

NOURISHING our hope



*Daily Advent
Reflections*

Pope Francis • Thomas Merton
St. Mother Teresa • Henri Nouwen

This past year, Pope Francis reminded us that:

"In the face of the pandemic and its social consequences, many risk losing hope. In this time of uncertainty and anguish, I invite everyone to welcome the gift of hope that comes from Christ. It is he who helps us navigate the tumultuous waters of sickness, death and injustice, which do not have the last word over our final destination. We need to nourish the roots of our hope so that they can bear fruit."

The two fundamental desires of the human person—whether one consciously recognizes it or not—are the hope for a better relationship with God and the hope for a better world. Christian hope grounds these fundamental human hopes in the incarnation of God's son in Jesus of Nazareth who initiated by his life, death and resurrection God's promised final triumph over evil and the transformation of all creation into the evil-free way God had originally desired it to be.

This booklet offers reflections for every day of Advent, together with an appropriate Scripture verse and a question for your reflection or prayer and a Daily Advent Prayer inside the back cover. We hope that it will help you to nourish your hope as you prepare to celebrate God's coming into our history to be with us as Jesus of Nazareth and into our hearts through grace to live as Jesus did.

To make the most of this Advent season, we have gathered reflections from four perceptive and helpful spiritual guides—Jesuit Pope Francis, Cistercian (Trappist) monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968), Missionaries of Charity founder St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1997) and priest-psychologist Henri J.M. Nouwen (1932–1996)—to offer their insights and experience to help us deepen our relationship with God and act with God to make a better and more just world for all.

Steve Mueller, Editor

ADVENT: EXPECTATION AND HOPE

"And now, LORD, for what do I wait? You are my only hope." (Psalm 39:8)

Advent, which prepares us for Christmas, is a continuous call to hope. It reminds us that God is present in history to lead it to its ultimate goal and to lead us to its fullness, which is the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Hope is not something abstract. Hope instead means living in expectation of the concrete encounter with Jesus, who came to us at Bethlehem and will come at the end of the world, but who also comes to us every day so that, with his grace, we might accomplish good in our own lives and in the lives of others.

Hope speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical

conditioning. Hope speaks to us of a thirst, an aspiration, a longing for a life of fulfillment, a desire to achieve great things that fill our heart and lift our spirit to lofty realities grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile.

I wish all of you a good Advent journey to encounter the Lord. May it be a time of hope: to encounter the Lord who comes to encounter us; true hope, founded on God's fidelity, and on our responsibility.

Let us not resist when Christ comes to change our lives, but to be ready to let ourselves be visited by him, the awaited and welcome guest, even if it disturbs our plans.

—Pope Francis

What do I most want to do to let Christ change my life this Advent season?

LETTING GOD'S PRESENCE CHANGE ME

"Out of the depths I call to you, LORD; Lord, hear my cry! I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and I hope for his word." (Psalm 130:1, 5)

The Advent season is a time of hope. There still is fear, there still is a painful awareness of sinfulness, but there also is light breaking through. Something new is happening, something that goes beyond the changing moods of our life. We can be joyful or sad, optimistic or pessimistic, tranquil or angry, but the solid stream of God's presence moves deeper than the small waves of our minds and hearts.

This season brings the awareness that God is present even when this presence is not directly noticed. The good news is that, although things seem to get worse in the world, the Evil One has already been overcome. We can affirm that although God seems very distant and al-

though we remain preoccupied with many little things, our Lord walks with us on the road and keeps explaining the Scriptures to us. Thus there are many rays of hope casting their light on our way through life.

Dear Lord, in the midst of much inner turmoil and restlessness, there is a consoling thought: maybe you are working in me in a way I cannot yet feel, experience or understand. I believe that your Spirit reaches deeper and further than my mind or heart, and that profound movements are not the first to be noticed. I promise I will not run away, not give up, not stop praying, even when it all seems' useless, pointless, and a waste of time and effort.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen
A Cry for Mercy

*How might I spend a little more time each day
being attentive to God's presence?*

GOD'S PRESENCE IS ALREADY HIDDEN AMONG US

*"The coming of the kingdom of God cannot be observed,
and no one will announce, 'Look, here it is,' or, 'There it is.'
For behold, the kingdom of God is among you." (Luke 17:20-12)*

Advent reminds us that the "last things" are already present and realized in a hidden manner. God's kingdom is already "in our midst." But, the mystery can only be known by those who enter into it, who find their place in the Mystical Christ, and therefore find the mystery of Christ realized and fulfilled in themselves.

It is important to remember the deep seriousness of Advent, when the celebrations of our marketing culture so easily harmonize with our tendency to regard Christmas as a return to our own innocence and infancy. But the Church, in preparing us for the birth of Christ has more in mind than seasonal cheer. The

Advent mystery focuses the light of faith upon the very meaning of human life, of history, of the world and of our own being. In Advent we celebrate the coming and indeed the presence of Christ in our world.

We learn to recognize the present Advent that is taking place at every moment in our own earthly life as wayfarers. We awaken to the fact that every moment is a moment of judgment, that Christ is passing by and that we are judged by our awareness of his passing. If we join him and travel with him to the kingdom, the judgment becomes for us salvation. But if we neglect him and let him go by, our neglect is our condemnation!

—Thomas Merton
Seasons of Celebration

When and where have I most discovered God's hidden presence in my life?

CO-WORKERS WITH GOD AND CHRIST

"Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth.... We are God's co-workers." (1 Corinthians 3:7, 9)

You have been chosen and been called by your name to be a co-worker with Christ. To be a co-worker is not just to join an organization or belong to an association. A co-worker is a person who has to be the love and compassion of God today. God loves the world so much that God gave God's Son and today, God gives you to your family and to the world as a proof that God loves the world.

God loves the world today through God's co-workers. God says, "Give me your heart." That heart has to be the sunshine of God's love in the world, the hope of eternal happiness, the burning flame of God's love in the world

today. Actually you are the co-workers of Christ himself, and he wants you to be so totally his wherever you are, whatever work you are doing, there to be that sunshine of God's love.

There is so much darkness in the world today and you, a co-worker, have to be that sunshine there. There is so much less hope, there is so much despair, so much distress in the world, and a co-worker has to be the hope of eternal happiness. There is so much hatred, there's so much killing, so much destruction in the world and a co-worker has to be the burning flame of God's love and compassion, and that's why we need to pray.

—St. Mother Teresa
Where There is Love, There Is God

How might I work with Christ to be a light bringing love to someone in need today?

LISTENING TO JESUS AT THE DOOR OF OUR HEART

"Our soul waits for the LORD, who is our help and shield. For in God our hearts rejoice; in God's holy name we trust." (Psalm 33:20-21)

We are well aware that life is made up of highs and lows, of lights and shadows. Each one of us experiences moments of disappointment, failure and being lost. Moreover, the situation we are living in, marked by the pandemic, generates worry, fear and discouragement in many people. We run the risk of falling into pessimism, closure and apathy. How should we react in the face of all this? The Psalmist suggests when our soul is confidently waiting for the Lord, this allows us to find comfort and courage in the dark moments of our lives.

And what gives rise to this courage and this trustful pledge?

Where do they come from? They are born of hope. And hope does not disappoint, that virtue that leads us ahead, looking at the encounter with the Lord.

Jesus, the Bible tells us, is at the door and knocks (Rev 3:20). Every day. He is at the door of our heart. He knocks. Do you know how to listen to the Lord who knocks, who has come today to visit you, who knocks at your heart restlessly, with an idea, with inspiration? He came to Bethlehem, and he will come at the end of the world, but every day he comes to us. Be careful, notice what you feel in your heart when the Lord knocks.

—Pope Francis

*How am I responding to the promptings of Jesus
knocking at my heart this Advent?*

LOOKING BACKWARD, LOOKING FORWARD

"LORD, My spirit is faint within me; my heart despairs. I remember the days of old; I ponder all your deeds; the works of your hands I recall." (Psalm 143:4-5)

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 Gospel not only reminds me 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.

I am struck by the fact that 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.

All this seems extremely important in a time in which our sense of history is so weak. Without anchors in its early promises and aspirations a nation is in danger of drifting and losing direction. And not only a nation, but the Church as well. It seems that progress is always connected with a refreshing of our collective memory. I pray that Advent will offer me the opportunity to deepen my memory of God's great deeds in time and will set me free to look forward with courage to the fulfillment of time by him who came and is still to come.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen
The Genesee Diary

How does my memory of what God has done deepen my expectation of what God is now doing?

TRUSTING IN GOD INSTEAD OF IN THINGS

“Seek first the kingdom of God, and his justice and all these things will be given to you besides” (Matthew 6:33).

We are not perfectly free until we live in pure hope. For when our hope is pure, it no longer trusts exclusively in human and visible means, nor rests in any visible end. One who hopes in God trusts God, whom he never sees, to bring him to the possession of things that are beyond imagination.

When we do not desire the things of this world for their own sake, we become able to see them as they are. We see at once their goodness and their purpose, and become able to appreciate them as we never have before. As soon as we are free of them, they begin to please us. As soon as we cease to rely on them alone, they are able to serve us. Since we depend

neither on the pleasure nor on the assistance we get from them, they offer us both pleasure and assistance, at the command of God.

Hope deprives us of everything that is not God, in order that all things may serve their true purpose as means to bring us to God. Hope teaches us to deny ourselves and leave the world not because either we or the world are evil, but because the imperfection of all things reminds us to leave them in order to live in hope. We leave the good things of this world not because they are not good, but because they are only good for us insofar as they form part of a promise.

—Thomas Merton
No Man Is an Island

How might my attachment to things keep me from trusting completely in God and God's promises?

LOVE IS NOT TALKING, LOVE IS LIVING

"In the morning let me hear of your mercy, for in you I trust. Show me the path I should walk, for I entrust my life to you." (Psalm 143:8)

People are asking for spiritual help, for consolation. They are so afraid, discouraged, in despair, so many commit suicide. That's why we must concentrate on being God's love, God's presence—not by words, but by service, concrete love, listening. How can we love Jesus in the world today? By loving Him in my husband, my wife, my children, my brothers and sisters, my parents, my neighbors, the poor.

Love is not talking, love is living. I can talk about love the whole day and love not once—looking everywhere, except looking down when there is a man dying on the street.

I belong to Jesus. I have been chosen, with a purpose to satiate

his thirst for love by loving him, by putting this love for him into action. We have to work at the salvation and sanctification of the poorest of the poor.

I cannot love God in words only: my heart has to express it, my hands have to express it, my feet have to express it. It's not enough to just say, "I want to love the poor." Our service is to be "wholehearted" not half-hearted, the proof of our love for God in action.

In the Scripture it says that we must love God with our whole heart and your neighbor. It is not sufficient to say, "Oh, I love Jesus tenderly." We have to show we love him by our wholehearted service.

—St. Mother Teresa
Where There is Love, There Is God

How might I show my love by wholeheartedly acting to help someone in need today?

WALKING WITH JESUS OUR BROTHER

“As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in him, rooted in him and built upon him and established in the faith as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” (Colossians 2:6-7)

We also accompany Jesus, knowing him to be close, present in us and among us as a friend, a brother. Jesus is God, but he lowered himself to walk with us. He is our friend, our brother. He illumines our path here. Ours is a joy born of from having encountered a person: Jesus, in our midst.

It is born from knowing that with him we are never alone, even at difficult moments, even when our life’s journey comes up against problems and obstacles that seem insurmountable. Let us follow Jesus!

We accompany Jesus but above all we know that he accompanies us and carries us on his shoulders. This is our joy.

This is the hope that we must bring to this world. Let us pray the same words with which the Spirit sealed all the Sacred Scriptures. Jesus says: “Yes, I am coming soon” and the Church responds: “Amen. Come, Lord, Jesus” (Rev 22:20).

And Jesus comes, in his way every day. We have trust in this. Let us share this message with the people defeated and bent by life, to those who have tasted hatred more than love, those who have lived aimless days without ever understanding why, those who have fought for justice, and to those who have come to the conclusion that they have fought for nothing and that in this world evil always dominates.

—Pope Francis

How might I share the message of Jesus’ presence among us with someone today?

WHERE IS OUR HOPE?

"You must return to your God.

Maintain loyalty and justice and always hope in your God." (Hosea 12:7)

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of Christian obedience to God today concerns the responsibility of the Christian in a technological society toward God's creation and God's will for God's creation. Obedience to God's will for nature and for mankind demands respect for nature and for mankind because of our power to frustrate God's designs for nature and for mankind, to radically corrupt and destroy natural goods by misuse and blind exploitation, especially by criminal waste.

There are very grave problems in the implications of certain kinds of Christian outlooks on "the world." The crux of the matter seems to be to what extent a Christian thinker can preserve his independence from ob-

sessive modes of thought about secular progress. (Behind which is always the anxiety for us and for the Church to be "acceptable" in a society that is leaving us behind in a cloud of dust.) In other words, where is our hope?

If in fact our hope is in a temporal and secular humanism of technological and political progress, we will find ourselves, in the name of Christ, joining in the stupidity and barbarism of those who are despoiling God's creation in order to make money or get power for themselves. But our hope must be in God. And one who hopes in God will find himself sooner or later making apparently hopeless and useless protests against the barbarism of power.

—Thomas Merton
A Year with Thomas Merton

*How might I act with greater respect for God's creation
and the environment today?*

MARY: MODEL OF TRUST AND HOPE

"Mary said, 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.'" (Luke 1:38)

When Mary answered the angel Gabriel, she was really saying, "I don't know what this all means, but I trust God and I trust you and I believe that good things will happen." She trusted so deeply that her waiting was open to all possibilities and she could trust what was going to happen.

I have found it very important in my own life to try to let go of my wishes and instead to live in hope. I am finding that when I choose to let go of my sometimes petty and superficial wishes and trust that my life is precious and meaningful in the eyes of God something really new, something beyond my own expectations begins to happen for me.

To wait with openness and trust is an enormously radical attitude toward life. It is choosing to hope that something is happening for us that is far beyond our own imaginings. It is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life. It is living with the conviction that God molds us in love, holds us in tenderness, and moves us away from the sources of our fear. Our spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, expecting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination or prediction. This, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen
Finding My Way Home

What new things have been happening to me as I deepen my trust in God?

SHARING OUR RICHES TODAY

“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?...Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25:37, 40)

As we love God we must love the poor in their sufferings. The love of the poor is an overflow of our love for God. We must find the poor, serve them. And when you have found them, you must take them to your heart. We owe our people the greatest gratitude, because they allow us to touch Christ. We must love the poor like he did.

We talk much *about* the poor but very little *to* the poor. There is so much talk about hunger and all that, that we'll have food after ten years, so much food—in the meantime, somebody's dying for a piece of bread and we don't even look at that person.

Once when there was a very, very big conference in Bombay,

and the participants were calculating in fifteen years' time how much more food there would be, and right in front of the house there was a man about twenty-five, twenty-six years old actually dying of hunger. So I took him and put him in the car with me. By the time I reached our house, he died—and he died purely of hunger.

This opened my eyes. They are calculating for tomorrow and in the meantime, today, many people are dying for a piece of bread. I have never experienced saying to people, “I don't have, I can't give you.” There's never been a time when we didn't have one more plate of rice, one more bed, one more dose of medicine.

—St. Mother Teresa

Where There is Love, There Is God

What practical help might I give today to help those who need food?

HOPE ENCOURAGES US TO DREAM BIG

*“Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”
(Isaiah 43:18-19)*

Hope is audacious, and so let’s encourage ourselves to dream big! Let’s not be afraid to dream big, to seek the ideals of justice and social love that are born of hope. Let’s not try to reconstruct the past, above all the past that was unjust and already ill. The past is the past, let’s look forward to new things. The Lord’s promise is: “I make all things new” (Rev 21:5).

Hope would have us recognize that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems. Let’s construct a future where the local and global dimensions mutually enrich each other, where everyone can contribute, where everyone must contribute their share—from their culture, from

their philosophy, from their way of thinking—where the beauty and the wealth of smaller groups, even the groups that are cast aside, might flourish because beauty is there too, and where those who have more can dedicate themselves to service and give more to those who have less.

Let’s construct this future together, aspiring to greater things, broadening our horizons and ideals. Either we do it together, or it won’t work. To create a better future means to change, a true change to which everyone contributes, all the persons that form a people. Everyone—families, associations, cooperatives, small businesses, and all other aspects of society—needs to contribute, everyone.

—Pope Francis

How might I begin to construct a better future in my household, workplace, neighborhood and parish?

GOD'S SPIRIT DWELLS IN US

"The mystery hidden from ages and from generations past now has been manifested to his holy ones, to whom God chose to make known the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; it is Christ in you, the hope for glory." (Colossians 1:26-27)

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 (John 6:40). 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
Turn My Mourning into Dancing

How has God's life-giving Spirit been most active in me this Advent?

JESUS: OUR REAL AND HOPEFUL JOY

"Amen, amen, I say to you, you will weep and mourn, while the world rejoices; you will grieve, but your grief will become joy... You are now in anguish. But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you." (John 16:20, 22)

Christian joy, like hope, is founded on God's fidelity, on the certainty that God always keeps his promises. We are called to rejoice for the imminent coming of our redeemer, and to share this joy with others, giving comfort and hope to the poor, the sick and to people who are lonely and unhappy. This message of hope—God-with-us, God who draws near—which is fulfilled at Christmas, leads to fulfillment of the expectation of God in each one of us too, in all the Church, and in the many little ones whom the world scorns, but whom God also loves and to whom God draws near.

The human heart desires joy. We all desire joy, every family, every people aspires to happi-

ness. 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 God's presence in our life. From the moment Jesus entered into history at his birth in Bethlehem, humanity received the seed of the kingdom of God, like the soil receives the seed, with the promise of a future harvest. There is no need to look further!

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 but a joy already real and tangible now, because Jesus himself is our joy, for he is the destination to which the human heart tends when it seeks joy and happiness.

—Pope Francis

*How might I share with others my joy
because of Jesus' presence with us today?*

LOVING CHRIST THROUGH LOVING ACTIONS

"Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you." (Luke, 6:38)

It is not how much we do but how much love we put in the action that matters to Almighty God. God keeps on loving the world through each one of us, through the work that has been entrusted to you. The work that you are doing at home or at work sacred work. Never do it slapdash for Jesus is present there. Your hands are feeding the hungry Christ, your hands are clothing the naked Christ, your hands are giving home to the homeless Christ in some part of the work. So, do your work well, and do it with great love. Otherwise it is not worth doing it. It is not worth doing it half-half. That is the means for you to become

holy because Jesus our God is there.

What you have received from Jesus give generously. He loves you. He took all the trouble to come from heaven to give us the good news to love one another. This is something that you and I can do—it is God's gift to us to be able to share our love with others.

And let it be as it was for Jesus. Let us love one another as he loved us. Let us love him with undivided love. Knowledge of Christ and of him present in his poor will lead us to personal love. This love only can become our light and joy in cheerful service of each other.

—St. Mother Teresa
Where There is Love, There Is God

How might I show my love for Christ by acting to help others in whom he is present?

PREPARING TO RECEIVE THE ONE WHO IS COMING

*“Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will act...
Be still before the LORD; wait for him.” (Psalm 37:5, 7)*

The days before Christmas must be days of deep prayer to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ. We must be really ready to receive him. Christ wants to be born in us, but we must be open, willing, receptive and truly welcoming. To become that way we have Advent and especially the last days before Christmas.

Somehow I realized that songs, music, good feelings, beautiful liturgies, nice presents, big dinners, and many sweet words do not make Christmas. Christmas is saying “yes” to something beyond all emotions and feelings. Christmas is saying “yes” to a hope based on God’s

initiative, which has nothing to do with what I think or feel. Christmas is believing that the salvation of the world is God’s work and not mine. Things will never look just right or feel just right. If they did, someone would be lying. But it is into this broken world that a child is born who is called Son of the Most High, Prince of Peace, Savior.

Thank you Lord, that you came, independent of my feelings and thoughts. Your heart is greater than mine. Maybe a “dry” Christmas, a Christmas without much to feel or think, will bring me closer to the true mystery of God-with-us. What it asks is pure, naked faith.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen
The Road to Daybreak

*How might I focus better on the true message of Christmas
despite how I might feel?*

HOPE BECAUSE GOD LOVES US

"The Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have come to believe that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world." (John 16:27-28)

We can either love God because we hope for something from God, or we can hope in God knowing that God loves us. Sometimes we begin with the first kind of hope and grow into the second. In that case, hope and charity work together as close partners, and both rest in God. Then every act of hope may open the door to contemplation, for such hope is its own fulfillment.

Better than hoping for anything from the Lord, besides God's love, let us place all our hope in God's love itself. This hope is sure and can never be confounded. It is more than a promise of its own fulfillment. It is an effect of the very love it hopes for. It seeks God knowing

that it has already been found by God. It travels to heaven realizing obscurely that it has already arrived.

All desires but one can fail. The only desire that is infallibly fulfilled is the desire to be loved by God. We cannot desire this efficaciously without at the same time desiring to love God, and the desire to love God is a desire that cannot fail.

Merely by desiring to love God, we are beginning to do that which we desire. Freedom is perfect when no other love can impede our desire to love God. But if we love God for something less than himself, we cherish a desire that can fail us. We run the risk of hating God if we do not get what we hope for.

—Thomas Merton
No Man Is an Island

How has my desire to be loved by God been most nourished during this Advent season?

OUR HEARTS ARE ANCHORED IN GOD

"Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2)

To see God, to be like God: this is our hope. This is the hope that accompanies us in life. The first Christians depicted hope with an anchor, as though life were an anchor cast on heaven's shores and all of us journeying to that shore, clinging to the anchor's rope. This is a beautiful image of hope: to have our hearts anchored there, where our beloved predecessors are, where Jesus is, where God is. The hope of being born to a new life is what we must make our own, if we are to be faithful to the teaching of Jesus.

Hope is a gift of God that we must ask for: "Lord, give me hope." Hope attracts us and makes sense of our lives. I cannot

see the afterlife, but hope is God's gift that draws us to life, to eternal joy. Hope is a free gift that we never deserve. It is a grace placed deep within each human heart in order to shed light on this life, so often troubled and clouded by so many situations that bring sadness and pain.

We need to nourish the roots of our hope so that they can bear fruit—especially the certainty of God's closeness and compassion, despite whatever evil we have done. There is no corner of our heart that cannot be touched by God's love. Whenever someone makes a mistake, the Father's mercy is all the more present, awakening repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace.

—Pope Francis

How has God's love and presence most touched me this Advent?

THE POOR ARE OUR HOPE

“Jesus said, ‘the poor you will always have with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them, but you will not always have me.’” (Mark 14:7)

Love begins at home. This is what we must know. Do we really know that in our own family? Maybe there is my brother, my sister, my wife, my husband, who feels unwanted, unloved, exhausted, looking for a little compassion, a little sympathy and I have no time. This is the great poverty and I think unless and until we begin to love at home, we begin to love in our communities, that love for one another as Jesus has loved us, as he was loved by his Father, we cannot hope for peace. That’s why the poor are the hope of salvation.

The poor are the hope of mankind. The poor are the hope for you and me to go to heaven for at the last judgment, we are

going to be judged on that. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me” (Mt 25:35-36).

People are not only hungry for bread and rice but hungry for love, to be wanted, to be known that I’m somebody to you, to be called by name, to know my name, to have that deep compassion. Today in the world there is a tremendous hunger for that love. People are thirsting for understanding. Very often we pass by our own brothers and sisters and we don’t understand their difficulty.

—St. Mother Teresa
Where There is Love, There Is God

How might I be more attentive to the need of those around me who are hungry in some way?

HOPE SPRINGS FROM LOVE

"The LORD shall judge between the nations, and set terms for many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again." (Isaiah 2:4-5)

On the night watch, hurrying by, I pushed open the door of the novice's scriptorium and flashed the light over all the empty desks. It was as if the empty room was wholly full of their hearts and their love, as if their goodness had made the place wholly good and rich in love. The loveliness of humanity which God has taken to himself in love, and the wonder of each individual person among them. This is of final and eternal significance. To have been appointed by God to be their father, to have received them from God as my children, to have loved them and been loved by them with such simplicity and sincerity, without nonsense or flattery or sentimentality: this is completely wonder-

ful and is a revelation, a *parousia* [Greek: coming] of the Lord of history.

From this kind of love necessarily springs hope, hope even for political action, for here, paradoxically, hope is most necessary. Hope is always most necessary precisely when everything, spiritually, seems hopeless. And this is precisely in the confusion of politics. Hope against hope that humanity can gradually disarm and cease preparing for destruction and learn at last that we must live at peace with others. Never have we been less disposed to do this. It must be learned, it must be done, and everything else is secondary to this supremely urgent need.

—Thomas Merton
A Year with Thomas Merton

How might I best express my hope for peace amidst the divisiveness of today's politics?

THE ONE TO COME IS ALREADY HERE

"Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress. Turn your ear to me; when I call, answer me quickly." (Psalm 102:3)

What strikes me is that 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. The Gospel passages read during Mass this coming week all talk about the events before Jesus' birth and the people ready to receive him. In the other readings Isaiah heaps prophecy on prophecy to 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 is this not a prepara-

tion that can 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. This last week is indeed a happy one.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen
The Genesee Diary

What have I learned that has helped me to get to know Jesus better this Advent?

HOPE AT THE EDGE OF DESPAIR

"We even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5:3-5)

How close God is to us when we come to recognize and to accept our abjection and to cast our care entirely upon God! Against all human expectation God sustains us when we need to be sustained, helping us to do what seemed impossible. We learn to know God, now, in the emptiness of a hope that may come close to despair. For perfect hope is achieved on the brink of despair when, instead of falling over the edge, we find ourselves walking on the air.

Hope is always just about to turn into despair, but never does so, for at the moment of supreme crisis God's power is suddenly made perfect in our infirmity. So we learn to expect God's mercy

most calmly when all is most dangerous, to seek God quietly in the face of peril, certain that God cannot fail us though we may be upbraided by the just and rejected by those who claim to hold the evidence of God's love.

Our weakness has opened heaven to us, because it has brought the mercy of God down to us and won us God's love. God, who is all holy, not only has had mercy on us, but has given his mercy into the hands of potential sinners in order that they may be able to choose between good and evil, and may overcome evil with good, and may earn his mercy for their own souls by having mercy on others.

—Thomas Merton
No Man Is an Island

When and how have I most discovered new strength from God in my times of weakness?

CHRIST: EMPTIED YET FULL

“Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness.” (Philippians 2:6-7)

When Jesus was born, he became so humble, so small, so helpless that anybody could have destroyed him he was so poor. He became dependent on a human mother. He could have been born in a palace, in an ordinary family life, but he was born in a stable because there was no room in the inn for him. There were no windows, no air. He was with the animals. Mary’s faith must have been so strong to accept that Jesus was really the Son of God.

Then when he grew up, he had to bring the good news to the poor. What is that good news? That God loves us and we should love one another as God loves us. So poverty has much to

do with charity. Before, people were frightened of God. When we read some of the Psalms, we see how terrified people were of God.

Then Jesus came, full of gentleness, and being rich he emptied himself. This is where contradiction lies. If I want to be poor like Christ—who became poor even though rich—he renounced, he gave—I must do the same. But there is another kind of contradiction when people nowadays want to be poor and live with the poor but they still want to be free to dispose of their valuable things. But his is having riches. They want both and you cannot have both.

—St. Mother Teresa
Where There is Love, There Is God

How might I share some of my riches at this time with those most in need?

THE SAVIOR HAS COME!

"For 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. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful." (Isaiah 9:5-6)

We do not dare to believe or trust the incredible truth that God could live in us, and live there out of choice, out of preference. This child and redeemer who comes amid the songs of angels to answer the prayers of all the patriarchs and prophets, and to satisfy the unrecognized longings of the whole lineage of Adam, exiled from Paradise, comes also to quiet the groanings of all creation.

For the whole world has been in labor and in mourning since the fall of Adam. The whole created universe, with all its manifold beauty and splendor, has travailed in disorder, longing for the birth of a savior. The patriarchs

and prophets prayed for the coming of Christ in Bethlehem, and this first coming did not silence the groanings of creation.

The mystery of Christmas therefore lays upon us all a debt and an obligation to the rest of humanity and to the whole created universe. We who have seen the light of Christ are obliged, by the greatness of the grace that has been given us, to make known the presence of the savior to the ends of the earth. This we will do not only by preaching the glad tidings of his coming but, above all, by revealing him in our lives. Christ is born to us in order that he may appear to the whole world through us.

—Thomas Merton
Seasons of Celebration

With whom might I share my experience of God's presence in my life?

CARING FOR GOD IN THE WORLD

*"May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting encouragement and good hope through his grace, encourage your hearts and strengthen them in every good deed and word."
(2 Thessalonians 2:16-17)*

Spiritually we are in God, in the Lord, at home in God. Our true identity is that we are God's children. It is from that perspective—from God's perspective—that we are called to see the world as God sees it. God says, "I love you with an everlasting love," and Jesus came to tell us that. We are the Beloved, not because we did anything, not because we proved ourselves. Basically, God loves us whatever we do. If that's true, these few years that we are in the world, we are sent to say, in the midst of our life, "Yes, God, I love you, too."

Just as God cares for us, it's very important that we care for God in the world. If God is born

like a little baby, God cannot walk or speak unless someone teaches God. That's the story of Jesus, who needs human beings in order to grow. God is saying, "I want to be weak so you can love me. What better way to help you respond to my love than becoming weak so you can care for me?"

God becomes a stumbling God who falls at the cross, who dies for us, and who is totally in need of love. God does this so that we can get close. The God who loves us is a God who becomes vulnerable, dependent in the manger and dependent on the cross, a God who basically is saying, "Are you there for me?"

—Henri J.M. Nouwen
The Road to Peace

When have I most experienced God's love for me? With what results?

LEARNING FROM THE NATIVITY DISPLAY

“The shepherds went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child.” (Luke 2:16-17)

The Nativity display is a catechesis about the Christmas story. Let us pause to contemplate the scene, and wonder at the marvelous way in which God wanted to come into the world be reborn in us. Let us ask for the grace of wonder before this mystery—a reality so tender, so beautiful, so close to our hearts—that the Lord may give us the grace of wonder to encounter him, to draw closer to him, to draw closer to us all.

The other day, while I was speaking with some scientists, we spoke about artificial intelligence and robots that are now programmed for everyone and everything. And I asked them, “But what is it that robots will

never be able to do?” They thought about it and made various suggestions, but in the end they were all in agreement about one thing: tenderness. Robots will never be capable of this.

And this tenderness is what God brings us now. The wonderful way in which God wanted to come into the world revives tenderness in us, the human tenderness that imitates that of God. And today we are in great need of more tenderness and human touch in the face of so much misery! If the pandemic has forced us to be more distant, Jesus, in the Nativity scene, reminds us that the way of human tenderness is to be close to each other. Let us follow this path.

—Pope Francis

How might I show some tenderness to those suffering from loneliness and isolation at this time?

GOD'S MOST WONDERFUL GIFT

"No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and God's love is brought to perfection in us." (1 John 4:12)

The coming of Jesus at Christmas completed the Holy Family. At that first Christmas, Jesus, being God, became humble, small and helpless. Today, Jesus is still humble, small and helpless in the unborn, and in those who are materially or spiritually poor, hungry for love and friendship, ignorant of the riches of the love of God for them, homeless for want of a home that is made of love in your heart. He is hungry, naked, sick and homeless in your own heart, in your family, in your neighbors.

God's love must be in your home first. You must be that hope of eternal happiness to your husband, to your wife, to your child, to your grandfather,

grandmother, to whoever is connected with you. Can they look up and see the joy of loving in your face? Can they look up and see Jesus in you?

When our attention is turned only to the Christmas parties and the presents, it becomes too easy to forget Christ at Christmas. Let us not forget the best and the most wonderful gift that God has given to us—Jesus.

He offers his tender, faithful love, to make us one in our families. What you have received from Jesus give generously. So let us give Jesus to each other, beginning in our families, by loving each other with a tender and most personal love as God loves each one of us.

—St. Mother Teresa
Where There is Love, There Is God

How might I find a way to show my love today for household members, friends or relatives?

OUR DAILY ADVENT PRAYER

O God, the Father who has given us Jesus,
may we come to know your true face,
feel your closeness and live in your presence.
May our gaze be fixed on you,
in whom true joy is found.

O Jesus, help us never to forget
the meaning of your earthly journey.
May the constant light of faith illumine our days,
the comforting power of hope direct our steps,
the contagious warmth of love stir our hearts.

O Holy Spirit, guard our life with your embrace:
bless and strengthen every desire for good;
give new life and nourishment to faith;
sustain and enlighten hope;
awaken and animate charity;
guide us all on the path to holiness.

—Pope Francis

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Pope Francis: All reflections have been adapted from the encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, weekly papal audiences, addresses and homilies of Pope Francis.

Henri J.M Nouwen: *A Cry for Mercy* (Doubleday, 1981); *Finding My Way Home* (Crossroad, 2001); *The Genesee Diary* (Doubleday, 1976); *The Road to Daybreak* (Doubleday, 1988); *The Road to Peace: Writings on Peace and Justice*, John Dear, ed. (Orbis, 1998); *Turn My Mourning into Dancing* (World Publishing Group 2001).

Mother Teresa: *Where There is Love, There Is God: A Path to Closer Union with God and Greater Love for Others*, an anthology compiled and edited by Brian Kolodiejchuk, MC (Doubleday, 2010).

Thomas Merton: *A Year with Thomas Merton: Daily Meditations from His Journals*, selected and edited by Jonathan Montaldo (HarperCollins, 2005); *No Man Is an Island* (Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1955); *Seasons of Celebration: Meditations on Cycle of Liturgical Feasts* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965).

JESUS CHRIST, SOURCE OF HOPE

"When the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared...God saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the holy Spirit, whom he richly poured out on us through Jesus Christ our savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life." (Titus 3:4-7)

This year, amid the ongoing global health crisis, Christmas can help us look ahead and embrace the hope that the newborn Jesus offers us. Christmas invites us to reflect, on the one hand, on the drama of history, in which men and women, wounded by sin, are unceasingly in search of truth, in search of mercy, and in search of redemption; and, on the other hand, of the goodness of God, who came towards us to communicate to us the Truth that saves and to make us share in his friendship and his life.

And as we receive this gift of grace, it can remove from our hearts and minds the pessimism that has spread even more nowadays as a result of the pandemic. We can overcome that sense of

disquieting bewilderment, not letting ourselves be overwhelmed by defeat and failure, in the re-discovered awareness that that humble and poor child, hidden away and helpless, is God himself, made human for us.

This reality gives us much joy and courage. God did not look down on us, from afar, nor pass us by repulsed by our misery. God did not clothe himself only superficially in a body, but rather fully assumed our nature and our human condition. Christmas is the feast of Love incarnate, of love born for us in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the light of mankind shining in the darkness, giving meaning to human existence and to the whole of history. Merry Christmas!

—Pope Francis

How has my hope in God most grown this Advent and how might I share this with others?