

JESUS

THE COMING ONE



THROUGH ADVENT WITH

POPE FRANCIS
& HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

OUR DAILY ADVENT PRAYER

Let us open our hearts to receive
the grace of this Advent season,
which is Christ himself,
whom God our Father has revealed
to the entire world.

Where God is born, hope is born.
Where God is born, peace is born.
And where peace is born,
there is no longer room
for hatred and for war.

God alone can save us and free us
from the many forms of evil
and selfishness in our midst.

Let us welcome into our lives God's mercy,
which Jesus Christ has bestowed on us,
so that we in turn can show mercy
to our brothers and sisters.

In this way, we will make peace grow!

—*Pope Francis*

INTRODUCTION

Once again the Advent season is upon us, inviting us to spend some extra time preparing for our celebration of Jesus' coming to be with us. In this little booklet, through the insightful reflections of Pope Francis and Fr. Henri J.M. Nouwen (1932–1996), one of the most helpful spiritual writers of the twentieth century, we not only remember Jesus' coming as a babe in Bethlehem and anticipate his future coming in glory, but we concentrate most of all on his coming to us now in Word and Sacrament, in prayer and silence, in our hearts and in his Body, the Church, and in our world.

During this Advent, let us focus our attention on the way that God prepares for Jesus' entry into his human body by inviting Mary to be his mother. As the necessary link between Jesus' divinity and his human body, Mary provides us with a model for our own Advent when we attempt to give birth to Christ in ourselves. She shows us how to respond and receive God's invitation to live with us and to transform our lives. She also reminds us that as God grows within us we must wait and watch in prayer to be ready when God breaks into our lives, then treasure these things and let them change us.

Through our faithful daily attention to Jesus' presence, we will be more ready when God invites himself to come and dwell in us more fully so that we may become what we were created to be—images of God and Jesus.

—Steve Mueller, *Editor*

Acknowledgements

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

Henri J.H. Nouwen *Finding My Way Home: Pathways to Life and the Spirit* (Crossroad, 1994); *The Genesee Diary* (Doubleday, 1976); *Gracias!* (Harper& Row, 1983); *Here and Now* (Crossroad, 1994); *The Inner Voice of Love* (Doubleday, 1996); *Making All Things New* (HarperCollins, 2000); *Letters to Marc about Jesus* (HarperCollins, 1998); *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective* (New York: Doubleday, 1986); *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey* (Doubleday, 1988).

WAITING FOR THE LORD

*“For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.”
(Psalm 62:5)*

Today, on the First Sunday of Advent, we begin a new liturgical year; that is, a new journey of the People of God with Jesus Christ, who guides us through history toward the kingdom of justice, toward the kingdom of peace.

Just as in each of our lives we always need to begin again, to get up again, to rediscover the meaning of the goal of our lives, so also it is always necessary to rediscover the common horizon toward which we are journeying. The season of Advent, which we begin again today, restores our hope, which does not disappoint for it is founded on God's Word. A hope which does not disappoint, simply because God never disappoints. God is faithful!

The model of this spiritual way of being and journeying in life is the Virgin Mary. A simple girl from the country who carries within her heart the fullness of hope in God. In her womb, God's hope took flesh, it became human, it became history: Jesus Christ. Her *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46-55) is the canticle of the People of God on a journey, and of all men and women who hope in God and in the power of God's mercy. Let us allow ourselves to be guided by her, she who is mother, a mamma, and knows how to guide us. Let us allow ourselves to be guided by her during this season of active waiting and watchfulness.

—Pope Francis

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

LOOKING BACKWARD, LOOKING FORWARD

*“Remember not the events of the past,
the things of long ago consider not.
See, I am doing something new!” (Isaiah 43:18-19)*

The expectation of Advent is anchored in the event of God’s incarnation. The more I come in touch with what happened in the past, the more I come in touch with what is to come. The prophets speaking about the future of Israel always kept reminding their people of God’s great works in the past. They could look forward with confidence because they could look backward with awe to Yahweh’s great deeds. The Gospels not only remind us of what took place but also of what will take place. In the contemplation of Christ’s first coming, I can discover the signs of his second coming. By looking back in meditation, I can look forward in expectation. By reflection, I can project; by conserving the memory of Christ’s birth, I can progress to the fulfillment of his kingdom.

Waiting is a period of learning. The longer we wait the more we hear about him for whom we are waiting. As the Advent weeks progress, we hear more and more about the beauty and splendor of the One who is to come. I pray that Advent will offer the opportunity to deepen our memory of God’s great deeds in time and will set us free to look forward with courage to the fulfillment of time by him who came and is still to come.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*What past experiences of God’s presence encourage me
to anticipate a renewed divine presence this Advent?*

GOD INITIATES JESUS' COMING

*“The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power
of the Most High will overshadow you.
The child to be born will be called holy,
the Son of God.” (Luke 1:35)*

At Mary's Annunciation, the angel announces that the child that will be born to this humble girl from Nazareth will be called Son of the Most High. Mary's reply is a short sentence that does not speak of glory or privilege but only of willingness and service. She does not exalt herself before the prospect of becoming the mother of the messiah, but rather remains modest and expresses her acceptance of the Lord's plan. As we admire her for this response to God's call to mission, we ask her to help each of us to welcome God's plan into our lives with sincere humility and brave generosity.

Now Jesus is again coming. Indeed, the mystery of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem long ago now occurs as a spiritual event in the “today” of our lives. The Word, who found a home in Mary's womb, comes in the celebration of Christmas to knock once again at the heart of every Christian. Each of us is called to respond, like Mary, with a personal and sincere “yes,” placing ourselves fully at the disposal of God and of God's mercy and love. How many times Jesus comes into our lives or sends us an angel, and we don't notice because we are so immersed in our own thoughts and affairs, and even, in these days, in our Christmas preparations, so as not to notice him who comes and knocks at the door of our hearts, asking for acceptance, asking for a “yes” like Mary's.

—Pope Francis

*How has Jesus been knocking at the door
of my heart and what response have I given?*

MARY'S "YES"

*"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord;
let it be to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)*

Often during my meditation I think about a thousand things except God and God's presence in my life. To my own surprise my meditation on the Annunciation brings me real peace and joy. I try to simply be with Mary and listen to her words and discover a restful peace. Instead of thinking about these words and trying to understand them, I just listen to them being spoken for me.

At the Annunciation Mary is so open, so free, so trusting. She is completely willing to hear words that go far beyond her own comprehension. She knows that the words spoken to her by the angel come from God. She seeks clarification, but she does not question their authority. She senses that the message of Gabriel will radically interrupt her life, and she is afraid, but she does not withdraw. She responds with a complete surrender and thus becomes not only the mother of Jesus but also the mother of all who believe in him.

I keep listening to these words where Mary says "Yes" to God's love as words that summarize the deepest possible response to God's loving action within us. God wants to let the Holy Spirit guide our lives, but are we prepared to let it happen? Just being with Mary and the angel and hearing their words—words which changed the course of history—bring me peace and rest.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*How might I answer "Yes" to Jesus' desire
to come and live in me?*

MARY, OUR ADVENT MODEL

*“Mary treasured all these things
and pondered them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19)*

In these words, Luke describes the attitude with which Mary took in all that she had experienced in those days. Far from trying to understand or master the situation, Mary is the woman who can treasure, that is to say, protect and guard in her heart, God’s presence in our world. Deep within, she had learned to listen to the heartbeat of her Son, and that in turn taught her, throughout her life, to discover God’s heartbeat in history.

She learned how to be a mother, and in that learning process she gave Jesus the beautiful experience of knowing what it is to be a Son. In Mary, the eternal Word not only became flesh, but also learned to recognize the maternal tenderness of God. With Mary, the God-child learned to listen to the yearnings, the troubles, the joys and the hopes of the people of the promise. With Mary, he discovered himself a Son of God’s faithful people.

In the Gospels, Mary appears as a woman of few words, with no great speeches or deeds, but with an attentive gaze capable of guarding the life and mission of her Son and of everything he loves. She was able to watch over the beginnings of the first Christian community, and in this way she learned to be the mother of the Church.

—Pope Francis

*How might I better treasure and ponder
God’s Word in my heart this Advent?*

HOPE IN GOD'S PROMISES

*“May your mercy, LORD, be upon us;
as we put our hope in you.” (Psalm 33:22)*

Waiting, as we see it in the people in the Christmas story in Luke's Gospel, is waiting with a sense of promise. Those who were waiting had each received a promise that gave them courage and allowed them to wait. They received something that was at work in them, a seed that had started to grow.

This is very important for us because we too can wait only if what we are waiting for has already begun for us. Waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more. Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon, and Anna were living with a promise. It was a promise that nurtured them, fed them, and enabled them to stay where they were. By their waiting, the promise could gradually unfold and realize itself within them and through them. They were present to the moment. That is why they could hear the angel. They were alert, attentive to the voice that spoke to them and said, “Don't be afraid. Something is happening to you. Pay attention.” They were filled with hope. Their hope was something very different. Their hope was trusting that fulfillment would come, but fulfillment according to God's promises and not just according to their wishes. Hope is always open-ended.

—Henri J. M. Nouwen

*How has God's promise to come and dwell
within me encouraged my hope this Advent?*

TOGETHER IN SILENCE

“Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer!”

(Psalm 61:2)

Praying, like every true dialogue, is also knowing how to be in silence together with Jesus. When we go to Mass, perhaps we arrive five minutes early and begin to chat with the person next to us. But this is not the moment for small talk but for silence to prepare ourselves for the dialogue. It is the moment for recollection within the heart, to prepare ourselves for the encounter with Jesus. Silence is so important! Remember that we are not going to Mass to view a spectacle but to encounter the Lord, and silence prepares us and accompanies us. Pausing in silence with Jesus.

From this mysterious silence of God springs God’s Word which resonates in our heart. Jesus himself teaches us how it is truly possible to “be” with the Father and he shows us this with his prayer. The Gospels show us Jesus who withdraws to secluded places to pray. Seeing his intimate relationship with God, the disciples feel the desire to be able to take part in it, and they ask him: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1). Jesus responds that the first thing necessary for prayer is being able to say “Father,” that is, to place ourselves in God’s presence with childlike trust. But to be able to learn, we must humbly recognize that we need to be taught, and to say with simplicity: “Lord, teach me to pray.”

—Pope Francis

*How might I spend a little more time
in prayer with Jesus this Advent?*

CHANGE YOUR HEART

“This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Change your hearts and lives, and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:15)

Living a spiritual life requires a change of heart, a conversion. Such a conversion may be marked by a sudden inner change, or it can take place through a long, quiet process of transformation. But it always involves an inner experience of oneness. We realize that we are in the center, and that from there all that is and all that takes place can be seen and understood as part of the mystery of God’s life with us.

Our conflicts and pains, our tasks and promises, our families and friends, our activities and projects, our hopes and aspirations, no longer appear to us as a fatiguing variety of things which we can barely keep together, but rather as affirmations and revelations of the new life of the Spirit in us. All these other things, which so occupied and preoccupied us, now come as gifts or challenges that strengthen and deepen the new life which we have discovered.

This does not mean that the spiritual life makes things easier or takes our struggles and pains away. The lives of Jesus’ disciples clearly show that suffering does not diminish because of conversion. Sometimes it even becomes more intense. But our attention is no longer directed to the “more or less.” What matters is to listen attentively to the Spirit and to go obediently where we are being led, whether to a joyful or a painful place.

—Henri J. M. Nouwen

*Where does it seem that Jesus and
the Holy Spirit are leading me this Advent?*

PREPARE HIS WAY

*“Build up, build up, prepare the way,
remove every obstruction from my people’s way.” (Isaiah 57:14)*

To prepare the way of the Lord’s coming, we must notice the requirements of conversion to which John the Baptist invites us. What are these requirements for conversion? First of all we are called to fill the “valleys” caused by coldness and indifference, opening ourselves to others with the same sentiments as Jesus, that is, with affection and fraternal attention which takes on the needs of our neighbors. One cannot have a relationship of love, charity and fraternity with one’s neighbors if there are gaps, just as one cannot travel a road with many potholes. This requires a change of attitude. And all this should also be done with special attention to the neediest.

There is also the need to curtail the indifference caused by pride and arrogance. How many people, perhaps without realizing it, are proud, indifferent, lacking that kindly relationship. We overcome this by making concrete gestures of reconciliation with our brothers and sisters, asking for forgiveness for our faults. It is not easy to reconcile with another. One always thinks: “who will take the first step?” The Lord helps us in this if we are of good will. Indeed, conversion is complete if it leads us to humbly recognize our errors, our infidelity and failings.

—Pope Francis

*What is God asking me most to change
in my self and my life now?*

LIFE IS ADVENT

*“Brothers and sisters, you must be patient
as you wait for the coming of the Lord.” (James 5:7)*

Life is Advent; life is recognizing the coming of the Lord. Be alert so that you will be able to recognize Christ in your husband, your wife, your parents, your children, your friends, your teachers, but also in all that you read in the daily papers. The Lord is coming, always coming. Be alert to his coming. When you have ears to hear and eyes to see, you will recognize him at any moment of your life.

I keep expecting loud and impressive events to convince me and others of God’s saving power. When I have no eyes for the small signs of God’s presence—the smile of a baby, the carefree play of children, the words of encouragement and gestures of love offered by friends—I will always remain tempted to despair.

The small child of Bethlehem, the unknown man of Nazareth, the rejected preacher, the naked man on the cross, all ask for my full attention. The work of our salvation takes place in the midst of a world that continues to shout, scream and overwhelm us with its claims and promises.

I pray that God will let me know through all my senses that God’s love is more real than my sins and my cowardice. I want to see the light in darkness, and I wait to hear God’s voice, which says: “Why are you afraid, you of little faith? I am with you always.”

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*What signs of God’s presence have been
most noticeable to me this Advent?*

THE SCANDAL OF JESUS' HUMANITY

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways,” says the LORD.” (Isaiah 55:8)*

The people of Nazareth rejected Jesus, thinking that God is too great to humble himself to speak through such a simple man! It is the scandal of the Incarnation: the unsettling event of a God made flesh who thinks with a human mind, works and acts with human hands, loves with a human heart, a God who struggles, eats and sleeps like one of us. This is a reason for scandal and incredulity, not only then, but even today.

Indeed, we might even harbor some prejudices that prevent us from seeing reality. But, Jesus asks us to adopt an attitude of humble listening and docile expectation because God's grace often manifests itself in surprising ways that do not match our expectations.

God does not conform to our human prejudices. We must make an effort to open our heart and mind to welcome the divine reality which comes to encounter us. It is a case of having faith: lack of faith is an obstacle to God's grace. Many people who have been baptized live as though Christ did not exist. They repeat the gestures and the signs of faith but these do not correspond to a true bond with Jesus' person and his Gospel. Each Christian—all of us, each of us—is called to deepen this fundamental belonging, and try to bear witness to it with a consistent conduct in life, always motivated by charity.

—Pope Francis

*What most comforts and what most
unsettles me about Jesus being human?*

JESUS, GOD-WITH-US

*“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God is with us.”
(Matthew 1:23-24)*

God has become human so as to be able, in all completeness, to live with us, suffer with us and die with us. We have found in Jesus a fellow human being who is so completely one with us that not a single weakness, pain or temptation has remained foreign to him. Precisely because Jesus is God and without any sin, he is able to experience our sinful, broken human condition so thoroughly that we may say he knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us more than we love ourselves.

No one else, however well disposed, is ever in a position to be with us so completely that we feel ourselves to be understood and loved without limit. We humans remain too self-centered to be able to forget ourselves fully for the other person's sake. But Jesus does give himself fully, he holds nothing back for himself, he wants to be with us in so total a fashion that we can never again feel alone. Jesus is the compassionate God who comes so close to us in our weakness that we can turn to him without fear.

When you stand before God, vulnerable as you are, and let him see all there is of you, you will begin gradually to experience for yourself what it means that God has sent Jesus to be, in all things, God-with-you.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*What do I most hesitate to acknowledge
and bring openly to God in my prayer?*

GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor!” (Luke 4:18)

In Jesus’ incarnation we can see how human history, that movement of the powerful of this world, is visited by the history of God. And God engages those who, confined to the margins of society, are the first beneficiaries of his gift, namely, the salvation borne by Jesus.

With the little ones and the scorned Jesus establishes a friendship that continues in time and that nourishes hope for a better future. To these people, represented by the shepherds of Bethlehem—marginalized, frowned upon, scorned, counted for nothing—the Good News first appeared. With them, in all ages, God wishes to build a new world, a world in which there are no longer rejected, mistreated and indigent people.

In these days of Advent let us open our minds and hearts to welcome this grace. Jesus is God’s gift to us and, if we welcome him, we too can become so to others—be a gift of God to others—first and foremost to those who have never experienced attention and tenderness. How many people in our life have never experienced a caress, loving attention, a kind gesture. Christmas spurs us to do so. In this way Jesus comes to be born again in each of our lives and, through us, he continues to be the gift of salvation for the little ones and the excluded.

—Pope Francis

*What loving attention or kind gesture
might I extend to others today?*

JESUS IS WAITING FOR YOU

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” (Luke 11:9)

You have decided to dedicate yourself completely to God, to make Jesus the center of your life, and to be fashioned into an instrument of God’s grace. You can look at your life as a large cone that becomes narrower the deeper you go. There are many doors in that cone that give you chances to leave the journey. But you have been closing these doors one after the other, making yourself go deeper and deeper into your center.

You know that Jesus is waiting for you at the end, just as you know that he is guiding you as you move in that direction. Every time you close another door—be it the door of immediate satisfaction, the door of distracting entertainment, the door of busyness, the door of guilt and worry, or the door of self-rejection—you commit yourself to go deeper into your heart and thus deeper into God’s heart.

This is a movement toward full incarnation. It leads you to become what you already are—a child of God. It lets you embody more and more the truth of your being. It makes you claim the God within you. You are tempted to think that you are a nobody in the spiritual life and that your friends are far beyond you on the journey. But this is a mistake. You must trust the depth of God’s presence in you and live from there. This is the way to keep moving toward full incarnation.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*How have I been moving more intentionally
into God’s presence this Advent?*

THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL

*“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you,
and that your joy may be complete.” (John 15:11)*

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent, which is called *Gaudete* Sunday—the Sunday of joy. Why? Because the Lord is near. Christmas is near. The Christian message is called the “gospel” — “good news”—an announcement of joy for all people. The Church is not a haven for sad people but a joyful home! And those who are sad find in her true joy.

But the joy of the Gospel is not just any joy. It consists in knowing one is welcomed and loved by God. God comes to save us and seeks to help, especially those who are fearful of heart. God’s coming among us strengthens us, makes us steadfast, gives us courage, makes the desert of our lives blossom when our lives becomes arid. And when do our lives become arid? When they lack the water of God’s Word and God’s Spirit of love.

However great our limitations and dismay, we are not allowed to be sluggish and vacillating when faced with difficulty and our own weakness. On the contrary, we are invited to be strong and to fear not, because our God always shows us the greatness of his mercy. God gives us the strength to go forward and is always with us to help us go forward. God loves us and that is why God is with us, to help us, to strengthen us, to help us go forward. Thanks to God’s help, we can always begin again.

—Pope Francis

*How have I most experienced God’s
love during this Advent season?*

SHARE YOUR JOY

*“You will show me the path to life,
abounding joy in your presence,
the delights at your right hand forever.” (Psalm 16:11)*

We are joyful already now because we know that the Lord will come. Our expectation leads to joy and our joy to a desire to give to others. Real joy always wants to share. It belongs to the nature of joy to communicate itself to others and to invite others to take part in the gifts we have received. Advent is indeed a time of joyful waiting and joyful giving.

The period before Christmas has that remarkable quality of joy that seems to touch not only Christians but all who live in our society. But Advent is not only a period of joy. It is also a time when those who are lonely feel lonelier than during other periods of the year. During this time many people try to commit suicide or are hospitalized with severe depression. Those who have hope feel much joy and desire to give. Those who have no hope feel more depressed than ever and are often thrown back on their lonely selves in despair.

Surrounded by a loving, supportive community, Advent and Christmas seem pure joy. But let us not forget our lonely moments because it does not take much to make that loneliness reappear. If we are able to remember loneliness during joy, we might be able in the future to remember joy during loneliness and so be stronger to face it and help others face it.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*How might I reach out today to be supportive
for someone who is lonely or depressed?*

GOD WANTS TO BE WITH US

“The Word became flesh and came to live among us.”

(John 1:14)

In these words, which never cease to astound us, is the whole of Christianity! God became mortal, fragile like us. He shared our human condition, except for sin, but took our sins upon himself as if they were his own. He entered into our history and fully became God-with-us! Jesus' birth, then, shows us that God wanted to unite himself to every man and woman, to each one of us, to communicate his life and his joy.

So, God is God with us, God who loves us, God who walks with us. This is the message of Christmas: the Word became flesh. Thus, Christmas reveals God's immense love for humanity. From here stems the enthusiasm, the hope of Christians, who in our poverty know that we are loved, visited and accompanied by God. And so we look at the world and at history as the place in which to walk together with God and with each other, toward the new heaven and the new earth. With Jesus' birth a new promise is born, a new world is born, but also a world that can always be renewed. God is always present to purify the world from the sin that makes it old, from the sin that corrupts it. God's closeness to each of us is a gift that never fades away. Christ is with us! Christ is God with us! This is the good news of Christmas.

—Pope Francis

*How has God's transforming presence been
most apparent to me this Advent?*

TRANSFORMED BY JESUS' LOVE

*“Behold, I make all things new.”
(Revelation 21:5)*

You are looking for ways to meet Jesus. You are trying to meet him not only in your mind but also in your body. You seek his affection and you know that this affection involves his body as well as yours. He became flesh for you so that you could encounter him in the flesh and receive his love in the flesh.

But something remains in you that prevents this meeting. There is still a lot of shame and guilt stuck away in your body, blocking the presence of Jesus. You do not fully feel at home in your body. You look down on it as if it were not a good enough, beautiful enough, or pure enough place to meet Jesus.

You will not be able to meet Jesus in your body while your body remains full of doubts and fears. Jesus came to free you from these bonds and to create in you a space where you can be with him. He wants you to live the freedom of the children of God.

Do not despair, thinking that you cannot change yourself after so many years. Simply enter into the presence of Jesus as you are and ask him to give you a fearless heart where he can be with you. Jesus came to give you a new heart, a new spirit, a new mind, and a new body. Let him transform you by his love and so enable you to receive his affection in your whole being.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*What most keeps me from bringing my whole self—body, mind
and spirit—to meet with Jesus?*

THE TRUE GIFT

“We await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of the great God and of our savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us.” (Titus 2:13-14)

Without Jesus there is no Christmas. There might be another holiday, but it is not Christmas. And if he is at the center, then all the trimmings, that is, the lights, sounds, various local traditions, including the characteristic foods, all contribute to creating an atmosphere of celebration. If we remove him, the light goes out and everything becomes feigned, illusory.

So we are led to seek out and find the true light, that of Jesus who, becoming human like us, reveals himself in a surprising way: he is born to a poor, unknown maiden, who gives birth to him in a stable, with only the help of her husband. The world does not notice anything, but in heaven the angels who know of the event exult! And in this way the Son of God presents himself to us today.

We can thus ask ourselves what it means to welcome God’s gift, which is Jesus. As he himself has taught us with his life, it means becoming daily a gift freely given to those we meet on our own path. This is why Christmas gifts are exchanged. The true gift to us is Jesus, and like him we seek to be gifts to others. And, since we want to be gifts to others, we exchange gifts, as a sign, as a symbol of this attitude that Jesus teaches us: he, sent by the Father, was a gift to us, and we are gifts to others.

—Pope Francis

What gifts of myself do I most want to give to others this Christmas?

COME, LORD JESUS

*“Yes, I am coming soon.” Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!
(Revelation 22:20)*

The words about God’s coming not only remind us that God will appear, but also that God will slowly transform our whole being into expectation. Then we will no longer have expectations but be expectation, when all we are has become “waiting.” The longer we wait the more we hear about him for whom we are waiting.

The Gospel readings at Mass talk about the events before Jesus’ birth and the people ready to receive him. In the other readings the prophets strengthen and deepen our hope, and the songs, lessons, commentaries, and antiphons all compete in their attempt to set the stage for the Lord who is to come.

There is a stark beauty about it all. But does this preparation only lead to an anticlimax? I don’t think so. Advent does not lead to nervous tension stemming from expectation of something spectacular about to happen. On the contrary, it leads to a growing inner stillness and joy allowing me to realize that he for whom I am waiting has already arrived and speaks to me in the silence of my heart. Just as a mother feels the child grow in her and is not surprised on the day of the birth but joyfully receives the one she learned to know during her waiting, so Jesus can be born in my life slowly and steadily and be received as the one I learned to know while waiting.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*How have I been most aware of Jesus’ presence
growing inside me during this Advent?*

GOD'S SURPRISES

“You also must wait patiently, strengthening your resolve, because the coming of the Lord is near.” (James 5:8)

It will soon be Christmas. The trees, the decorations and the lights everywhere remind us that this year too there will be a celebration. The publicity machine invites us all to exchange ever new presents to surprise each other. But I ask myself: is this the celebration that God likes? What Christmas would he like, which presents and which surprises?

Let us look at the first Christmas to discover God's ways. That first Christmas was filled with surprises. It begins with Mary when the angel arrives and changes her life. As a virgin, she will become a mother. It continues with Joseph, called to be father to a son without begetting him. The common custom of the time invited Joseph to repudiate Mary and save his good name. But despite this right, he surprises: in order not to shame Mary, he considers leaving her secretly, at the cost of risking his own reputation.

Then another surprise. God changes Joseph's plans in a dream and asks him to take Mary with him. After Jesus is born and, having plans of his own for his family, once again in a dream, Joseph is told to get up and go to Egypt. Well, Christmas brings unexpected changes to life. And if we want to experience Christmas, we must open our hearts and be ready for surprises, that is, for an unexpected change in life.

—Pope Francis

*How has my life unexpectedly changed this Advent
because of God's presence?*

GOD CHOSE WEAKNESS

“God delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:13-14)

What was and is God’s response to the diabolic power that rules the world and destroys people and their lands? The answer is a deep and complete mystery because God chose powerlessness. God chose to enter into human history in complete weakness. And this weakness opens for us the way to the heart of God.

Though powerful, God does not want us to be afraid, distant, or envious. God wants to come close, very close, so close that we can rest in the intimacy of God as children in their mother’s arms. Therefore God became a little baby. Who can be afraid of a little baby? A tiny little baby is completely dependent on its parents, nurses and caregivers. God wanted to become so powerless as to be unable to eat or drink, walk or talk, play or work without many people’s help.

God became dependent on human beings to grow up and live among us and proclaim the good news. God chose to become so powerless that the realization of God’s own mission among us became completely dependent on us. How can we fear a baby we rock in our arms, or look up to a baby that is so little and fragile, or be envious of a baby who only smiles at us in response to our tenderness? That’s the mystery of the incarnation. God became human, in no way different from other human beings, to break through the walls of power in total weakness. That’s the story of Jesus.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*How has God been revealed to me
in my weakness and in that of others?*

CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS

“A child is born to us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:5)

God’s biggest surprise comes on Christmas Eve: the Almighty is a little child. The divine Word is an infant, which literally means “unable to speak.” There are no local authorities nor ambassadors to welcome the Savior but only simple shepherds who, surprised by the angels while they worked at night, hasten without delay. Who would have expected this? Christmas is the celebration of an unprecedented God who overturns our logic and our expectations.

It will truly be Christmas if, like Joseph, we make room for silence; if like Mary, we say “here I am” to God; if, like Jesus, we are close to those who are alone; if, like the shepherds, we leave our enclosure to be with Jesus. It will be Christmas if we find the light in the poor grotto in Bethlehem. It will not be Christmas if we seek the glittering brilliance of the world, if we fill ourselves with presents, meals and dinners but do not help at least one poor person who resembles God because, on Christmas, God came as a poor one.

To celebrate Christmas, then, is to receive on earth the surprises of heaven. Christmas inaugurates a new epoch where life is not planned, but is given: where one no longer lives for oneself, but rather for God, and lives with God because from Christmas onward, God is the God-with-us, who lives with us, who walks with us.

—Pope Francis

*How might I better live for and with God
who wants to be more a part of my life?*

GOD'S WAY OF WEAKNESS

“For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” (1 Corinthians 1:25)

The way of God is the way of weakness. The great news of the Gospel is precisely that God became small and vulnerable, and hence bore fruit among us. The most fruitful life ever lived is the life of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but became as we are.

Jesus brought us new life in ultimate vulnerability. He came to us as a small child, dependent on the care and protection of others. He lived for us as a poor preacher, without any political, economic or military power. He died for us nailed on a cross as a useless criminal. In this extreme vulnerability our salvation was won. The fruit of this poor and failing existence is eternal life for all who believe in him.

It is very hard for us to grasp even a little bit of the mystery of God’s vulnerability. Yet, when we have eyes to see and ears to hear we can see it in many ways and in many places. We can see it when a child is born, the fruit of the love of two people who came together without defenses and embraced each other in weakness. We can see it in the graceful smiles of poor people and in the warm affection of the handicapped. We can see it every time people ask forgiveness and are reconciled.

—Henri J. M. Nouwen

*What most surprises me about Jesus
becoming truly human just like me?*

HEARING THE SILENT VOICE OF GOD

*“Oh, that today you would hear his voice: harden not your hearts.”
(Hebrews 3:15)*

To celebrate Christmas is to do as Jesus did, who came for us needy ones and to bend down to those who need us. It is to do as Mary did: to trust God with docility, even without understanding what he will do. To celebrate Christmas is to do as Joseph did: to arise in order to do what God wants, even if it is not according to our plans.

Saint Joseph is surprising. There is never a word from Joseph in the Gospel and the Lord speaks to him in silence. He actually speaks to him in his sleep. Christmas means preferring the silent voice of God to the din of consumerism. If we can pause in silence before the Nativity scene, Christmas will be a surprise for us too, not a thing that we have already seen.

To stand in silence before the Nativity scene: this is the invitation for Christmas. Take some time, stand before the Nativity scene and be silent. And you will feel, you will understand the surprise. To experience Christmas is to allow oneself to be shaken by its surprising newness. The birth of Jesus does not offer reassuring coziness by the fireside, but rather the divine shudder which shakes history. Christmas is the victory of humility over arrogance, of simplicity over abundance, of silence over clamor, of prayer over “my time,” of God over my self.

—Pope Francis

*What surprising newness has most taken hold
of me during this Advent season?*

WALKING WITH GOD

*“May the LORD, our God, be with us as he was with our ancestors.
May he draw our hearts to himself, that we may walk in his ways.”
(1 Kings 8:57-58)*

God came to us because God wanted to join us on the road, to listen to our story and to help us realize that we are not walking in circles but moving towards the house of peace and joy. This is the great mystery of Christmas that continues to give us comfort and consolation: we are not alone on our journey. The God of love who gave us life sent us his only Son to be with us at all times and in all places, so that we never have to feel lost in our struggles but always can trust that he walks with us. All has become different while all remains the same.

I know that God loves me, even though I do not feel that love as I can feel a human embrace, even though I do not hear a voice as I hear human words of consolation, even though I do not see a smile as I can see a human face. Still the Lord speaks to me, looks at me, and embraces me there, where I am still unable to notice it. Christmas is the renewed invitation not to be afraid and let him—whose love is greater than our own hearts and minds can comprehend—be our companion.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*How have I most experienced God walking
with me on my Advent journey?*

THE WONDER OF GOD'S LOVE

*“You are the God who does wonders;
among the peoples you have revealed your might.” (Psalm 77:15)*

Today we once more experience the wonder of Mary, Joseph and the shepherds of Bethlehem as they contemplate the newborn child laid in a manger: Jesus, the Savior. The power of this child, Son of God and Son of Mary, is not the power of this world, based on might and wealth. It is the power of love. It is the power that created the heavens and the earth and gives life to all creation: to minerals, plants and animals. It is the force that attracts man and woman and makes them one flesh, one single existence. It is the power that gives new birth, forgives sin, reconciles enemies and transforms evil into good. It is the power of God. This power of love led Jesus Christ to strip himself of his glory and become human, to give his life on the cross and to rise from the dead. It is the power of service, which inaugurates in our world the kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice and peace.

Today this message goes out to the ends of the earth to reach all peoples, especially those scarred by war and harsh conflicts that seem stronger than the yearning for peace. At this joyful time, we are all called to contemplate the child Jesus, who gives hope once again to every person on the face of the earth. By his grace, let us with our voices and our actions give witness to solidarity and peace.

—Pope Francis

*What do I most experience when contemplating
the newborn child in the manger?*

LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF LOVE

“Grace, mercy and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father’s Son in truth and love.” (2 John 2:3)

Prayer is the discipline of the moment. When we pray, we enter into the presence of God whose name is God-with-us. To pray is to listen attentively to the One who addresses us here and now. When we dare to trust that we are never alone but that God is always with us, always cares for us, and always speaks to us, then we can gradually detach ourselves from the voices that make us guilty or anxious and thus allow ourselves to dwell in the present moment.

This is a very hard challenge because radical trust in God is not obvious. Most of us distrust God. Most of us think of God as a fearful, punitive authority or as an empty, powerless nothing. Jesus’ core message was that God is neither a powerless weakling nor a powerful boss, but a lover, whose only desire is to give us what our hearts most desire.

To pray is to listen to that voice of love. That is what obedience is all about. The word “obedience” comes from the Latin word *ob-audire*, which means to listen with great attentiveness. Without listening, we become “deaf” to the voice of love. If we could just be, for a few minutes each day, fully where we are, we would indeed discover that we are not alone and that the One who is with us wants only one thing: to give us love.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*How will I try to continue to listen
and respond more fully to God’s Word in the future?*

BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST

“This will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:12)

Like the shepherds who first went with haste to the stable, let us halt in wonder before the sign that God has given us. In silence, let us kneel and worship. What does that child, born for us of the Virgin Mary, have to tell us? What is the universal message of Christmas? It is that God is a good Father and we are all brothers and sisters. This truth is the basis of the Christian vision of humanity. Without the community that Jesus Christ has bestowed on us, our efforts for a more just world fall short, and even our best plans and projects risk being soulless and empty.

The face of God has been revealed in a human face. It did not appear in an angel, but in one man, born in a specific time and place. By his incarnation, the Son of God tells us that salvation comes through love, acceptance, respect for this poor humanity of ours, which we all share in a great variety of races, languages and cultures. Yet all of us are brothers and sisters in humanity! Our differences, then, are not a detriment or a danger but a source of richness. As when an artist is about to make a mosaic: it is better to have tiles of many colors available, rather than just a few! May this Christmas help us to rediscover the bonds of community linking us together as individuals and joining all peoples. Merry Christmas to all!

—Pope Francis

How will I try to recognize the face of God in every person I now meet?