men came from country far,
To seek for a King was their intent,
And to follow the star wherever it went.

(Refrain)
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,
Born is the King of Israel.

This star drew night to the north west,
O'er Bethlehem it took its rest,
And there it did both stop and stay
Right over the place where Jesus lay.

(Refrain)
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,
Born is the King of Israel.

Then enter it in those Wise men three,
Full rev'rently upon their knee,
And offer'd there, in His presence,
Their gold and myrrh and frankincense.

(Refrain)
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,
Born is the King of Israel.

Then let us all with one accord
Sing praises to our heavenly Lord;
That hath made Heaven and Earth of naught,
And with his blood mankind hath bought.

(Refrain)
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,
Born is the King of Israel.

OPLATKI



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11. PRAYERS AND RITUAL FOR THE EATING OF THE OPLATKI

(Christmas wafer bread)

from 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 *oblatus*, 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 Holy 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 Holy 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 Holy Mass are referred to as *oblata* (offerings). It is from the Latin word *Oblata* that the Polish word *Oplatki* and the Slovak word *Oplatky* 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

symbolism 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 or monasteries, 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 men of good will."

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 have 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 poppy seeds symbolize tranquility.

Other dishes include sauerkraut stewed with mushrooms and/or peas, pierogi 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.

ALL-NIGHT PRAYER VIGIL AT THE MANGER OF OUR LORD



devotiontoourlady.com wishes you a Merry and “Mary” Christmas!

12. OVERNIGHT VIGIL AND PRAYERS

from devotiontoourlady.com

This is what separates the men from the boys, the women from the girls, the fervent from the not so fervent.

The opening minutes of Christmas could and should be given to Our Lord. Much like Abel giving God the first fruits of his flock of sheep.

Christmas is a time of sheep and shepherds. The shepherds were the first watchers at the cave, aside from Mary and Joseph. Let us also flock to the baby Good Shepherd and not leave Him alone throughout the night. Of course, it is a sacrifice—who doesn't like to sleep!?! Yet Our Lord has come to sacrifice—to sacrifice Himself for His sheep!

A large family could handle this far more easily than a small family. One does not have to guarantee a presence at the home nativity scene for every single minute, all night long. However, perhaps a few minutes of each hour could be covered between all the family members. Simply praying a decade of Rosary would be enough to cover your 'shift'! Some family members or guests could do more, other less. Age and health will play a great part in it.

Alarm clocks (cell phone alarms too) can be set to wake the person up, or if a family intends to really sacrifice, and do the “whole hog” by maintaining an all night vigil of prayer, then as one goes to bed, they can wake the next person on list.

We cannot outdo God in generosity. After all, it's His birthday! Many a mother spends a whole 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-NIGHT PRAYER VIGIL

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