

# THE WAY



ADVENT & CHRISTMAS  
DAILY REFLECTIONS 2019

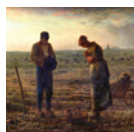
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1-6 DECEMBER

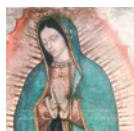
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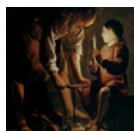
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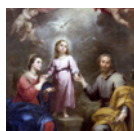
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**CONTRIBUTORS**

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FRONT COVER  
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*Madonna del Granduca*

**RAFFAELLO SANZIO DA URBINO (1483–1520)**

“Madonna del Granduca”, c. 1504.

Oil on panel, 84 × 55 cm. Florence, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina. Public Domain.

During his closing address at our diocesan Marian Congress in 1981, Cardinal James Freeman said of Our Lady: “She has been accepted or rejected. Only with difficulty has she been ignored.” The most depicted subject in art is that of the Madonna and Child. Somehow, this theme catches the imagination and speaks of life itself—the joy of motherhood and the excitement of a new human beginning. But then, we quickly remember the fate of this Child, and the painting takes on a new dimension. Suddenly, we detect a wistful expression on the Mother’s face. Instinctively, we know we can turn to her, for she is a Mother of Sorrow, even in the midst of joy.

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The *Madonna del Granduca* was painted by Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (known as Raphael) in A.D. 1504 shortly after he arrived in Florence. It became the property of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Ferdinand III, hence the name of the painting. It is still housed in Florence in the Palatine Gallery of the Pitti Palace. Mary is shown standing, and we see her in more length than in Raphael's other Madonnas. This allows Mary to be shown in a more majestic pose. Instead of the baby being held at shoulder height, the Christ Child is tenderly held and supported by his mother at almost waist level. Mary gazes downwards in an almost trance-like expression, while the Christ Child is wide-eyed and inquisitive. Whatever he sees, he is clinging to the comfort and protection of his mother. We, too, naturally fly to her when times are tough. "We fly to thy protection, O holy Mother of God, despise not our prayers in our necessities, but deliver us from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin," is the oldest known prayer to Our Lady, dating from around A.D. 300.

The *Madonna Granduca* remains one of Raphael's finest creations in his early period. He came to Florence after his formation by Perugino (whom we met in Advent 2017—his *Baptism* adorns the Sistine Chapel). Previous artists seem to have all been groping for the very simplicity that Raphael attained.

One critic points out Our Lady's hand supporting the baby's buttocks: "The most disarming gesture I have ever witnessed in painting," he says. Raphael repeats the gesture several times later. But, notice Our Lady's other hand, more than holding the Child, she is pointing to him. In fact, this hand occupies the very centre of the painting. Raphael may well have been influenced by Byzantine art. There are several "classes" of Marian icons, one being the *hodegitria*—literally "she who shows *the way*". Mary does more than just point. She is "showing" us her Child, for he is "*the Way*". Although Our Lady takes up almost the centre space of the picture, it is the Child

who is the main feature. In Jesus is the whole reason for Mary's being. "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord" (Lk 1:46). Mary is not forcing the Child on us. She is simply offering him as the Saviour of the World to those with eyes of faith. Our Lady's posture is simply a gentle invitation to move closer to Jesus—he wants to belong to us as much as he obviously belongs to her.

In his commentary on another class of Marian icon—the *Tenderness* icons—Rowan Williams, a former archbishop of Canterbury, points out that Mary actually represents us, and Christ's clinging to his mother is a sign of how close he wishes to come to us. "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:3). Jesus is asking us to do no more than he has done himself. Children are full of trust. It must always be our attitude before God.

Mary is not looking directly at us, but she truly "sees" us. This is the whole point of the painting. We are not spectators at a museum. We are the Mother's children given directly to us by her Son. "Behold your mother" (Jn 19:27). We have come to her with all our problems in life. She is showing us the answer: "Do what he tells you" (Jn 2:5). We spend so much of our lives trying to look "good" so that others will notice us, that we may not be prepared to be truly "seen".

**MGR GRAHAM SCHMITZER**

**I am not worthy to have you under my roof.** MT 8:8

We are considering *the way* and today's Gospel gives us a good indication. All journeys start somewhere. For the centurion, the journey started with a genuine concern for someone else. He knew what he wanted. Are you sure of what you want? Do you even know what your journey in life is about and who it affects? What spurs you on?

Once we know this, our centurion shows us a way forward. He comes at *his* want from a position of humility, not demand or entitlement. "Lord, I am not worthy." Humility puts others first and does not push our own ego or interests. It's about being able to stand in front of another—actually bowing down before another in mind and heart.

Nelson Mandela, in the time of apartheid, once saw a white woman stranded beside her broken-down car. He offered to help, and got the car going. She offered to pay him sixpence, but he refused. She was amazed and asked why he, a black man, would help her, a white woman. He simply said, "Because you needed help." Humility isn't about being a doormat, demeaning yourself, or being grovelling. C.S. Lewis said, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."

That's what the centurion did. Do you? The centurion, great man though he was, was not ashamed to be vulnerable. What about you?

Why not make a start today? The promise is that, in humility, you will find more than you are looking for.

A little prayer to say often:

*Take me beyond myself today. Amen.*

**MOTHER HILDA SCOTT OSB**

**I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and revealing them to mere children.** LK 10:21

During his missionary tour of India, St Francis Xavier recounts the urgency with which he goes from town-to-town preaching the Gospel. The children in one town spot him praying and they climb all over him, as children do with their parents when they want something badly. Except, they don't want ice cream, toys or a new iPad. They want to know more about Jesus. Like any good father, St Francis knows he cannot sleep until all the children are fed.

Children learn by imitation. That is why the best educators of children will always be their parents. They love what we love, they love who we love. If we have cause to lament the state of the world today, then let us take it as a reflection of our own inner state. If the world "out there" seems to have closed its ears to God, then let us open our own.

In truth, St Francis Xavier and the children were one. He could communicate the Gospel in a tender and loving way because he loved his Saviour with the fervour of a small child for its parents.

"Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel." Indeed. Our calling is the same as St Francis Xavier's: to surrender ourselves to Jesus, and in doing so, to share him as naturally as a father would with his child.

*Heavenly Father, in this Advent season, fill us with your Holy Spirit and grant us the simple missionary fervour of St Francis Xavier, so that more may hunger for the tender love of your Son, Jesus. Amen.*

**FR JAMES MACKAY**

**He who is your teacher will hide no longer, and you will see your teacher with your own eyes. Whether you turn to right or left, your ears will hear these words behind you, “This is the way, follow it.”** IS 30:20B–21

When we were young, we might have looked forward to the days when we no longer had to attend school. We might have sought out independence from our parents' guidance, seeking our own freedom as an adult. And, to some extent, this is simply a part of growing up. Nonetheless, as children of God, we never outgrow our need for our heavenly Father. He made us. He created us. He designed us. He sees our whole past, present and future. For this reason, we need to cling to him to be our teacher. He simply knows best, and in ways that surpass our own thinking.

Part of allowing Christ to be our *way* is to surrender to his wisdom and listen to him. Why is this so difficult? Sometimes, we simply don't trust giving our lives completely over to God. We think that holding onto our own *way* will be more reliable. It is scary handing ourselves over to God, but he is good, and his plan is far better than anything we can imagine.

*Lord teach me to be swept up in your goodness, to forget all of my fears, and to sit at your feet and listen to you as my Teacher. Grant me the grace of humility to see the flaws in my own thinking about you, about myself and others. Let me see the world through your eyes, so that I may know the way to you. Amen.*

**FR CHRIS PIETRASZKO**



**Prepare a way for the Lord.** MT 3:3

I remember when my mum was expecting my youngest sister, Gemma. As the day approached, Dad went around the house tidying the floor, putting away toys, removing clutter or trip hazards so that Mum could walk safely around the house without the risk of falling over objects left lying around.

I remember a place in the family home being prepared—the crib (or cot) was set up in my parents' bedroom, and the house was given a good clean. Finally, my mum gave birth and the waiting and expectation was over, and when she arrived home from hospital, the house was filled with a sense of joy and wonder at the presence of the new arrival—our little baby sister.

During the season of Advent, this is how we are called to “prepare a way for the Lord” (Mt 3:3). We are called to prepare our homes—the home of our heart—by removing some of the clutter and trip hazards within the heart; the baggage we might carry; grudges or resentments we might be clinging on to, so that our hearts are a clean safe place, ready to receive the child Jesus.

In doing so, we imitate our Blessed Lady. For Mary was so open to receiving God that, quite literally, she conceived God inside her womb. But in a spiritual sense, we are called to be so open to receiving God that we conceive God in the womb of our hearts, so to speak. And, just as Mary gave birth to God in that stable in Bethlehem, so also, we are called to birth God into our world through all our kind words and acts of charity. It might sound incredible, but like Mary, we also become mothers of God. As Jesus said, “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Mt 12:50).

*Lord, help prepare my heart to receive you this Christmas.  
Amen.*

**25 DECEMBER 2019**

The Nativity of the Lord

Isaiah 52:7–10

Psalm 97(98):1–6

Hebrews 1:1–6

John 1:1–18

**The Word was made flesh, he lived among us.** JN 1:14

The moments between Jesus' birth and his first cry must have felt like the eternity from which he was born. Jesus, held in the trembling arms of Mary, is the promise of an angel fulfilled. And then, God breathed.

God had breathed life into Adam in the garden (Gn 2:7) and all of Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tm 3:16), but this is different. God is truly Emmanuel, with us in all things except sin—even in breath. God has been speaking to us in many ways throughout salvation history (cf. Heb 1:1) but, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI tells us, "God's dialogue with us becomes truly human, since God conducts his part as man." But, more than this, in coming down to us as one of us, Jesus draws us up into his life and shares with us a dignity unique in all of creation—we become sons and daughters of the Father.

Amid the activities of today, take time to remember what your breathing says about you, considering this mystery of Emmanuel—God with us. Breathe in; I am loved with an everlasting love. Breathe out; nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Breathe in; I am no longer a slave to sin and death. Breathe out; in Jesus, we are forgiven, redeemed and restored. Breathe in; I am a child of God. Breathe out; no greater gift do I have to offer the world than the truth of this.

Happy Christmas.

*The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. Amen.*

**PETER GILMORE**

**But the man who stands firm  
to the end will be saved.** MT 10:22

Yesterday we celebrated God becoming one of us—Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary in a humble stable in Bethlehem. The angels sang, “Glory to God in the Highest!” and shepherds came and adored him, and the world changed forever. God is with us—Emmanuel.

Today is different. Although we are still in the Christmas season, the priest is wearing red (not white) and we are celebrating the feast of St Stephen—the first Christian martyr; stoned to death. It’s as if we went from the warmth and safety of a mother’s arms to the cold stare of an angry mob in a day’s time.

It’s easy to sense God’s love when life is going well—when our family is together, when we are healthy, when we are financially sound, and when life is going as planned. But, when things aren’t going so well—when we are sick, when we are suffering, when our hearts are broken, and when we feel all alone, it’s often a lot more difficult to sense the love and the presence of God. And that’s why we celebrate St Stephen’s martyrdom the day immediately following Christmas.

God is with us in our joys, and God is with us in our sorrows. St Stephen knew this truth, which is what gave him the courage to die a martyr’s death and proclaim the good news of Emmanuel. May we know this truth too, and may we proclaim it to the world by our lives.

*St Stephen, ora pro nobis. Amen.*

**FR DAMIAN FERENCE**

**29 DECEMBER 2019**

The Holy Family

Ecclesiasticus 3:3–7, 14–17

Psalm 127(128):1–5

Colossians 3:12–21

Matthew 2:13–15, 19–23

**In a dream.** MT 2:13

I have never been so tired than I was in my first year of religious life. During the 30 minutes of afternoon *lectio divina* each day, I was overcome. Day after day, I drifted in and out in a curious mix of faux contemplation and muddled embarrassment. My brothers called it *nap-tio divina*.

For those given to dozing, there is comfort in the prayer of St Joseph. Four times he received weighty visions. Four times they came in sleep. From St Joseph, we learn that the efficacy of prayer hinges, not so much on our awareness, as on God's goodness. As St Therese once recalled, "When doctors perform operations, they put their patients to sleep."

And yet, we can't help but think that this sounds like a rationalisation. Just because he, like his Old Testament namesake, dreamed prayerful dreams, that doesn't mean I should presume on God to do the same for me. Perhaps his were the culmination of an otherwise attentive prayer life. Who's to say he didn't make an exemplary Holy Hour?

But, here we arrive at a mysterious dimension of St Joseph's sanctity. We can't know how good he was at praying. What we do know though is that he showed up. He showed up for Mary. And, he showed up for Jesus. And frankly, that's about all we know. And, his fidelity—by God's grace—made him a saint.

So, though we should never despair of alert and attentive prayer, we have to begin and end with fidelity. Your prayer may improve. It may not. What is paramount is that it not cease.

*Good St Joseph, intercede for me, that by remaining faithful to prayer, I may avail myself of all God's graces. Amen.*

**FR GREGORY PINE OP**

## **Courage! It is I!** MK 6:50

The feast of the Epiphany is of great importance. An epiphany speaks of a great revelation, or realisation. The importance is grounded in the truth that when one reveals themselves, there is an opportunity for a deepening of the relationship—if received into the heart of the other.

Today's Gospel speaks of the ever-deepening spiritual journey of God drawing close, revealing something of himself, our reaction, and God's response. We notice that Jesus "was going to pass them by", that is, to reveal himself. The Hebrew Scriptures give us a number of examples of God "passing by"—leaving an indelible mark on the heart of those God encounters.

The disciples had *seen* Jesus and were terrified. What did they see?

I dare say it was something of the truth of who Jesus was for them. Whenever the *heart* of something or someone is revealed, a reaction takes place within us. We are usually either drawn toward or away from the subject. As Jesus reveals himself to us this Christmas season, you may wish to take particular notice of your reaction—and Jesus' response. Does he "get in the boat" and simply be with you, waiting to hear your deepest fears and desires?

"Courage" is not only associated with bravery, but with *heart*—revealing the deepest part of ourselves. *The way* to insight, an epiphany, is through courage and vulnerability—sharing our true selves with Jesus.

*Jesus as you reveal yourself to us in the mystery of Christmas, grant us the grace to respond with courage, sharing our true selves with you and making our way closer in truth. Amen.*

**TRISH MCCARTHY**

**He would always go off some place where he could be alone and pray.** LK 5:16

Jesus has just amazed the people by his preaching and miracles, including the instantaneous healing of a man with leprosy. But, he is not concerned about amazing people—he desires to be alone and to pray.

What a curious thing it is for Jesus (God) to pray. How can God pray to God? Jesus' prayer points to the mystery of the love of the Trinity—that Jesus' whole life is one of perpetual union with the Father and the Holy Spirit; a communion of unlimited love. His prayer is a reflection of this communion.

Jesus models for us something of our own desires. I long to be in the presence of someone who loves me just as I am—in all my inadequacy, failures and fears—who nonetheless accepts me, and can strengthen me to face those inadequacies, failures and fears. Sometimes, this is the healing experience of marriage—of belonging permanently to another who faithfully accepts me—hence, it is a reflection of Trinitarian love. As wonderful as our human relationships may be, they are limited, and deep-down we long for even more. In the presence of the Trinity, that acceptance, love and strength we desire, is available to us to an infinite degree—an unchanging, never-ending, limitless love. This is what our own prayer is meant to be.

*Lord God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thank you for loving me without limit. In my desire for something infinite, help me run to you in prayer, to receive strength from you who are infinite love and mercy. Amen.*

**SR ANASTASIA REEVES OP**