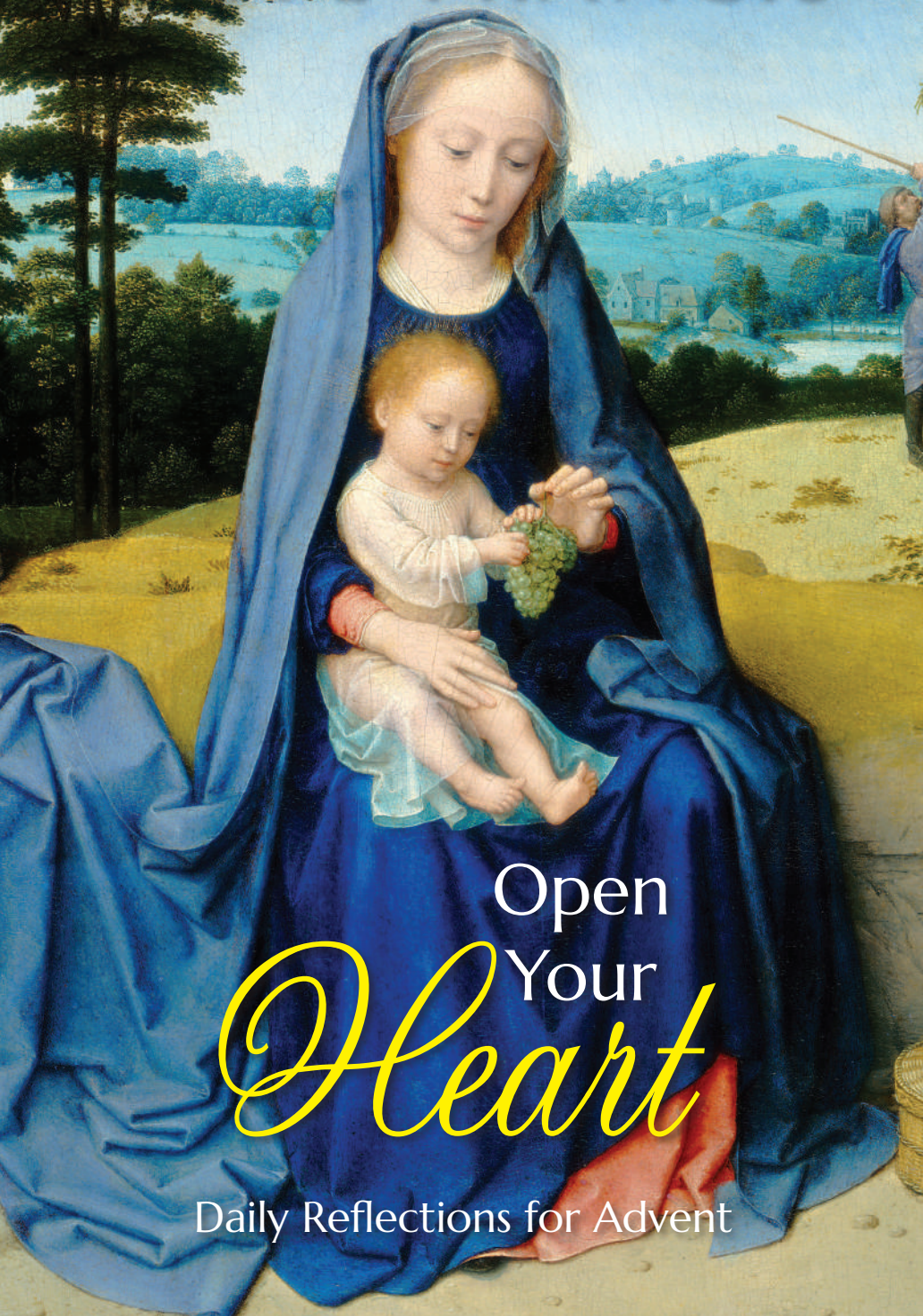


POPE FRANCIS



Open
Your
Heart

Daily Reflections for Advent

Open Your Heart

INTRODUCTION

There is a wonderful image in the Book of Revelation (3:20) of Jesus standing at our door and knocking, just waiting for us to open the door and invite him in. This image also captures the spirit of Advent. Our task is to open the door of our heart and welcome Jesus once again into our lives so that we can enter more deeply into a relationship with him.

This encounter is what we have been waiting our whole lives for. When he steps across the threshold of our hearts, everything will be changed—ourselves, our relationship to him, our relationships with others and our relationship to our world. Of course we want to wait patiently for his knock, but we also want to be prepared and not to be afraid to open ourselves and our lives to his presence. But when we do encounter Jesus, we realize that he challenges us daily with two questions: Do you believe? And if so, then how will you live?

I hope that these reflections of Pope Francis will help you to answer these two crucial questions and open your heart to a fresh experience of Christ coming again to dwell with you and change your life. So as we turn to the work of opening our hearts to Jesus during this Advent, let us be encouraged by these words of Pope Francis:

“I wish all of you a good Advent journey to encounter the Lord. May it be a time of hope: to encounter the Lord who comes to encounter us. Let us not resist when Christ comes to change our lives, but to be ready to let ourselves be visited by him, the awaited and welcome guest, even if it disturbs our plans.”

Steve Mueller, Editor

A SEASON OF HOPE

*“Let your steadfast love, O LORD,
be upon us, even as we hope in you.”
(Psalm 33:22)*

In this season of Advent, which is a time of waiting in which we prepare ourselves to welcome once again the comforting mystery of the Incarnation and the light of Christmas, it is important to reflect on Christian hope. It is very important, because hope never disappoints. Optimism disappoints, but hope does not!

We have such need, in these times that appear dark and in which we sometimes feel disoriented at the evil and violence that surrounds us and at the distress of so many of our brothers and sisters. We need hope! We feel disoriented and even rather discouraged because we are powerless and it seems this darkness will never end. But we must not let hope abandon us, because God, with his love, walks with us.

We can all say “I hope because God is beside me; I have hope because God walks with me.” God walks and holds my hand. God does not leave us to ourselves. The Lord Jesus has conquered evil and has opened the path of life for us. The birth of the Savior is the light that pierces and dispels the deepest darkness. The presence of the Lord in the midst of his people cancels the sorrow of defeat and the misery of slavery, and ushers in joy and happiness.



*How might I reaffirm my hope and try to discover
anew God’s presence in me and in my life this Advent?*

HOPE URGES US ON

*“I wait for the LORD;
my soul waits, and in his word I hope.”
(Psalm 130:5)*

*A*dvent offers us a time to reflect upon when hope came into the world with the incarnation of the son of God. Isaiah foretold the birth of the messiah in several passages: “Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (7:14); and “there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (11:1). In these passages, the meaning of Christmas shines through. God fulfills the promise by becoming human.

Not abandoning his people, God draws near to the point of stripping himself of his divinity. In this way God shows his fidelity and inaugurates a new kingdom, which gives a new hope to mankind. The birth of Christ, inaugurating redemption, speaks to us of a different hope, a dependable, visible and understandable hope, because it is founded in God. He comes into the world and gives us the strength to walk with him. God walks with us in Jesus, and walking with him toward the fullness of life gives us the strength to dwell in the present in a new way.

Thus for a Christian, to hope means the certainty of being on a journey with Christ toward the Father who awaits us. Hope is never still; hope is always journeying. This hope, which the child of Bethlehem gives us, offers a destination—a sure, ongoing goal of blessedness—to those who trust in a merciful God.



How might I invite Jesus to journey with me during this Advent?

REASONS FOR OUR HOPE

*“I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”
(Isaiah 43:19)*

When everything seems finished, when, faced with many negative realities, faith becomes demanding and there comes the temptation that says that nothing makes sense anymore, behold instead the beautiful Good News: God is coming to fulfill something new, to establish a kingdom of peace. God comes to bring freedom and consolation. Evil will not triumph forever; there will be an end to suffering. Despair is defeated because God is among us.

And we too are urged to awake a little, like Jerusalem, for we are called to become men and women of hope, cooperating in the coming of this kingdom made of light and destined for all persons. How bad it is when we find a Christian who has lost hope! “But, I don’t hope in anything; everything is finished for me” says a Christian who is incapable of looking to the horizons of hope, and before whose heart there is only a wall. However, God destroys such walls with forgiveness! And for this reason we must pray, that each day God may give us hope and give it to everyone: that hope which arises when we see God in the crib in Bethlehem. The message of the Good News entrusted to us is urgent because the world cannot wait, humanity is hungry and thirsty for justice, truth and peace.



*How might I share
my hope today with someone else?*

SENT FOR FORGIVENESS

*“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.”
(John 3:17)*

God’s final judgment is already in progress. It begins now and is pronounced at every moment over the course of our lives, as it sums up either our faith in the salvation that is present and active in Christ, or of our unbelief, whereby we close in upon ourselves. But if we close ourselves to Jesus’ love, we condemn ourselves.

Salvation means opening oneself to Jesus for he saves us. If we are sinners—and we all are—we ask him for forgiveness and if we have the desire to be good, he forgives us. Jesus’ love is great, Jesus’ love is merciful, Jesus’ love forgives. But you have to open yourself and to open oneself means to repent, to accuse oneself of the bad things that we have done.

The Lord Jesus gave himself and continues to give himself to us, in order to fill us with the mercy and grace of the Father. We must not grow weary of keeping watch over our thoughts and our attitudes, in order that we may be given even now a foretaste of the warmth and splendor of God’s face, which in eternal life we shall contemplate in all its fullness. Let us go forward in such a way that our hearts open up to Jesus and to his salvation. Let us go forward without fear, for Jesus’ love is greater and if we ask forgiveness for our sins he will forgive us. This is what Jesus is like.



*For what and from whom
do I most need to ask forgiveness?*

JESUS WAITS FOR US

“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” (Revelation 3:20)

The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life. It is not God’s will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit that has its source in the heart of the risen Christ.

I invite all Christians, everywhere this Advent to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them. I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord. The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk. Whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that God is already there, waiting for us with open arms.



*How might I invite Jesus to draw near
to help me renew my relationship with him?*

WELCOME JESUS INTO YOUR HOME

*“I was a stranger and you did not welcome me,
naked and you did not give me clothing,
sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”
(Matthew 25:43)*

Each Christian family can first of all—as Mary and Joseph did—welcome Jesus, listen to him, speak with him, guard him, protect him, grow with him and in this way improve the world. Let us make room in our heart and in our day for the Lord as Mary and Joseph also did, though it was not always easy.

How many difficulties they had to overcome! They were not a superficial family, they were not an unreal family. The family of Nazareth urges us to rediscover the vocation and mission of the family, of every family. And, what happened in those 30 years in Nazareth, can thus happen to us too as we seek to make love and not hate normal, to make mutual help commonplace, not indifference or enmity.

Since then, each time there is a family that keeps this mystery, even if it were on the periphery of the world, the mystery of Jesus, God’s son who comes to save us, is at work. He comes to save the world. And this is the great mission of the family: to make room for Jesus who is coming, to welcome Jesus in the family, in each member: children, husband, wife, grandparents. Jesus is there. Welcome him there, in order that he grow spiritually in the family. May the Lord grant us this grace in these days of Advent.



*What can my household do
to welcome Jesus more fully this Advent?*

OPENING OUR HEARTS TO JESUS

“We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us.” (1 John 1:3)

The primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus that we have received, the experience of salvation urging us to ever greater love of him. What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, point him out, make him known? If we do not feel an intense desire to share this love, we need to pray insistently that he will once more touch our hearts. We need to implore his grace daily, asking him to open our cold hearts and shake up our lukewarm and superficial existence.

Standing before Jesus with open hearts, letting him look at us, we see that gaze of love that the disciples glimpsed when he called them. How good it is to stand before a crucifix, or on our knees before the Blessed Sacrament, and simply be in his presence! How much good it does us when he once more touches our lives and impels us to share his new life!

The best incentive for sharing the gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart. If we approach it in this way, its beauty will amaze and constantly excite us. We need to recover a contemplative spirit which can help us realize anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure that makes us more human and helps us lead a new life. There is nothing more precious that we can give to others.



*How might I share the good news
of Jesus' love with someone else today?*

PREPARE THE LORD'S WAY

“A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” (Isaiah 40:3)

Isaiah addresses the people with his message of comfort: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid.” God the Father comforts by raising up comforters, whom he asks to encourage the people, his children, by proclaiming that the tribulation has ended, affliction has ended and sins have been forgiven. This is what heals the afflicted and fearful heart. This is why the prophet asks them to prepare the way of the Lord, to be ready to receive his gifts and his salvation.

For the people, comfort begins with the opportunity to walk on God's path, a new path, made straight and passable, a way prepared in the desert, so as to make it possible to cross it and return to the homeland. The prophet addresses the people who are living the tragedy of the exile in Babylon, and now instead they hear that they may return to their land, across a path made smooth and wide, without valleys and mountains that make the journey arduous, a level path across the desert. Thus, preparing that path means preparing a way of salvation and liberation from every obstacle and hindrance.



*What obstacles do I most need
to remove to let God draw nearer to me today?*

HE IS COMING

*“One who is more powerful than I is coming after me;
I am not worthy to carry his sandals.
He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Matthew 3:11)*

*W*e cannot deny that the world today is in a crisis of faith. Someone says: “I believe in God, I am a Christian.” But your life is far from being Christian; it is far removed from God! “Do I believe?” “Yes!” This means returning to God, converting the heart to God and going on this path to find him. He is waiting for us.

This is John the Baptist’s preaching: prepare. Prepare for the encounter with this child who will give our smile back to us. When the Baptist proclaims Jesus’ coming, it is as if the Israelites are still in exile, because they are under Roman domination, which renders them foreigners in their own homeland, ruled by powerful occupiers that make decisions about their lives. However, the true history is not the one made by the powerful, but the one made by God together with his little ones.

The true history—that which will remain in eternity—is the one that God writes with his little ones: God with Mary, God with Jesus, God with Joseph, God with the little ones. The little ones, made great by their faith, are able to continue to hope. Hope is the virtue of the little ones. The great ones, those who are satisfied, do not know what hope is. Let us be confident and hopeful as we await the coming of the Lord.



*What might I do today to seek to discover
God’s presence in myself and in others?*

JESUS' PRESENCE CHANGES EVERYTHING

*"Keep awake therefore, for you do not know
on what day your Lord is coming." (Matthew 24:42)*

Scripture emphasizes the contrast between the normal unfolding of events, the everyday routine, and the unexpected coming of the Lord. In the hours which precede a great disaster, everyone is calm, and they go about their usual business without realizing that their lives are about to be turned upside down. Scripture wants us to open our horizons to another, greater dimension, one which, on the one hand puts into perspective everyday things, while at the same time making them precious, crucial. The relationship with the God-who-comes-to-visit-us gives every thing a different meaning and value.

From this perspective there also comes an invitation to sobriety, to not be controlled by the material things of this world, but rather to govern them. If, by contrast, we allow ourselves to be influenced and overpowered by these things, we cannot perceive that there is something more important: our final encounter with the Lord who comes for us. In that moment, we are invited to be vigilant, because in not knowing when he will come, we always need to be ready.

In this season of Advent, we are called to expand the horizons of our hearts, to be amazed by the life which presents itself each day with newness. In order to do this, we must learn to not depend on our own certainties, on our own established strategies, because the Lord comes at a time that we do not imagine.



*How might I be more open to what
God is doing in me to draw me closer to God?*

GOD IS NEAR

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1:15)

Jesus preached a new joyful message: the kingdom of God is at hand! It is near, and it is in us! But what is this kingdom of God? In some way it is already present and we may experience spiritual power from now on. God comes to establish his lordship in our history, today, every day, in our life; and there—where it is welcomed with faith and humility—love, joy and peace blossom.

The condition for entering and being a part of this kingdom is to implement a change in our life, that is to convert, to convert every day, to take a step forward each day. It is a question of leaving behind the comfortable but misleading ways of the idols of this world and instead preparing the way of the Lord, which does not take away our freedom, but gives us true happiness.

With the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, it is God himself who abides among us to free us from self interest, sin and corruption, from seeking success at all costs, from seeking power to the detriment of the weak, from having the desire for wealth and from seeking pleasure at any price. In this season of Advent, we prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight when we examine our conscience, when we scrutinize our attitudes, to eliminate these sinful ways.



*What changes in myself and my life do
I think God is most asking me to make now?*

MARY: MODEL OF FAITH

*“Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)*

Mary was a Jewish girl who was waiting with all her heart for the redemption of her people. But in her heart there was a secret that even she herself did not yet know: in God’s loving plan she was destined to become the mother of the redeemer. At the Annunciation, God’s messenger calls her “full of grace” and reveals this plan to her. Mary answers “yes” and from that moment Mary’s faith is concentrated on Jesus, the son of God, who took flesh from her and in whom all the promises of salvation history are fulfilled. Mary’s faith is the fulfillment of Israel’s faith, and thus she is the model of the Church’s faith, which has Christ, the incarnation of God’s infinite love, as its center.

Mary lived her faith in the simplicity of the thousand daily tasks and worries of every mother. Her normal life served as the basis for the unique relationship and profound dialogue that unfolded between her and God, between her and her son. Her “yes,” already perfect from the start, grew until the hour of the cross. There her motherhood opened to embrace every one of us, so as to guide us to her son. Mary lived perpetually immersed in the mystery of God-made-human, as his first and perfect disciple, by contemplating all things in her heart in the light of the Holy Spirit, in order to understand and live out the will of God.



*How might I show my faith better
in my daily thoughts and actions?*

THE FULLNESS OF BELIEVING

*“No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,
who is close to the Father’s heart,
who has made him known.” (John 1:18)*

In faith, Christ is not simply the one in whom we believe, the supreme manifestation of God’s love; he is also the one with whom we are united precisely in order to believe. Faith does not merely gaze at Jesus, but sees things as Jesus himself sees them, with his own eyes. It is a participation in his way of seeing.

In many areas in our lives we trust others who know more than we do. We trust the architect who builds our home, the pharmacist who gives us medicine for healing, the lawyer who defends us in court. We also need someone trustworthy and knowledgeable where God is concerned. Jesus, the son of God, is the one who makes God known to us. Christ’s life, his way of knowing the Father and living in complete and constant relationship with him, opens up new and inviting vistas for human experience.

John’s Gospel brings out the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus for our faith by using various forms of the verb “to believe.” In addition to “believing that” what Jesus tells us is true, John also speaks of “believing” Jesus and “believing in” Jesus. We “believe” Jesus when we accept his word, his testimony, because he is truthful. We “believe in” Jesus when we personally welcome him into our lives and journey towards him, clinging to him in love and following in his footsteps along the way.



*In what way can I welcome Jesus
more fully into my life today?*

THE POWER OF GOD'S LOVE

*“God reveals deep and hidden things;
God knows what is in the darkness,
and light dwells with him.” (Daniel 2:22)*

To enable us to know, accept and follow him, the son of God took on our flesh. In this way he also saw the Father humanly, within the setting of a journey unfolding in time. Christian faith is faith in the incarnation of the Word and his bodily resurrection. It is faith in a God who is so close to us that he entered our human history.

Far from divorcing us from reality, our faith in the son of God made human in Jesus of Nazareth enables us to grasp reality's deepest meaning and to see how much God loves this world and is constantly guiding it towards himself. This leads us, as Christians, to live our lives in this world with ever greater commitment and intensity. God alone can save us. Only God's mercy can free humanity from the many forms of evil, at times monstrous evil, that selfishness spawns in our midst. The grace of God can convert hearts and offer mankind a way out of humanly insoluble situations.

Let us make ourselves ready to celebrate Christmas by contemplating Mary and Joseph: Mary, the woman full of grace who had the courage to entrust herself totally to the Word of God; Joseph, the faithful and just man who chose to believe the Lord rather than listen to the voices of doubt and human pride. With them, let us walk together toward Bethlehem.



*From what selfishness or evil
do I most want Jesus to free me?*

JOYFUL SUNDAY

*“Rejoice in the Lord always;
again I will say, Rejoice.” (Philippians 4:4)*

On this Sunday, the Church looks forward to the joy of Christmas, which is why it is called “Gaudete Sunday,” from the Latin word for *rejoice*. In this season, a time of preparation for Christmas, we usually wear violet vestments, but today they are rose-colored for the blossoming of Christmas joy, which is a special joy not just for Christmas day but for the entire life of a Christian. This serene and tranquil joy forever accompanies the Christian. Even in difficult moments and suffering, this joy becomes peace.

Therefore, to have this joy in preparation for Christmas, first, pray: “Lord, let me live this Christmas with true joy,” not with the joy of consumerism that leads me to December 24th with anxiety, because “I’m missing this, I’m missing that.” Second, give thanks to God: “Thank you, Lord, for so many beautiful things!” Third, think of how you can go out to others in difficulty and with problems to bring a little peace and joy.

Let us pray, then, asking for the joy of Christmas. Let us give thanks to God for the good things that he has given us, above all the faith. Let us ask, what can I do to bring a little relief, a little peace to those who suffer? So pray, give thanks and help others to arrive at the birth of the anointed One, the Christ.



*How might I pray, give thanks
and help others better today?*

JESUS IS OUR JOY

“Now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.” (John 17:13)

The human heart desires joy. We all desire joy—every family, every people aspires to happiness. But what is the joy that the Christian is called to live out and bear witness to? It is the joy that comes from the closeness of God, from God’s presence in our life.

From the moment Jesus entered into history with his birth in Bethlehem, humanity received the seed of the kingdom of God like the soil receives the seed, the promise of a future harvest. Jesus has come to bring joy to all people for all time. It is not just a hopeful joy or a joy postponed until paradise—as if here on earth we are sad but in paradise we will be filled with joy. No! It is a joy already real and tangible now, because Jesus himself is our joy, and with Jesus joy finds its true home. And without Jesus is there joy? No! He is living, he is the risen One, and he works in us and among us especially through the Word and the sacraments.

We are called to accept ever anew God’s presence among us and to help others to discover him, or to rediscover what they have forgotten. It is a most beautiful mission to direct people to Christ—not to ourselves!—for Christ is the destination to which the human heart tends when it seeks joy and happiness.



*How might I better share my joy
and draw someone closer to Christ today?*

MISSIONARIES OF JOY

*“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”
(1 Thessalonians 5:16-17)*

St. Paul indicates the conditions for being “missionaries of joy:” praying constantly, always giving thanks to God, giving way to his Spirit, seeking the good and avoiding evil (1 Thessalonians 5:17-22). If this becomes our lifestyle, then the Good News will be able to enter so many homes and help people and families to rediscover that in Jesus lies salvation.

In Christ it is possible to find interior peace and the strength to face different life situations every day, even the most difficult. The Christian’s heart is filled with peace because he knows how to place his joy in the Lord even when going through the difficult moments in life. To have faith does not mean to never have difficult moments but to have the strength to face those moments knowing that we are not alone. And this is the peace that God gives to his children.

With her gaze turned to Christmas already close at hand, the Church invites us to bear witness that Jesus is not a person of the past but the Word of God who today continues to illuminate the path of mankind. His gestures—the Sacraments—are the manifestation of the love that the Father bears for every human being. May the virgin Mary render us ever more joyous in the Lord, who comes to free us from the many depressing forms of interior and exterior slavery.



*What do I most need to change in my lifestyle
to witness to God’s presence in my life?*

RENEWAL FROM WITHIN

*“Although you have not seen him, you love him;
and even though you do not see him now,
you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable
and glorious joy.” (1 Peter 1:8)*

Christian joy is not a superficial or purely emotional cheerfulness, nor is it the cheerfulness of worldliness or of consumerism. Rather, it entails a more authentic joy, the taste of which we are called to rediscover. This joy touches our innermost being, as we await Jesus, the promised messiah, born in Bethlehem of the virgin Mary who has already come to bring salvation to the world.

The salvation Jesus brings seizes the human being and regenerates him. God has entered history to free us from the slavery of sin. God pitched his tent in our midst in order to share our existence, to heal our lesions, to bind our wounds and to give us new life. Joy is the fruit of this intervention of God’s salvation and love.

We are called to let ourselves be drawn in by the feeling of this exultation and joy, a heartfelt joy, the joy within which leads us forth and gives us courage. But a Christian who isn’t joyful is a Christian who is lacking something, or else is not a Christian at all! The Lord comes into our life as a liberator to free us from all forms of interior and exterior slavery and show us the path of faithfulness, of patience and of perseverance because, upon his return, our joy will be overflowing. Then we can share this joy with others, giving comfort and hope to the poor, the sick and those who are lonely and unhappy.



From what and for what do I most want Jesus to free me today?

SEEKING REAL JOY

“Christ was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.” (1 Timothy 3:16)

The Gospel, radiant with the glory of Christ’s cross, constantly invites us to rejoice. I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved.

I understand, though, the grief of people who have to endure great suffering. Yet slowly but surely we all have to let the joy of faith slowly revive as a quiet yet firm trust, even amid the greatest distress. Sometimes we are tempted to find excuses and complain, acting as if we could only be happy if a thousand conditions were met. I can say that the most beautiful and natural expressions of joy that I have seen in my life were in poor people who had little to hold on to.

I also think of the real joy shown by others who, even amid pressing professional obligations, were able to preserve, in detachment and simplicity, a heart full of faith. In their own way, all these instances of joy flow from the infinite love of God, who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ.



How might I better share my joy with others today?

AFRAID TO BE FREE

“If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36)

The attitude of thanksgiving disposes us to humility, to recognize and receive the Lord’s gifts. The fundamental motive for our rendering thanks to God is that God has made us his children. This unmerited gift fills us with a gratitude brimming with astonishment! But the very gift for which we give thanks is also a reason for an examination of conscience, for a revision of our personal and communal life, to ask ourselves: what is our lifestyle? Do we live as children or as slaves? Do we live as people baptized in Christ, anointed by the Spirit, delivered and free? Or do we live according to the corrupt, worldly logic, doing what the devil makes us believe is in our interests?

On our daily journey there is always a tendency to resist liberation. We are afraid of freedom and, paradoxically and somewhat unwittingly, we prefer slavery. Freedom frightens us because it causes us to face our responsibility to live it well. Instead, slavery makes us feel more secure, that is, it impedes us from truly and fully living the present, because it empties it of the past and closes it to the future, to eternity. Slavery makes us believe that we cannot dream, fly, hope.

For us Christians, the quality of our actions, of our life, of our presence in the city, of our service to the common good, of our participation in public and ecclesial institutions, also depends upon this examination of conscience.



*What resistance do I most need to overcome
to accept the freedom that Christ is offering me?*

LISTEN TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

“The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” (John 14:26)

The Holy Spirit teaches us to see with the eyes of Christ, to live life as Christ lived, to understand life as Christ understood it. That is why the living water, who is the Holy Spirit, quenches our thirst, why he tells us that we are loved by God as children, that we can love God as his children and that by his grace we can live as children of God, like Jesus. And do we listen to the Holy Spirit?

What does the Holy Spirit tell us? He says: God loves you. He tells us this. God loves you, God likes you. Do we truly love God and others, as Jesus does? Let us allow ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit, let us allow him to speak to our heart and say this to us: God is love, God is waiting for us, God is Father, he loves us as a true father loves. He loves us truly and only the Holy Spirit can tell us this in our hearts.

We must listen to the Holy Spirit who is within us and hear him. What is he telling us? That God is good, that God is Father, that God loves us, that God always forgives us. Let us listen to the Holy Spirit, let us hear the Holy Spirit and let us move forward on this path of love, mercy and forgiveness. Let us listen carefully to the Holy Spirit.



*What might I do to listen
more attentively to the Holy Spirit today?*

YOU ARE NEAR

*“The LORD is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.” (Psalm 145:18)*

This time of Advent is characterized by the theme of closeness, God’s closeness to humanity. Mary and Joseph are the two people who, more than anyone else, were involved in this mystery of God’s closeness to humanity.

The son of God comes into Mary’s womb in order to become human, and she welcomes him. Thus, in a unique way, God drew near to us and took on flesh through a woman. To us too, in a different way, God draws near with his grace in order to enter our life and offer us the gift of his son. What do we do? Do we welcome him, let him draw near, or do we reject him, push him away?

Joseph faces this extraordinary event, which surely gave rise to many questions in his heart, trusting totally in God who has drawn near to him, and so he does not repudiate Mary. In accepting her, Joseph knowingly and lovingly receives her child.

Mary and Joseph, who were the first to welcome Jesus through faith, introduce us to the mystery of Christmas. Mary helps us to assume an attitude of openness in order to welcome the son of God into our concrete life, in our flesh. Joseph spurs us to always seek God’s will and to follow it with full trust. Both allow God to draw near to them.



*How and when have I most experienced
God’s closeness during this Advent?*

STIRRED FROM WITHIN

*“When the voice of your greeting came to my ears,
the babe in my womb leaped for joy.
And blessed is she who believed.” (Luke 1:44-45).*

With these words Elizabeth anointed Mary’s presence in her house. Words that were born of her womb, that come from within; words that managed to echo all she experienced with her cousin’s visit. God visits us in a woman’s womb by moving the womb of another woman with a song of blessing and praise, with a song of joy. The Gospel scene bears all the dynamism of God’s visit: when God comes to encounter us, God moves us inwardly and sets in motion what we are until our whole life is transformed into praise and blessing.

When God visits us, God leaves us restless, with the healthy restlessness of those who feel they have been called to proclaim that God lives and is in the midst of his people. This is what we see in Mary, the first disciple and missionary, the new ark of the covenant who, far from remaining in the reserved space of our temples, goes out to visit and accompany the gestation of John with her presence. She is thus the icon of the disciple, of the believing and prayerful woman who is able to accompany and encourage our faith and our hope in the various stages through which we must pass.



*What restlessness have I most felt this
Advent because of God’s presence stirring within me?*

GOD'S PATIENCE

*“The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region
and shadow of death light has dawned.” (Matthew 4:16)*

During this Advent, we have passed through the darkness which envelops the earth, guided by the flame of faith that illuminates our steps and enlivened by the hope of finding the “great light.” By opening our hearts, we also can contemplate the miracle of that child/sun who, arising from on high, illuminates the horizon.

The origin of the darkness that envelops the world is lost in the night of the ages. As a result, the unfolding of the centuries has been marked by violence, wars, hatred and oppression. But God, who placed a sense of expectation in humans who were made in God’s image and likeness, was waiting. God waited for so long that perhaps at a certain point it seemed God should have given up. But God could not give up but continued to wait patiently in the face of the corruption of the world. How difficult it is to comprehend God’s patience towards us.

Through the course of history, the light that shatters the darkness reveals to us that God is Father and that his patient fidelity is stronger than darkness and corruption. This is the message of Christmas. God does not know outbursts of anger or impatience but is always there, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, waiting patiently to catch from afar a glimpse of the beloved lost son as he returns.



*How can I thank God for being patient
with me as I try to find my way back to God?*

BRINGING THE GIFT OF OURSELVES

*“May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God
and to the steadfastness of Christ.” (2 Thessalonians 3:5)*

God’s love brings light to our lives and peace to our hearts. The shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth understood this. They were among the marginalized of those times. Yet no one is marginalized in the sight of God, and that Christmas, they themselves were the guests. People who felt sure of themselves, self-sufficient, were at home with their possessions. It was the shepherds who “set out with haste.”

May we too be challenged and called by Jesus. Let us approach him with trust, starting from all those things that make us feel marginalized, from our limitations and our sins. Let us be touched by the tenderness that saves. Let us draw close to God who draws close to us. Let us pause to gaze upon the crib, and relive in our imagination the birth of Jesus: light and peace, dire poverty and rejection.

With the shepherds, let us enter into the real Christmas, bringing to Jesus all that we are, our alienation, our unhealed wounds, our sins. Then, in Jesus, we will enjoy the taste of the true spirit of Christmas: the beauty of being loved by God. With Mary and Joseph, let us pause before the manger, contemplating Jesus’ humble and infinite love, let us simply tell him: Thank you. Thank you because you have done all this for me.



*How might I make an offering
of myself and my life to God today?*

CHALLENGED BY THIS CHILD

*“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,
and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”*
(Mark 9:37)

Today, before the little child Jesus, we should acknowledge that we need him to enlighten us, because all too often we end up being narrow-minded or prisoners of an all-or-nothing attitude that would force others to conform to our own ideas. We need this light, which helps us learn from our mistakes and failed attempts in order to improve and surpass ourselves; this light born of the humble and courageous awareness of those who find the strength, time and time again, to rise up and start anew.

We do well to contemplate the God-child! Doing so invites us to return to the sources and roots of our faith. In Jesus, faith becomes hope; it becomes a leaven and a blessing. With a tenderness that never disappoints but is always capable of restoring our joy, Christ makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew.

But let us also allow the child in the manger to challenge us concerning all those children in today’s world who are lying not in a crib, caressed with affection by their mothers and fathers, but in squalid mangers that devour dignity. Children who hide underground to escape bombardment, on the pavements of large cities, in the hold of a boat overladen with immigrants. Let us allow ourselves to be challenged by those children who are not allowed to be born, by those who cry because no one relieves their hunger, by those who hold in their hands not toys, but weapons.



*How might the Christ child’s vulnerability
move me to help children who are in need today?*

AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

*“But above all bless your Maker,
who fills you with his good gifts.” (Sirach 32:13)*

*A*s Advent draws to a close, let us pause before the manger and express our gratitude to God for all the signs of his generosity in our life and our history, seen in countless ways through the witness of those people who quietly took a risk. A gratitude that is no sterile nostalgia or empty recollection of an idealized and disembodied past, but a living memory, one that helps to generate personal and communal creativity because we know that God is with us.

Let us pause to contemplate how God has been present throughout this year and to remind ourselves that every age, every moment is the bearer of graces and blessings. The manger challenges us not to give up on anything or anyone. To look upon the manger means to find the strength to take our place in history without complaining or being resentful, without closing in on ourselves or seeking a means of escape, without looking for shortcuts in our own interest. Looking at the manger means recognizing that the times ahead call for bold and hope-filled initiatives, as well as the renunciation of vain self-promotion and endless concern with appearances. Looking at the manger means seeing how God gets involved by involving us, making us part of his work, inviting us to welcome the future courageously and decisively.



*How has God been most present
to me throughout this Advent season?*

GOD'S BELOVED CHILDREN

*"Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."
(Philippians 2:6-7)*

God wants us to live as his sons and daughters. What is so surprising is that God accomplishes this through the smallness and vulnerability of a newborn child. He decides personally to draw near to us and in his flesh to embrace our flesh, in his weakness to embrace our weakness, in his littleness to envelop our littleness.

In Christ, God did not put on a human mask. Instead he became human and shared completely in our human condition. Far from remaining an idea or an abstract essence, he wanted to be close to all those who felt lost, demeaned, hurt, discouraged, inconsolable and frightened. Close to all those who in their bodies carry the burden of separation and loneliness, so that sin, shame, hurt, despair and exclusion would not have the final word in the lives of his sons and daughters.

The manger invites us to make this divine "logic" our own. It is not a logic centered on privilege, exemptions or favors but on encounter and closeness. The manger invites us to break with the logic of exceptions for some and exclusion for others. God himself comes to shatter the chains of privilege that always cause exclusion, in order to introduce the caress of compassion that brings inclusion, that makes the dignity of each person shine forth, the dignity for which he or she was created. A child in swaddling clothes shows us the power of God who approaches us as a gift, an offering, a leaven and opportunity for creating a culture of encounter.



*How has God's closeness
to me most changed me this Advent?*

Let us rejoice for the imminent coming of our Redeemer
and share this joy with others,
giving comfort and hope to the poor, the sick,
and to people who are lonely and unhappy.
Let us welcome the Lord who always comes
and knocks at our door, knocks at our heart,
in order to draw near to us.

He invites us to recognize his footsteps
among the brothers and sisters who pass beside us,
especially the weakest and most needy.
Help us to hear God's voice in prayer
and to serve God with compassion
in our brothers and sisters,
especially the weakest and most needy,
so as to be prepared for our Christmas appointment,
preparing our hearts to welcome Jesus.

—*Pope Francis*



Acknowledgements

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THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS

“To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:11-12)

The mystery of Christmas, which is light and joy, challenges and unsettles us, because it is at once a mystery of hope and of sadness. It has a taste of sadness, inasmuch as love is not accepted and life is discarded. Such was the case with Joseph and Mary, who met with closed doors and placed Jesus in a manger, “because there was no place for them in the inn.”

Jesus was born rejected by some and regarded by many others with indifference. Today too, that same indifference can exist, whenever Christmas becomes a holiday with ourselves at the center rather than Jesus; when the lights of shop windows push the light of God into the shadows; when we are enthused about gifts but indifferent to our neighbors in need. This worldliness has kidnapped Christmas. We need to liberate it!

Yet Christmas has above all a taste of hope because, for all the darkness in our lives, God’s light shines forth. His gentle light does not frighten us. God, who is in love with us, draws us to himself with his tenderness, by being born poor and frail in our midst, as one of us. He is born in Bethlehem, which means “house of bread.” In this way, he seems to tell us that he is born as bread for us. He enters our life to give us his life. He comes into our world to give us his love.



How might I be more eager to share the love of Christ with others during the coming days?