



WATCH *for the* LORD

Advent Reflections from

POPE FRANCIS, MOTHER TERESA
HENRI NOUWEN

INTRODUCTION

*A*dvent is a season of wonder. And nothing surprises us more than God's extravagant giving of gifts. Without our even asking, God has given us the gift of life, bestowed on us our unique bodies and minds, our families and situations in which we slowly but surely make our way back to the God from whom we have come. But perhaps the biggest surprise of all is the gift that God has given us in Jesus, who is God become human. This most surprising gift is the one we concentrate on during our Advent preparation for Christmas. Of course, we must also note that Christ was not satisfied simply to become human long ago, but found a way to remain with us even after death. Jesus, the living and now risen one, continues to live within us through the power of the Holy Spirit, who unites us to Jesus and to one another as we share the life of God that Jesus brought us. In this little booklet, through the reflections of Pope Francis, St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Fr. Henri Nouwen, we discover the power and wonder of God's presence and how we might respond to it. These three guides to the ways that God continues to be with us help us recapture the wonder of God's surprising presence in our hearts and in our lives today.

—*Steve Mueller, Editor*

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Watch for the Lord

*"You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts,
for the coming of the Lord is near" (James 5:8).*

Today we begin our Advent journey, which will culminate in Christmas. Advent is the time we are given to welcome the Lord who comes near to encounter us, and also to verify our longing for God, to look forward and prepare ourselves for Christ's return to us in the celebration of Christmas. We remember his historic coming in the humility of the human condition. But he enters our heart each time we are willing to receive him and he will come again at the end of time to "judge the living and the dead." Therefore, we must always be vigilant and await the Lord with the hope of encountering him. In today's Gospel Jesus exhorts us to be vigilant, so as to be ready

to welcome him at the moment of his return. The person who takes heed does not let himself or herself be overwhelmed by distraction or superficiality amid the worldly din, but lives in a full and conscious way, with concern first and foremost for others. The watchful person is the one who accepts the invitation to keep watch, that is, not to be overpowered by the listlessness of discouragement, by the lack of hope, by disappointment, and at the same time to ward off the allure of the many vanities with which the world is brimming and for which, now and then, time and personal and familial peace is sacrificed.

—Pope Francis



How might I be more attentive to God's presence with me this Advent?

MONDAY, WEEK I

Works of Love & Peace

*“My mother and my brothers are those
who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:21).*

Looking at your eyes I can tell whether there is peace in your heart or not. We see people radiating joy, and in their eyes you can see purity. If we want our minds to have silence, keep a silence of the eyes. Use your two eyes to help you pray better. Prayer in action is love, and love in action is service. Try to give unconditionally whatever a person needs in the moment. The point is to do something, however small, and show you care through your actions by giving your time. We can do something beautiful for God by reaching out to the poor. I see no lack of hesitation in help-

ing others. I see only people filled with God's love, wanting to do works of love. Works of love are always works of peace. Whenever you share love with others, you'll notice the peace that comes to you and to them. When there is peace, there is God—that is how God touches our lives and shows his love for us by pouring peace and joy into our hearts. Lead me from death to life, from falsehood to truth. Lead me from despair to hope, from fear to truth. Lead me from hate to love, from war to peace. Let peace fill our hearts, our world our universe, peace, peace, peace.

—Mother Teresa



How might I do more to help those around me this Advent?

TUESDAY, WEEK I

God Comes to Meet Us!

*“Perhaps the LORD will come to meet me.
Whatever he shows me I will tell you” (Numbers 23:3).*

God did not create us to be alone, closed in on ourselves, but in order to be able to encounter him and to open ourselves to encounter others. God first comes to each one of us—and this is marvelous! In the Bible God always appears as the one who takes the initiative in the encounter with us: it is God who seeks us, and usually he seeks us precisely while we are in the bitter and tragic moment of betraying and fleeing from God. God does not wait in seeking us but seeks us out immediately. God is a patient seeker, our Father! God goes before us and waits for us always. God never

tires of waiting for us, God is never far from us, but God has the patience to wait for the best moment to meet each one of us. And when the encounter happens, it is never rushed, because God wants to remain at length with us to sustain us, to console us, to give us his joy. God hastens to meet us, but never rushes to leave us. God stays with us. As we long for God and desire God, so God too desires to be with us, that we may belong to God. God, too, we can say, thirsts for us, to meet us. Our God is thirsty for us. And this is God’s heart.

—Pope Francis



How might I stay with God a little longer in my daily prayer?

Living in the Spirit

“We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God”

(1 Corinthians 2:12).

*L*ife in the Spirit of Jesus is a life in which Jesus’ coming into the world—his incarnation, his death and resurrection—is lived out by those who have entered into the same obedient relationship to the Father which marked Jesus’ own life. Having become sons and daughters as Jesus was Son, our lives become a continuation of Jesus’ mission. We are totally transformed by the Spirit of love yet everything seems to remain the same. To live a spiritual life does not mean that we must leave our families, give up our jobs, or change our ways of working; it does not require severe forms of asceticism or long hours of prayer. Changes

such as these may in fact grow out of our spiritual life, and for some people radical decisions may be necessary. But the spiritual life can be lived in as many ways as there are people. What is new is that we have moved from the many things to the kingdom of God. What is new is that we are set free from the compulsions of our world and have set our hearts on the only necessary thing. What is new is that we no longer experience the many things, people, and events as endless causes for worry but begin to experience them as the rich variety of ways in which God makes his presence known to us.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen



How might I focus more on God’s presence and gifts today?

THURSDAY, WEEK I

Let God into Your Heart

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Everything starts from prayer. Without asking God for love, we cannot possess love and still less are we able to give it to others. Just as people today are speaking so much about the poor but they do not know the poor, we too cannot talk so much about prayer and yet not know how to pray. We too are called to withdraw at certain intervals into deeper silence and aloneness with God, together as a community as well as personally. To be alone with God, not with our books, thoughts, and memories but completely stripped of everything, to dwell lovingly in God's presence—silent, empty, expectant and motionless. Open your hearts to the love of God which

God will give you. God loves you with tenderness and will give you gifts not to keep but to share. Just once, let the love of God take entire and absolute possession of your heart. Let it become to your heart like a second nature. Let your heart suffer nothing contrary to enter and apply itself continually to increase this love of God by seeking to please God in all things and refusing God nothing. Let it accept as from God's hand everything that happens to it. Let it have a firm determination never to commit any fault deliberately and knowingly or, if it should fail, to be humbled and to rise up again at once—and such a heart will pray continually.

—Mother Teresa



How might I invite God to come and remain in my heart today?

FRIDAY, WEEK I

Where Is My Treasure?

*“For where your treasure is,
there will your heart be also” (Luke 12:34).*

The Christian is someone who has a deep desire within him to meet his Lord with his brothers and sisters, his travelling companions. We all have desires. For us Christians it is to encounter Jesus, who is our life, our joy, our happiness. I would like to ask you two questions. First, do you all have a desiring heart? A heart that desires to go forward to encounter Jesus? Is your heart filled with desire, or is it a closed heart, a sleeping heart, a heart numb to the things of life? The second question: where is your treasure, what are you longing for? Where is your treasure?

What is the most important reality for you, the most precious reality, the one that attracts your heart like a magnet? Is it God's love? God's love gives meaning to our small daily tasks and helps us face the great trials. This is the true treasure of humankind. Love of God in Jesus always opens us to hope. In this way our labors and failures find meaning. Even our sin finds meaning in the love of God because this love of God in Jesus Christ always forgives us. He loves us so much that he always forgives us.

—Pope Francis



What desire do I have to encounter Jesus and make him my treasure?

SATURDAY, WEEK I

Being Fully in God's Presence

*"Set your mind and heart to seek the LORD your God"
(1 Chronicles 22:19).*

To stand in God's presence with our mind and our heart, that is the essence of the prayer of the heart which unifies our whole person and places us without any reservation, mind and heart, in the awesome and loving presence of our God. If prayer were just an intelligent exercise of our mind, we would soon become stranded in fruitless and trivial inner debates with God. If, on the other hand, prayer would involve only our heart, we might soon think that good prayers consist in good feelings. But the prayer of the heart in the most profound sense unites mind and heart in the intimacy of the divine love. In the expression "Lord Jesus

Christ, have mercy upon me," we find a powerful summary of all prayer. It directs itself to Jesus, the son of God, who lived, died and was raised for us. It declares him to be the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah, the one we have been waiting for. It calls him our Lord, the Lord of our whole being: body, mind and spirit, thought, emotions and actions, and it professes our deepest relationship to him by a confession of our sinfulness and by a humble plea for his forgiveness, mercy, compassion, love and tenderness. The prayer of the heart can be a special guide to the present-day Christian searching for a personal way to an intimate relationship to God.

—Henri J. M. Nouwen



*How might I better engage both my mind
and my heart in my daily prayer?*

When Do I Meet Jesus?

*“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).*

*L*ife is a journey. It is a path, a journey to meet Jesus. It is for the Christian to continually encounter Jesus, to watch him, to let himself be watched over by Jesus, because Jesus watches us with love. He loves us so much and he is always watching over us. To encounter Jesus also means allowing oneself to be gazed upon by him. And the most beautiful gift is to meet Jesus. We meet Jesus every day. How? Our whole life is an encounter with Jesus: in prayer, when we go to Mass, when we receive Communion, when we do good works, when we visit the sick, when we help the poor, when we think of others, when

we are not selfish, when we are loving—in these things we always meet Jesus. “But, Father,” you might say, “you know that this journey is horrible for me, I am such a sinner, I have committed many sins. How can I encounter Jesus?” But remember that the people whom Jesus most sought out were the greatest sinners. And those who believed themselves righteous criticized him for this saying: this is no true prophet, look what kind of company he keeps! And Jesus said: I came for those in need of salvation, in need of healing. And along the way Jesus comes, heals us and forgives us—for we are all sinners.

—Pope Francis



For what do I most need to ask forgiveness from Jesus and others today?

MONDAY, WEEK 2

Seeing the Light

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Listening to the voice of love requires that we direct our minds and hearts toward that voice with all our attention. How can we do that? The most fruitful way is to take a simple prayer, a sentence or a word, and slowly repeat it. We can use the Lord's Prayer, the Jesus Prayer, the name of Jesus, or any word that reminds us of God's love and put it in the center of our inner room, like a candle in a dark space. Then as long as we keep the candle in our dark room burning, we can return to that light and see clearly the presence of the One who offers us what we most desire. But this is not always a satisfy-

ing experience. Often we are so restless and so unable to find inner quietude that we can't wait to get busy again, thus avoiding the confrontation with the chaotic state of our minds and hearts. Still, when we remain faithful to our discipline, even if it is only ten minutes a day, we gradually come to see—by the candlelight of our prayers—that there is a space within us where God dwells and where we are invited to dwell with God. Once we come to know that inner, holy place, a place more beautiful and precious than any place we can travel to, we want to be there and be spiritually fed.

—*Henri J.M. Nouwen*



How has God's presence most affected me during this Advent?

TUESDAY, WEEK 2

Joy, Prayer & Gratitude

*“What do you have that you did not receive?
And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?”
(1 Corinthians 4:7).*

To prepare for the coming of the Lord, let us assume three attitudes. First, constant joy; second, steadfast prayer; third, continuous thanksgiving. Constant joy comes from faith and from the encounter with Jesus Christ, the reason for our happiness. And when we are rooted in Christ, the closer we are to Jesus, the more we find inner peace, even among everyday contradictions for he has come to the earth to restore to mankind the dignity and freedom of the children of God—which only he can communicate—and thereby to give joy. The joy that characterizes the awaiting of the messiah is based on steadfast prayer: By praying we can

enter a stable relationship with God, who is the source of true joy. For this reason a Christian, having encountered Jesus, cannot be a prophet of misfortune, but a witness and herald of joy. A joy to share with others, an infectious joy that renders the journey of life less toilsome. The third attitude is continuous thanksgiving, which is grateful love towards God. Indeed, God is very generous to us, and we are invited to always recognize God’s beneficence, merciful love, patience and goodness, thus living in unceasing thanksgiving. Joy, prayer and gratitude are three attitudes that prepare us to experience Christmas in an authentic way.

—Pope Francis



How might I better express these three attitudes in my behavior today?

WEDNESDAY, WEEK 2

Belonging Fully to God

*"You belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God"
(1 Corinthians 3:23).*

If we really fully belong to God, then we must be at his disposal and we must trust in God. Even when we sin or make a mistake, let's allow that to help us grow closer to God. Let us tell God humbly, "I know I shouldn't have done this, but even this failure I offer you." Give yourself fully to God, who will use you to accomplish great things on the condition that you believe much more in God's love than in your weakness. If you truly repent, if you really mean it with a clean heart, you will be absolved in God's eyes. God will forgive you if you truly confess.

Pray to be able to forgive those who have hurt you or whom you don't like, and forgive as you have been forgiven. Let us thank God for all God's love for us, in so many ways and in so many places. Let us in return, as an act of gratitude and adoration, determine to love God. We all have much to give, to share, to contribute wherever we find ourselves to be living. Very humble work, that is where you and I must be. For there are many people who can do big things. But there are few people who will do the small things.

—Mother Teresa



How might I show in my behavior that I belong more fully to God?

THURSDAY, WEEK 2

Seeking the God of Love

*“Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart” (Joel 2:12).*

*P*rayer means entering into communion with the One who first loved us before we could love (1 Jn 4:19). The more deeply we enter into the house of God, the house whose language is prayer, the less dependent we are on the blame or praise of those who surround us, and the freer we are to let our whole being be filled with that first love. As long as we are still wondering what other people say or think about us and trying to act in ways that will elicit a positive response, we are still victimized and imprisoned by the dark world in which we live. As long as we are in the clutches of that world, we live in darkness, since

we do not know our true self. In prayer, however, again and again we discover that the love we are looking for has already been given to us and that we can experience that love. Prayer is entering into communion with the One who molded our being in our mother's womb with love and only love. There, in the first love, lies our true self, a self not made up of the rejections and acceptances of those with whom we live, but solidly rooted in the One who called us into existence. In the house of God we were created. To that house we are called to return. Prayer is the act of returning.

—Henri J. M. Nouwen



How might I rejoice in the experience of God's love for me?

Called to Be Saints

“To those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Sanctity is something God gives us. Indeed, it is precisely in living with love and offering one's own Christian witness in everyday affairs that we are called to become saints in the conditions and the state of life in which we find ourselves. Be a saint by living out your life with joy. Are you married? Be a saint by loving and taking care of your husband or your wife, as Christ did for the Church. Are you an unmarried baptized person? Be a saint by carrying out your work with honesty and competence and by offering time in the service of your brothers and sisters. God gives you the grace to become holy. God communicates himself to you. Always, in every

place, one can become a saint, that is, one can open oneself up to this grace, which works inside us and leads us to holiness. Be a saint by passionately teaching your children or grandchildren to know and to follow Jesus. Be a saint by becoming a visible sign of God's love and of his presence alongside us. Every state of life leads to holiness, always! In your home, on the street, at work, at church, in that moment and in your state of life, the path to sainthood has been opened. Don't be discouraged to pursue this path. It is God alone who gives us the grace. The Lord asks only this: that we be in communion with Him and at the service of our brothers and sisters.

—Pope Francis



*How might I strive for greater holiness
by responding to God's grace in my daily life?*

SATURDAY, WEEK 2

A Simple Path to Holiness

*“As God who called you is holy,
be holy yourselves in all your conduct” (1 Peter 1:15).*

Total surrender to God must come in small details just as it comes in big details. It’s nothing but that single word, “Yes, I accept whatever you give, and I give whatever you take.” And this is just a simple way for us to be holy. To be holy does not mean to do extraordinary things, to understand big things, but it is a simple acceptance, because I have given myself to God, because I belong to God—my total surrender. God could put me here. God could put me there. God can use me. God cannot use me. It doesn’t matter because I belong so totally to God

that God can do just what God wants to do with me. We do nothing. God does everything. All glory must be returned to God. God has not called us to be successful. God called me to be faithful. Let us thank God for all God’s love for us, in so many ways and in so many places. Let us in return, as an act of gratitude and adoration, determine to love God. We all have much to give, to share, to contribute wherever we find ourselves to be living. Holiness starts in the home, by loving God and those around us for God’s sake.

—Mother Teresa



What might I do to surrender myself more fully to God today?

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

What Shall We Do?

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

*I*n today's Gospel, there is a question posed three times: “What shall we do?” It is raised to John the Baptist by three categories of people: first, the crowd in general, second, the publicans or tax collectors, and third, some soldiers. They want to know what must be done to implement the conversion that he is preaching. John's reply to the question of the crowd is sharing essential goods. He told them to share basic necessities, and therefore says: “He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.” Then, he tells the tax collectors to collect no more than the amount owed. What does this

mean? No taking bribes, John the Baptist is clear. And he tells the soldiers not to extort anything from anyone and to be content with their wages. There are three answers to the three questions of these groups. Three answers for an identical path of repentance, which is manifested in concrete commitments to justice and solidarity. It is the path that Jesus points to in all his preaching: the path of diligent love for neighbor. We feel that this question is ours also. In the words of John, it is necessary to repent, to change direction and take the path of justice, solidarity, sobriety: these are the essential values of a fully human and genuinely Christian life.

—Pope Francis



*How must my life most change to deepen
my conversion to Christ and his way of living?*

MONDAY, WEEK 3

Giving Myself Fully to Jesus

*“Teach me to do your will, for you are my God.
Let your good spirit lead me on a level path” (Psalm 143:10).*

*J*esus is always waiting for us in silence. In this silence he listens to us, it is there that he speaks to our souls. And there, we hear his voice. Interior silence is very difficult, but we must make the effort to pray. In this silence we find a new energy and a real unity. God’s energy becomes ours, allowing us to perform things well. There is unity of our thoughts with his thoughts, unity of our prayers with his prayers, unity of our actions with his actions, of our life with his life. Holiness consists in doing God’s will joyfully. Faithfulness makes saints. The spiritual life is a union with Je-

sus—the divine and the human giving themselves to each other. The only thing Jesus asks of us is to give ourselves to him, in total poverty, and total self-forgetfulness. The first step toward holiness is the will to become holy. Through a firm and upright will we love God, we choose God, we hasten to God, we reach God, we have God. Often, under the pretext of humility, of trust, of abandonment, we can forget to use the strength of our will. Everything depends on these words: “I will” or “I will not.” And into the expression “I will” I must put all my energy.

—Mother Teresa



How might I create more silence to be with God in my prayer?

TUESDAY, WEEK 3

Jesus Is Our Joy

*“Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age”
(Matthew 28:20).*

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 present in our life. From the moment Jesus entered into history in his birth in Bethlehem, humanity received the seed of the Kingdom of God, like the soil receives the seed as 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. It

is a joy already real and tangible now, because Jesus himself is our joy, and with Jesus joy finds its home. He is living, he is the Risen One, and he works in us and among us especially in the Word and the Sacraments. We who are baptized are called to accept ever anew God’s presence among us and to help others to discover God, or to rediscover what they have forgotten. It is a most beautiful mission, like that of John the Baptist, to direct the people to Christ—not to ourselves!—for God is the destination to which the human heart tends when it seeks joy and happiness.

—Pope Francis



*What might I do today to help others
to discover Christ’s presence in our world?*

God's Mysterious Presence

*"This is indeed the will of my Father,
that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life;
and I will raise them up on the last day" (John 6:40).*

For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, much in our fleeting lives is not passing but lasting, not dying but coming to life, not temporary but eternal. Amid the fragility of our lives, we have wonderful reason to hope. Some call this hidden reality "grace," others "God's life in us," others still "the kingdom of God among us." Whatever the name you give, once you focus your eyes and ears on the precious center you start to realize that all the torrents of time and circumstance that roll over it serve only to polish it into a precious, imperishable gift. Anyone who believes, Jesus reminds us, has eternal life. That is the

enormous revolution, that in this fleeting, temporary world he comes to plant the seed of eternal life. In many ways that is what is meant by the term the spiritual life—the nurturing of the eternal amid the temporal, the lasting within the passing, God's presence in the human family. It is the life of the divine Spirit within us. Become aware of this mysterious presence and life turns around. You sense joy even as others nurse complaints, you experience peace while the world conspires in war, and you find hope even when headlines broadcast despair. You discover a deep love even while the air around you seems pervaded by hatred.

—Henri J. M. Nouwen



*What most leads me to an awareness of
God's presence in myself and my life?*

THURSDAY, WEEK 3

Lives of Humble Service

“But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves” (Luke 22:26).

Jesus’ birth brings us the good news that we are loved immensely and uniquely by God, who not only enables us to know this love, but also gives it to us. We may derive two considerations from the joyous contemplation of the mystery of the Son of God born for us. The first is that if God, in the Christmas mystery, reveals himself not as one who remains on high and dominates the universe, but as the one who bends down, descends to the little and poor earth, it means that, to be like God, we should not put ourselves above others, but indeed lower ourselves, place ourselves at the service of others, become small with the small

and poor with the poor. It is regrettable to see a Christian who does not want to lower himself or herself, who does not want to serve. A Christian who struts about is ugly: this is not Christian, it is pagan. Let us be sure that our brothers and sisters do not ever feel alone. The second consequence: if God, through Jesus, involved himself with us to the point of becoming one of us, it means that whatever we have done to a brother or a sister we have done to him. Jesus himself reminded us of this: whoever has fed, welcomed, visited, loved one of the least and poorest of persons, will have done it to the Son of God.

—Pope Francis



How might I better serve others today as Jesus encouraged?

Christ Hides among Us

"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:38).

Let Jesus empty and transform you and afterwards fill the chalice of your hearts to the brim, that you in your turn, may give of your abundance. Seek him trustfully without looking back, without fear. Believe that Jesus and Jesus alone is life. Serve Jesus, casting aside and forgetting all that troubles or worries you, make loved the love that is not loved. By yourself you can do nothing, have nothing but sin, weakness and misery. All the gifts of nature and grace you have them from God. Jesus wants to live the truth in us and through us. Speak the truth, think the

truth, act the truth with God, with his church, with each other and with yourselves. Do not be surprised at each other's failure. We need the eyes of deep faith to see Christ in the broken body and dirty clothes under which the most beautiful human one hides. We shall need the hands of Christ to touch those bodies wounded by pain and suffering. The true inner life makes the active life burn forth and consume everything. It makes us find Jesus in the dark holes of the slums, in the most pitiful miseries of the poor, in the God-man Jesus.

—Mother Teresa



*How might I be more attentive to Christ's hidden presence
in those around me?*

Heart Speaks to Heart

“Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35).

I still remember Mother Teresa once saying to me that you can't see God in the poor unless you can see him in the Eucharist. Now I'm beginning to understand better what she meant. It isn't really possible to see God in human beings if you can't see God in the hidden reality of the bread that comes down from heaven. In human beings you can see this, that, and the other: angels and devils, saints and brutes, benevolent souls and malevolent power-maniacs. However, it's only when you've learned from personal experience how much Jesus cares for you and how much he desires to be your daily food, that you can learn to see every human

heart as a dwelling place for Jesus. When your heart is touched by the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, then you will receive new eyes capable of recognizing that same presence in the hearts of others. Heart speaks to heart. Jesus in our heart speaks to Jesus in the hearts of our fellow men and women. That's the eucharistic mystery of which we are part. We want to see results and preferably instantly. But God works in secret and with a divine patience. By taking part in the Eucharist you can come gradually to understand this. Then your heart can begin to open up to the God who suffers in the people around you.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen



When have I most experienced Christ's presence in the Eucharist?

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

A Surprise Gift

“God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:5).

On this Sunday just before Christmas, we listen to the Gospel of the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. Mary shows us that being comes before doing, and to leave the doing to God in order to be truly as God wants us. It is God who works so many marvels in us. Mary is receptive, but not passive. Because, on the physical level, she receives the power of the Holy Spirit and then gives flesh and blood to the Son of God who forms within her. Thus, on the spiritual level, she accepts the grace and corresponds to it with faith. As Mary was greeted by Elizabeth as “blessed among women,” so too we have always been “blessed,”

that is, loved. Regarding this love, regarding this mercy, the divine grace poured into our hearts, one single thing is asked in return: unreserved giving. Not one of us can buy salvation! Salvation is a free gift of the Lord, a free gift of God that comes within us and dwells in us. As we have received freely, so are we called to give freely; imitating Mary, who, immediately upon receiving the Angel’s announcement, went to share the gift of her fruitfulness with her relative Elizabeth. In visiting her, the Virgin Mary brought not only material help but she also brought Jesus, who was already alive in her womb.

—Pope Francis



To whom might I bring Jesus and God’s love and mercy today?

MONDAY, CHRISTMAS WEEK

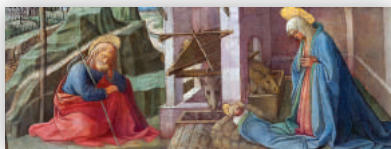
God So Loved the World

“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God’s love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12).

Today let us recall the love of God for you and for me. God’s love is so tender. God’s love is so great, so real, so living that Jesus came just to teach us how to love. Love is not something that fossilizes, but something that lives. Works of love, and declaring love, is the way to peace. And where does this love begin?—right in our hearts. We must know that we have been created for greater things, not just to be a number in the world, not just to go for diplomas and degrees, this work and that work. We have been created in order to love and to be loved. In the Scripture we read of the

tenderness of God for the world, and we read that God loved the world so much that God gave his Son Jesus to come to be like us and to bring us the good news that God is love, that God loves you and loves me. God wants us to love each other as God loves each one of us. You are to be the presence of Christ to each other. Love each other tenderly as Jesus loves each one of you. Love one another. That’s all Jesus came to teach us. The simplest way of becoming his light is by being kind and loving, thoughtful, and sincere with each other: “By this they will know that you are his disciples.”

—*Mother Teresa*



*How might I show my love for God
in my behavior toward others today?*

TUESDAY, CHRISTMAS WEEK

God's Life Revealed & Shared

*"The Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).*

In Jesus Christ, God has entered into our lives in the most intimate way, so that we could enter into his life through the Spirit. In Jesus, God became one of us to lead us through Jesus into the intimacy of his divine life. Jesus came to us to become as we are and left us to allow us to become as he is. By giving us his Spirit, his breath, he became closer to us than we are to ourselves. It is through this breath of God that we can call God "Abba, Father" and can become part of the mysterious divine relationship between Father and Son. Praying in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, therefore, means par-

ticipating in the intimate life of God himself. There is probably no image that expresses so well the intimacy with God in prayer as the image of God's breath. We are like asthmatic people who are cured of their anxiety. The Spirit has taken away our narrowness (the Latin word for anxiety is *angustia*, narrowness) and made everything new for us. We receive a new breath, a new freedom, a new life. This new life is the divine life of God himself. Prayer, therefore, is God's breathing in us, by which we become part of the intimacy of God's inner life, and by which we are born anew.

—*Henri J.M. Nouwen*



*How might my life become new because
of God's presence within me now?*

WEDNESDAY, CHRISTMAS WEEK

The Way of Witness

*“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”
(Psalm 27:1).*

*A*fter celebrating Jesus’ birth, today we celebrate the heavenly birth of St. Stephen, the first martyr. Even if at first sight, it may seem that there is no connection between the two events, in reality there is, and it is a very strong one. Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, was stoned because he professed his faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who comes into the world invites every believer to choose the way of light and life. This is the meaning of his coming among us. Loving the Lord and obeying his voice, the deacon Stephen chose Christ, life and light for all mankind. By choosing truth, he became at the same time a victim of the inexplicable

evil present in the world. But in Christ, Stephen triumphed! Today too, in order to bear witness to light and to truth, the Church experiences, in different places, harsh persecution, up to the supreme sacrifice of martyrdom. Today we should think of those who are suffering from persecution, and to be close to them with our affection, our prayers and also our tears. In making room in our heart for the Son of God who gives himself to us at Christmas, let us joyfully and courageously renew the will to follow him faithfully, as the only guide, by continuing to live according to the gospel message and rejecting the mentality of those who dominate this world.

—Pope Francis



*How might I resist evil and witness to the gospel message
of justice, love and peace?*

THURSDAY, CHRISTMAS WEEK

The Way of Self-Giving

*"It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.
And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).*

Why must we give ourselves fully to God? Because God has given himself to us. If God, who owes nothing to us, is ready to impart to us no less than that, shall we answer with just a fraction of ourselves? One thing Jesus asks of me: that I lean on him; that in him and only in him I put complete trust; that I surrender myself to him unreservedly. Even when all goes wrong and I feel as if I am a ship without a compass, I must give myself completely to him. I must not attempt to control God's action; I must not count the stages in the journey he would have me make. I must not desire a clear percep-

tion of my advance upon the road, must not know precisely where I am upon the way of holiness. We should always ask Jesus, "Make me a saint according to your own heart, meek and humble." Never stoop lower than the ideal. Let nothing satisfy you but God. Let us thank God for showering love on us, in so many ways and in so many places. Let us in return, as an act of gratitude and adoration, determine to be holy because God is holy. I ask God to make a saint of me; yet I must leave to him the choice of the saintliness itself and still more the means which leads to it.

—*Mother Teresa*



How might I offer myself fully to Christ who gives himself fully to me?

FRIDAY, CHRISTMAS WEEK

Christ among Us

“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).

Through prayer the Christ within us opens our eyes to the Christ among us. That is what is meant by the expression: “Spirit speaks to spirit.” The Spirit of the living Christ dwelling in our innermost being gives us eyes to contemplate the living Christ as God becomes visible in the concrete events of our history. To relearn what praying for the world means, we have to realize that the burden of the world has become a lighter burden because of Jesus. When God saw how humanity’s sin made the world an unbearable burden—a burden of painful birth and hard labor, competition and rivalry, anger and resentment, violence and war, sickness and death—

God showed us infinite mercy in sending Jesus, not to take our burden away but to transform it. Jesus’ mission was not to wipe out all human sorrow and take away all human pain, but to enter so fully into our world of sorrow and pain that nothing human would remain alien. Jesus gathered up the human suffering of all times and places. He destroyed its fatal power by offering it to God through his voluntary death on the cross. Thus Jesus made an unbearable burden bearable. We now have a companion who has tasted the agony of humanity more fully and deeply than any other person in history.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen



*Like Jesus, how might lighten the burden of suffering
for someone else today?*

SATURDAY, CHRISTMAS WEEK

Imitating the Holy Family

*“All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations shall worship before him” (Psalm 22:27).*

Today's Gospel invites families to welcome the light of hope that comes from the home of Nazareth, in which Jesus' childhood unfolded in joy. The family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph is for each believer and especially for families an authentic school of the Gospel. Here we admire the fulfillment of the divine plan to make of the family a special community of life and love. Here we learn that every Christian nuclear family is called to be a “domestic church,” to make the Gospel virtues shine and become a leaven of good in society. The classic traits of the Holy Family are: reflection and prayer, mutual understanding and respect, and a spirit of sacrifice,

work and solidarity. From the exemplary witness of the Holy Family, each family can find precious guidance for the style and choices of life, and can draw strength and wisdom for each day's journey. Mary and Joseph teach us to welcome children as a gift of God, to beget them and raise them, cooperating wonderfully in the work of the Creator and giving to the world, in each child, a new smile. It is in a united family that children bring their existence to maturity, living out the meaningful and effective experience of freely given love, tenderness, reciprocal respect, mutual understanding, forgiveness and joy.

—Pope Francis



*How might I better imitate the virtues of the Holy family
in my relationships today?*

Christmas Prayers

Come, Lord Jesus

Jesus, just as you do not belong to this world, so I do not belong to this world. Every time I feel this way I have an occasion to be grateful and to embrace you better and taste more fully your joy and peace. Come, Lord Jesus, and be with me where I feel poorest. I trust that this is the place where you will find your manger and bring your light. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen. —*Henri J.M. Nouwen*

Created for Love

Jesus, we have been created in your image, to love and be loved, and then you have become human to make it possible for us to love as you loved us. You make yourself the hungry one—the naked one—the homeless one—the sick one—the imprisoned one—the lonely one—the unwanted one—and you say: You did it to me. You are hungry for our love. Help us hunger always for your love. Amen. —*Mother Teresa*

A Christmas Blessing

On this day, illumined by the gospel hope which springs from the humble stable of Bethlehem, I invoke the Christmas gift of joy and peace upon all: upon children and the elderly, upon young people and families, the poor and the marginalized. May Jesus, who was born for us, console all those afflicted by illness and suffering. May he sustain those who devote themselves to serving our brothers and sisters who are most in need. Happy Christmas to all! —*Pope Francis*

Acknowledgements

Pope Francis: Reflections are adapted from the encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, weekly papal audiences, addresses and homilies of Pope Francis.

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CHRISTMAS

Learning from This Child

“Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Lk 2:7).

In these plain and clear words, Luke brings us to the heart of the event that changes our history for ever. Everything, that night, became a source of hope. Mary and Joseph, for whom there was no room, are the first to embrace the one who comes to give all of us our document of citizenship. The one who in his poverty and humility proclaims and shows that true power and authentic freedom are shown in honoring and assisting the weak and the frail. That night, the one who had no place to be born is proclaimed to those shepherds who had no place in the town. The faith we proclaim makes us see God present in all those situations where

we think God is absent. God is present in the unwelcomed visitor, often unrecognizable, who walks through our cities and our neighborhoods, who travels on our buses and knocks on our doors. In the child of Bethlehem, God comes to meet us and make us active sharers in the life around us. God offers himself to us, so that we can take him into our arms, lift him and embrace him. So that in him we will not be afraid to take into our arms, raise up and embrace the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned (Mt 25:35-36). In this child, God invites us to be messengers of hope and agents of God’s hospitality.

—Pope Francis



How might we leave this Advent more ready to see and respond to Christ’s presence in us and our lives?