

WELCOMING THE
**CHRIST
CHILD**

ADVENT REFLECTIONS BY
POPE FRANCIS & HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

WELCOMING THE CHRIST CHILD

Spending this Advent with Pope Francis and Henri J.M. Nouwen is a good way to focus our attention on the renewal of our belief in Jesus' incarnate presence with us in history and his resurrected presence with us today in ourselves, in others, in our church and in our world. As our organizing theme, let us heed the words of Pope Francis who reminds us that "Each Christian family can first of all—as Mary and Joseph did—welcome Jesus, listen to him, speak with him, grow with him and in this way improve the world."

So each week during Advent, let us concentrate on one of these welcoming actions: listening, speaking or praying, growing in holiness and finally working to make our world a better place. Through our faithful daily attention to Jesus' presence, we will prepare ourselves for the celebration of Christmas. As Pope Francis also reminds us:

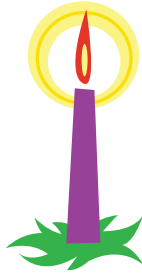
"Jesus no longer belongs to the past, but lives in the present and is projected towards the future. God's newness appears to us as victory over sin, evil and death, over everything that crushes life and makes it seem less human. Let the risen Jesus enter your life, welcome him as a friend, with trust: he is life! If up till now you have kept him at a distance, step forward. He will receive you with open arms. If you have been indifferent, take a risk. You won't be disappointed. If following him seems difficult, don't be afraid, trust him, be confident that he is close to you. He is with you and will give you the peace you are looking for and the strength to live as he would have you do."

So enjoy these Advent reflections as a way to more consciously welcome Christ into your life and change the world around you.

—Steve Mueller, Editor

A FAMILY WELCOME FOR JESUS

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” (Matthew 10:40)



Each Christian family can first of all—as Mary and Joseph did—welcome Jesus, listen to him, speak with him, grow with him and in this way improve the world. Let us make room in our heart and in our day for the Lord as Mary and Joseph also did. And it was not easy—how many difficulties they had to overcome! They were not a superficial family, they were not an unreal family. The family of Nazareth urges us to rediscover the vocation and mission of the family, of every family. And what happened in those 30 years in Nazareth can happen to us too: in seeking to make love and not hate normal, making mutual help commonplace, not indifference or enmity.

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

—Pope Francis

*Jesus, help me to be more attentive to your presence in those around me.
Today I will...*

LOOKING BACKWARD, LOOKING FORWARD

“I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds.”

(Psalm 77:11-12)

Last evening opened the Advent season. A large green wreath with four candles, symbolizing the four Sundays before Christmas, was hung in the center of the chapel. This simple decoration in the otherwise so sober chapel touched me deeply. Four weeks of expectation have begun. It is good, very good, to have these weeks of expectations and to deepen my realization that all my small expectations help me come to a deeper awareness of the great day on which the Lord will return to fulfill his promises.

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.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

Jesus, help me remember all you have done for me and my family.

Today I will...

THE ART OF LISTENING

*“O that today you would listen to God’s voice!
Do not harden your hearts.” (Psalm 95:7-8)*

Today more than ever we need men and women who, on the basis of their experience of accompanying others, are familiar with processes that call for prudence, understanding, patience and docility to the Spirit. We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God’s love and to bring to fruition what God has sown in our lives

All evangelization is based on God’s Word—listened to, meditated upon, lived, celebrated and witnessed to. The sacred Scriptures are the very source of evangelization. Consequently, we need to be constantly trained in hearing the Word. The Church does not evangelize unless she constantly lets herself be evangelized. It is indispensable that the word of God be ever more fully at the heart of every ecclesial activity. God’s Word, listened to and celebrated, above all in the Eucharist, nourishes and inwardly strengthens Christians, enabling them to offer an authentic witness to the gospel in daily life.

—Pope Francis

*Jesus, help me listen to your Word and use it to guide my life.
Today I will...*

QUIETING OUR HEART

“Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint.”
(Isaiah 7:4)



*I*t is better to have a daily practice of ten minutes' solitude than to have a whole hour once in a while. It is better to become familiar with one posture than to keep experimenting with different ones. Simplicity and regularity are the best guides in finding our way. They allow us to make the discipline of solitude as much part of our daily lives as eating and sleeping. When that happens, our noisy worries will slowly lose their power over us and the renewing activity of God's Spirit will slowly make its presence known.

Although the discipline of solitude asks us to set aside time and space, what finally matters is that our hearts become like quiet cells where God can dwell, wherever we go and whatever we do. The more we train ourselves to spend time with God and him alone, the more we will discover that God is with us at all times and in all places. Then we will be able to recognize him even in the midst of a busy and active life. Once the solitude of time and space has become a solitude of the heart, we will never have to leave that solitude. We will be able to live the spiritual life in any place and any time. Thus the discipline of solitude enables us to live active lives in the world, while remaining always in the presence of the living God.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*Jesus, help me find a quiet place where I can be alone with you.
Today I will...*

LISTENING TO GOD'S WORD

“Let my cry come before you, O LORD; give me understanding according to your word.” (Psalm 119:169)

The first step, after calling upon the Holy Spirit in prayer, is to give our entire attention to the biblical text. Whenever we stop and attempt to understand the message of a particular text, we are practicing “reverence for the truth.” This is the humility of heart which recognizes that the Word is always beyond us, that we are neither its masters or owners, but its guardians, heralds and servants. This attitude of humble and awe-filled veneration of the Word is expressed by taking the time to study it with the greatest care and a holy fear lest we distort it.

To interpret a biblical text, we need to be patient, to put aside all other concerns, and to give it our time, interest and undivided attention. We must leave aside any other pressing concerns and create an environment of serene concentration. It is useless to attempt to read a biblical text if all we are looking for are quick, easy and immediate results. We only devote periods of quiet time to the things or the people whom we love; and here we are speaking of the God whom we love, a God who wishes to speak to us. Because of this love, we can take as much time as we need, like every true disciple: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:9).

—Pope Francis

*Jesus, help me turn my full attention to your Word
in my prayer and reflection. Today I will...*

BE WITH ME IN THE SILENCE

*“For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from God comes my salvation.” (Psalm 62:1)*

Lord Jesus, your words to your Father were born out of your silence. Lead me into this silence, so that my words may be spoken in your name and thus be fruitful. It is so hard to be silent, silent with my mouth, but even more, silent with my heart. There is so much talking going on within me. It seems that I am always involved in inner debates with myself, my friends, my enemies, my supporters, my opponents, my colleagues, and my rivals.

But this inner debate reveals how far my heart is from you. If I were simply to rest at your feet and realize that I belong to you and you alone, I would easily stop arguing with all the real and imagined people around me. These arguments show my insecurity, my fear, my apprehensions, and my need for being recognized and receiving attention. You, O Lord, will give me all the attention I need if I would simply stop talking and start listening to you. I know that in the silence of my heart you will speak to me and show me your love. Give me, O Lord, that silence. Let me be patient and grow slowly into this silence in which I can be with you. Amen.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*Jesus, help me listen more attentively to your Word in Scripture.
Today I will...*

LISTENING TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

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



The Holy Spirit teaches us to see with the eyes of Christ, to live life as Christ lived, to understand life as Christ understood it. That is why the living water, who is the Holy Spirit, quenches our life, why he tells us that we are loved by God as children, that we can love God as his children and that by his grace we can live as children of God, like Jesus. And we, do we listen to the Holy Spirit? What does the Holy Spirit tell us? He says: God loves you. God likes you. Do we truly love God and others, as Jesus does?

Let us allow ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit, let us allow him to speak to our heart and say this to us: God is love, God is waiting for us, God is Father, who loves us as a true father loves, who loves us truly, and only the Holy Spirit can tell us this in our hearts. Let us hear the Holy Spirit, let us listen to the Holy Spirit and may we move forward on this path of love, mercy and forgiveness. We must listen to the Holy Spirit who is within us, hear him. What is he telling us? That God is good, that God is Father, that God loves us, that God always forgives us. Let's listen to the Holy Spirit.

—Pope Francis

Jesus, help me listen as the Holy Spirit reveals your love. Today I will...

THE SEEDS OF ETERNAL LIFE

“This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17:3)



*F*or 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

*Jesus, help me become more aware of your presence already working in me.
Today I will...*

FOLLOWING JESUS' EXAMPLE

*“For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”
(John 13:15)*

The humility of Jesus is like this: he is always inviting but never imposing. This tells us of the importance which conscience had for Jesus: listening in his heart to the Father's voice and following it. Jesus, in his earthly existence, was not, as it were “remote-controlled.” He was the incarnate Word, the Son of God made human. All his decisions were made freely, together with the Father, in full union with him, out of obedience to the Father and in profound and intimate listening to his will. In the Father Jesus found the strength and light for his journey.

Jesus wants us to be Christians, freely as he was, with the freedom that comes from this dialogue with the Father, from this dialogue with God. Jesus does not want selfish Christians who follow their own ego, who do not talk to God. Nor does he want weak Christians, Christians who have no will of their own, “remote-controlled” Christians incapable of creativity, who always seek to connect with the will of someone else and are not free. Jesus wants us free. And where is this freedom created? It is created in dialogue with God in the person's own conscience. If a Christian is unable to speak with God, if he or she cannot hear God in his own conscience, he or she is not free.

—Pope Francis

Jesus, help me speak more freely with you in my prayer. Today I will...

THE DISCIPLINE OF THE HEART

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.” (Psalm 19:14)

Personal prayer is not rewarded by acclaim, does not translate into helpful projects, and only rarely leads to the inner experience of peace and joy. Yet, personal prayer is the true test of our vocation.

If we take the discipline of the heart seriously, we have to start by setting aside a time and a place when and where we can be with God and God alone, not once in a while, but regularly.

For most of us it is very hard to spend a useless hour with God. It is hard precisely because by facing God alone we are also facing our own inner chaos. We come in direct confrontation with our restlessness, anxieties, resentments, unresolved tensions, hidden animosities and long-standing frustrations. Our spontaneous reaction to all this is to run away and get busy again, so that we can at least make ourselves believe that things are not as bad as they seem in our solitude.

The discipline of the heart is the discipline by which we create that inner space in which the Spirit of God can cry out in us “Abba Father” (Romans 8:15). Thus, through the discipline of the heart, we reach the heart of God. When we come to hear the heartbeat of God in the intimacy of our prayer, we realize that God’s heart embraces all the sufferings of the world. Prayer always leads us to the heart of God and the heart of the human struggle at the same time.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*Jesus, help me find a place and time to be alone with you.
Today I will...*

GOD IS AT YOUR SIDE

“Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you.” (Amos 5:14)



*C*rying day and night to God! This image of prayer is striking, but let us ask ourselves: Why does God want this? Doesn't God already know what we need? What does it mean to “insist” with God?

This is a good question that makes us examine an important aspect of the faith: God invites us to pray insistently not because God is unaware of our needs or not listening to us. On the contrary, God is always listening and knows everything about us lovingly. On our daily journey, especially in times of difficulty, in the battle against the evil that is outside and within us, the Lord is not far away, but by our side. We battle with God beside us, and our weapon is prayer which makes us feel God's presence beside us, his mercy and also his help.

But the battle against evil is a long and hard one; it requires patience and endurance, like Moses who had to keep his arms outstretched for the people to prevail (Exodus 17:8-13). This is how it is: there is a battle to be waged each day, but God is our ally, faith in God is our strength and prayer is the expression of this faith. Therefore Jesus assures us of the victory, but at the end he asks: “when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8). If faith is snuffed out, prayer is snuffed out, and we walk in the dark only to become lost on the path of life.

—Pope Francis

*Jesus, help me trust in your presence to lead me in times of difficulty.
Today I will...*

DISCOVERING JESUS WITHIN

“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.”
(John 15:4)

You complain that it is hard for you to pray, to experience the love of Jesus. But Jesus dwells in your fearful, never fully received self. When you befriend your true self and discover that it is good and beautiful, you will see Jesus there. Where you are most human, most yourself, weakest, there Jesus lives. Bringing your fearful self home is bringing Jesus home.

As long as your vulnerable self does not feel welcomed by you, it keeps so distant that it cannot show you its true beauty and wisdom. Thus, you survive without really living. Try to keep your small, fearful self close to you. This is going to be a struggle, because you have to live for a while with the “not yet.” Your deepest, truest self is not yet home. It quickly gets scared. Since your intimate self does not feel safe with you, it continues to look for others, especially those who offer it some real, though temporary, consolation. But when you become more childlike, it will no longer feel the need to dwell elsewhere. It will begin to look to you as home.

Be patient. When you feel lonely, stay with your loneliness. Avoid the temptation to let your fearful self run off. Let it teach you its wisdom; let it tell you that you can live instead of just surviving. Gradually you will become one, and you will find that Jesus is living in your heart and offering you all you need.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

Jesus, help me find your presence in my fearful self. Today I will...

MEETING JESUS

“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

(Matthew 28:20)



*W*e meet Jesus every day. You meet Jesus when you pray. You meet Jesus in the sacraments when you receive communion, when you bring your child to be baptized, when you are confirmed. Our whole life is an encounter with Jesus: in prayer, when we go to Mass, when we do good works, when we visit the sick, when we help the poor, when we think of others, when we are not selfish, when we are loving—in these things we always meet Jesus, we find Jesus. And the journey of life is precisely this: journeying in order to meet Jesus.

And in the Mass we shall all meet Jesus, and we will walk a portion of the journey together. Always remember this: life is a journey. It is a path, a journey to meet Jesus at the end, and forever. A journey in which we do not encounter Jesus is not a Christian journey. It is for the Christian to continually encounter Jesus, to watch him, to let himself be watched over by Jesus, because Jesus watches us with love. He loves us so much, and he is always watching over us. To encounter Jesus also means allowing oneself to be gazed upon by him.

—Pope Francis

*Jesus, help me to meet you every day in my prayer and actions.
Today I will...*

OPEN YOUR HANDS AND LET GOD LEAD

“Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.” (Psalm 25:5)

A life in prayer is a life with open hands where you are not ashamed of your weakness but realize that it is more perfect for a person to be led by another than to seek to hold everything in one’s own hands.

Only within this kind of life does a spoken prayer make sense. A prayer in church, at table or in school is only a witness to what we want to make of our entire lives. Such a prayer only recalls to mind that praying is living and it invites you to make this an ever-greater reality. Thus there are as many ways to pray as there are moments in life. Sometimes you seek out a quiet spot and you want to be alone, sometimes you look for a friend and you want to be together. Sometimes you’d like a book or some music. Sometimes you want to sing out with hundreds, sometimes only to whisper with a few. Sometimes you want to say it with words, sometimes with a deep silence. In all these moments, you gradually make your life more a prayer and you open your hands to be led by God even to where you would rather not go.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*Jesus, help me let you lead me where I can best serve you and others.
Today I will...*

DEEPENING OUR CHRISTIAN JOY

“I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” (John 16:22)



*F*or two weeks already, the season of Advent has been calling us to spiritual vigilance in preparation to welcome the Lord who is to come. Today, we note another interior attitude by which to live out this time of waiting for the Lord—joy. The Church looks forward to the joy of Christmas and so today is called “Gaudete Sunday.” Therefore, in order to have this joy in preparation for Christmas, first, pray: “Lord, let me live this Christmas with true joy.” Not with the joy of consumerism that leads me to Christmas with anxiety, because “ah, I’m missing this, I’m missing that.” No, this is not the joy of God. Second: give thanks to the Lord for the good things God has given us. Third, think of how we can go to others, to those in difficulty or sick or with other problems—to bring a little healing, peace, joy. This is the joy of the Christian.

We have less than 2 weeks left, so in these days, let us pray asking for the joy of Christmas. Let us give thanks to God for the good things that God has given us, above all our faith. This is a wonderful grace. Let us think where we can go to bring a little relief, a little peace, to those who suffer. Pray, give thanks and help others. And so we will arrive at the birth of the Anointed One, the Christ, as ones anointed in grace, prayer and acts of grace and help towards others.

—Pope Francis

Jesus, help me rejoice that Jesus is always near. Today I will...

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 the heart of God.

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

*Jesus, lead me deeper into my heart so I can meet you there.
Today I will...*

GROWING IN CHRIST

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” (Isaiah 43:7)



The Christian life calls for ongoing formation and maturation. Evangelization aims at a process of growth which entails taking seriously each person and God’s plan for his or her life. All of us need to grow in Christ. Evangelization should stimulate a desire for this growth, so that each of us can say wholeheartedly: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

It would not be right to see this call to growth exclusively or primarily in terms of doctrinal formation. It has to do with “observing” all that the Lord has shown us as the way of responding to his love. Along with the virtues, this means above all the new commandment, the first and the greatest of the commandments, and the one that best identifies us as Christ’s disciples: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

This process of response and growth is always preceded by the Father’s free gift which makes us his sons and daughters, and the priority of the gift of his grace enables that constant sanctification which pleases God and gives him glory. In this way, we allow ourselves to be transformed in Christ through a life lived “according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:5).

—Pope Francis

Jesus, help me respond more fully to your love. Today I will...

BELONGING TO GOD

“Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.” (Luke 6:36)

Jesus wants to make it clear that the God of whom he speaks is a God of compassion who joyously welcomes repentant sinners into his house. To associate and eat with people of ill repute, therefore, does not contradict his teaching about God, but does, in fact, live out this teaching in everyday life. If God forgives sinners, then certainly those who have faith in God should do the same. If God welcomes sinners home, then certainly those who trust in God should do likewise. If God is compassionate, then certainly those who love God should be compassionate as well.

The God whom Jesus announces and in whose name he acts is the God of compassion, the God who offers himself as example and model for all human behavior. But there is more. Becoming like the heavenly Father is not just one important aspect of Jesus’ teaching, it is the very heart of his message. The radical quality of Jesus’ words and the seeming impossibility of his demands are quite obvious when heard as part of a general call to become and to be true sons and daughters of God.

As long as we belong to this world, we will remain subject to its competitive ways and expect to be rewarded for all the good we do. But when we belong to God, who loves us without conditions, we can live as God does. The great conversion called for by Jesus is to move from belonging to the world to belonging to God.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*Jesus, help me be more compassionate to those around me.
Today I will...*

AT HOME IN THE CHURCH

“See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.”
(Revelation 21:3)

*I*n the Church each one of us finds what is needed to believe, to live as Christians, to become holy and to journey to every place and through every age. It is like family life in which everything that enables us to grow, to mature and to live is given to each of us. We cannot grow up by ourselves, we cannot journey on our own, in isolation. Rather, we journey and grow in a community, in a family. And so it is in the Church!

In the Church we can listen to the Word of God with the assurance that it is the message that the Lord has given us, encounter the Lord in the sacraments—which are the open windows through which the light of God is given to us and streams from which we can draw God’s very life—and learn to live in the communion and love that comes from God.

Each one of us can ask himself or herself today: how do I live in the Church? When I go to church, is it as though I were a spectator at a football game or at the movies? How do I receive the gifts that the Church offers me to grow and mature as a Christian? Do I participate in the life of the community or withdraw into my own problems, isolating myself from others? The Church is catholic because in her everyone can find a home.

—Pope Francis

*Jesus, help me participate more fully and actively when I go to church.
Today I will...*

DOING AS JESUS DID

“Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’” (John 6:68-69)



I have made an inner decision to keep looking at Jesus as the one who calls us to the heart of God, a heart that knows only love. It is from that perspective that I reflect on everything Jesus says, including his harsh statements. Jesus created divisions, but I have chosen to believe that these divisions were the result not of intolerance or fanaticism but of his radical call to love, forgive and be reconciled.

Every time I have an opportunity to create understanding between people and foster moments of healing, forgiving and uniting, I will try to do it, even though I might be criticized as too soft, too bending, too appeasing. Is this desire a lack of fervor and zeal for the truth? Is it an unwillingness to be a martyr? Is it spinelessness? I am not always sure what comes from my weakness and what comes from my strength. Probably I will never know. But I have to trust that, after sixty-four years of life, I have some ground to stand on, a ground where Jesus stands with me. And when divisions arise against my desire, I have to find the courage to live them as lovingly as I tried to prevent them; then Jesus' harsh words might prove consoling.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*Jesus, help me cling to you even when my life is most difficult.
Today I will...*

PRAY AND WORK

“Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” (1 John 4:20)

*L*istening to the word of the Lord, contemplation, and practical service to our neighbor are not two attitudes opposed to one another. On the contrary, they are two essential aspects in our Christian life that can never be separated but are lived out in profound unity and harmony.

In our Christian life too, prayer and action must always be deeply united. A prayer that does not lead you to practical action for others—the poor, the sick, those in need of help or in difficulty—is a sterile and incomplete prayer. But, in the same way, when time is not set aside for dialogue with God in prayer, we risk serving ourselves and not God present in our needy brother and sister.

St Benedict sums up the kind of life that indicated for his monks in two words: *ora et labora*, pray and work. From contemplation, from a strong friendship with the Lord, the capacity is born in us to live and to bring God’s love, mercy and tenderness to others. And also our work with others in need, our charitable works of mercy, lead us to the Lord because it is in the needy brother and sister that we see the Lord himself. So let us meditate in our hearts on the Word of God, pray faithfully and be ever more attentive in practical ways to the needs of our brothers and sisters.

—Pope Francis

*Jesus, help me unite my prayer and work to love
and serve you and others. Today I will...*

MARY OUR MODEL

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



Today, the Fourth and last Sunday of Advent, as we prepare us for Christmas, now at the door, let us meditate on the angel’s annunciation to Mary. Her attitudes are for us the model of how to prepare for Christmas.

First of all, her attitude of faith, which consists in listening to the Word of God in order to abandon herself to this Word with full willingness of mind and heart. Her response to the angel is filled with faith. Mary does not know by what road she must venture, what pains she must suffer, what risks she must face. But she is aware that it is the Lord asking and she entrusts herself totally to God and abandons herself to God’s love. This is the faith of Mary!

Second, she reminds us that everything is a free gift from God, everything is grace, everything is a gift out of God’s love for us. Mary responds to God’s grace and abandons herself, saying to the angel: “Let it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). And the Word was made flesh in her womb. We too are asked to listen to God who speaks to us, and to accept God’s will. According to the logic of the gospel, nothing is more productive and fruitful than listening to and accepting the Word of the Lord, which comes from the gospel, from the Bible. The Lord is always speaking to us!

—Pope Francis

Jesus, help me listen more carefully as you speak to me. Today I will...

MAKE THE WORLD BETTER

“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16)

Following Jesus’ incarnation example, we want to enter fully into the fabric of society, sharing the lives of all, listening to their concerns, helping them materially and spiritually in their needs, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep. Arm in arm with others, we are committed to building a new world. But we do so not from a sense of obligation, not as a burdensome duty, but as the result of a personal decision which brings us joy and gives meaning to our lives.

Loving others is a spiritual force drawing us to union with God. When we live out a spirituality of drawing nearer to others and seeking their welfare, our hearts are opened wide to the Lord’s greatest and most beautiful gifts. Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God. Whenever our eyes are opened to acknowledge the other, we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God. If we want to advance in the spiritual life, then, we must constantly be missionaries. The work of evangelization enriches the mind and the heart, opens up spiritual horizons, makes us more and more sensitive to the workings of the Holy Spirit and takes us beyond our limited spiritual constructs. We do not live better when we flee, hide, refuse to share, stop giving and lock ourselves up in own comforts. Such a life is nothing less than slow suicide.

—Pope Francis

*Jesus, help me venture forth more boldly to share your good news.
Today I will...*

BECOMING CHRISTS

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?”

(1 Corinthians 6:19)

The spiritual life is a life guided by the same Spirit who guided Jesus Christ. The Spirit is the breath of Christ in us, the divine power of Christ active in us, the mysterious source of new vitality by which we are made aware that it is not we who live, but Christ who lives in us (Galatians 2:20). Indeed, to live a spiritual life means to become living Christs. It is not enough to try to imitate Christ as much as possible; it is not enough to remind others of Jesus; it is not even enough to be inspired by the words and actions of Jesus Christ. No, the spiritual life presents us with a far more radical demand: to be living Christs here and now, in time and history.

We will never come to know our true vocation in life unless we are willing to grapple with the radical claim the gospel places on us. During the past twenty centuries many Christians have heard this radical call and have responded to it in true obedience. Some went to distant lands as preachers, teachers and healers, while others remained where they were, raised families and worked faithfully. Although their responses reveal an extraordinary diversity, these Christians all heard the call to follow Christ without compromise.

Regardless of the particular shape we give to our lives, Jesus' call to discipleship is primal, all-encompassing, all-inclusive, demanding a total commitment. One cannot be a little bit for Christ, give him some attention, or make him just one of many concerns.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*Jesus, help me become more like you in my words and deeds.
Today I will...*

LIFE IS NOT THE SAME WITHOUT JESUS

*“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)*

We have a treasure of life and love that cannot deceive, and a message that cannot mislead or disappoint. It penetrates to the depths of our hearts, sustaining and ennobling us. But this conviction has to be sustained by our own constantly renewed experience of savoring Christ’s friendship and his message.

It is impossible to persevere unless we are convinced from personal experience that it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to. It is not the same thing to try to build the world with his gospel as to try to do so by our own lights.

We know well that with Jesus life becomes richer and that with him it is easier to find meaning in everything. This is why we evangelize. A true missionary, who never ceases to be a disciple, knows that Jesus walks with him, speaks to him, breathes with him, works with him. He senses Jesus alive with him in the midst of the missionary enterprise. Unless we see him present at the heart of our missionary commitment, our enthusiasm soon wanes and we are no longer sure of what it is that we are handing on. A person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain and in love, will convince nobody.

—Pope Francis

Jesus, help me share my experience of you with others. Today I will...

POWER IN TOTAL WEAKNESS

“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6)

How shall I describe this Holy Night? How shall I give expression to the multitude of feelings and ideas that come together in this most joyful celebration? This night is the fulfillment of four weeks of expectation, the remembrance of the most intimate mystery of life, the birth of God in an agonizing world. It is the planting of the seeds of compassion, freedom and peace in a harsh, unfree and hateful society. It is hope in a new earth to come.

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. Yes, 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. Yes, God became dependent on human beings to grow up and live among us and proclaim the good news. Yes, indeed, God chose to become so powerless that the realization of God’s own mission among us became completely dependent on us. 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 is the story of Jesus.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

Jesus, help me understand the mystery of your sharing in our human weakness. Today I will...

WELCOMING THE CHRIST CHILD

“Do not be afraid; for see—to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”
(Luke 2:10-12)

On this holy night, while we contemplate the infant Jesus just born and placed in the manger, we can reflect on how we welcome the tenderness of God? Do I allow myself to be taken up by God, to be embraced by God, or do I prevent God from drawing close? “But I am searching for the Lord,” we could respond. Nevertheless, what is most important is not seeking God, but rather allowing God to seek me, to find me and to caress me with tenderness. The question put to us simply by the infant’s presence is: do I allow God to love me?

More so, do we have the courage to welcome with tenderness the difficulties and problems of those who are near to us, or do we prefer impersonal solutions, perhaps effective but devoid of the warmth of the gospel? How much the world needs tenderness today! The patience of God, the closeness of God, the tenderness of God.

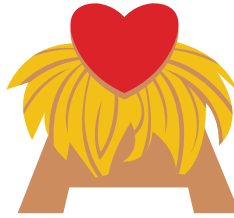
The Christian response cannot be different from God’s response to our smallness. Life must be met with goodness, with meekness. When we realize that God is in love with our smallness, that God made himself small in order to better encounter us, we cannot help but open our hearts and pray: “Lord, help me to be like you, give me the grace of tenderness in the most difficult circumstances of life, give me the grace of closeness in the face of every need, of meekness in every conflict.”

—Pope Francis

Jesus, help me welcome you more fully into my life now. Today I will...

THE NEW MANGER OF OUR HEART

“May you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God’s Spirit, and may Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” (Ephesians 3:16-17)



You are called to live out of a new place, beyond your emotions, passions, and feelings. Try thinking about this place as the core of your being—your heart, where all human sentiments are held together in truth. From this place you can feel, think, and act truthfully. It is quite understandable that you are afraid of this place. You have so little knowledge of it. You have caught glimpses of it, you have even been there at times, but for most of your life you have dwelt among your emotions, passions, and feelings and searched in them for inner peace and joy.

This new place is where God dwells and holds you. Do not be afraid. Trust that the God of life wants to embrace you and give you true safety. This is the place of unification, where you can become one. Right now you experience an inner duality; your emotions, passions, and feelings seem separate from your heart. The needs of your body seem separate from your deeper self. Your thoughts and dreams seem separate from your spiritual longing. You are called to unity. That is the good news of the Incarnation. The Word becomes flesh, and thus a new place is made where all of you and all of God can dwell. When you have found that unity, you will be truly free.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen

*Jesus, help me welcome you to live within me and change my whole life.
Today I will...*

A CHRISTMAS BLESSING

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

—*Pope Francis*

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Henri J.H. Nouwen: *A Cry for Mercy* (Doubleday, 1981); *Making All Things New* (HarperCollins, 2000); *Sabbatical Journey* (Crossroad, 1998); *The Genesee Diary* (Doubleday 1976); *The Inner Voice of Love* (Doubleday, 1996); *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Doubleday, 1994); *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life* (Orbis, 2007); *Turn My Mourning into Dancing* (World Publishing Group, 2001); *With Open Hands* (Ave Maria Press, 1972).

OUR JOY IS JESUS CHRIST

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him”—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.” (1 Corinthians 2:9-10)

Christian joy, like hope, is founded on God’s fidelity, on the certainty that God always keeps his promises. The prophet Isaiah exhorts those who have lost their way and have lost heart to entrust themselves to the faithfulness of the Lord, for his salvation will not delay in bursting into their lives. All those who have encountered Jesus along the way experience a serenity and joy in their hearts which nothing and no one can take away. Our joy is Jesus Christ, his faithful love is inexhaustible!

May the Virgin Mary help us to hasten our steps to Bethlehem, to encounter the child who is born for us, for the salvation and joy of all people. May she obtain for us the grace to live the joy of the gospel in our families, at work, in the parish and everywhere—an intimate joy, fashioned of wonder and tenderness, the joy a mother experiences when she looks at her newborn baby and feels that he or she is a gift from God, a miracle for which she can only give thanks!

Dear friends, be glad! Do not be afraid of being joyful! Don’t be afraid of joy! That joy which the Lord gives us when we allow him to enter our life. Let us allow him to enter our lives and invite us to go out to the margins of life and proclaim the gospel. Don’t be afraid of joy. Have joy and courage!

—Pope Francis

