



Incarnate

ADVENT & CHRISTMAS
DAILY REFLECTIONS 2022

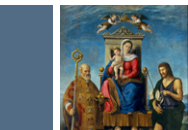
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27 NOVEMBER–3 DECEMBER

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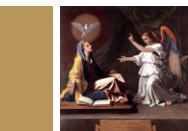
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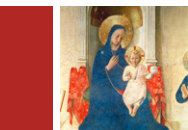
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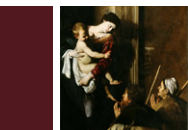
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Christmas

25 DECEMBER–31 DECEMBER

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Mary, Mother of God

1 JANUARY–7 JANUARY

X



The Epiphany

8 JANUARY–9 JANUARY

X



Mary
MOTHER OF GOD

Madonna of the Pilgrims

MICHELANGELO MERISI DA CARAVAGGIO
(1571–1610)

Madonna of the Pilgrims (1604–1606). Oil on canvas, 260 cm × 150 cm.
Basilica di Sant'Agostino, Rome, Italy. Public Domain.

On 21 July 1602, the marquis Ermete Cavalletti died. According to his wishes, his heirs purchased a chapel in the Church of St Augustine in Rome and commissioned the artist Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio to create a painting of Our Lady of Loretto. This theme was very popular at the time.

The finished work created a sensation. Caravaggio's style was unique. He painted directly onto the canvas without any preparatory drawings, and used as his models people straight off the street, sometimes even prostitutes and orphaned children. He wished to depict humanity at its most real—his figures displaying expressions of intense emotion. Caravaggio's art can almost be immediately recognised by his skilful use of light.

The Madonna of the Pilgrims, as his painting is commonly called, does not have Mary seated on a throne befitting her status as Queen of Heaven. This Mary is a barefooted woman from the surrounding streets. Jesus seems to have outgrown his mother's lap, yet she holds him so effortlessly. And it was common practice in paintings of the Madonna to show the patrons kneeling before her. But this couple are far too poor to be the patrons. They are just two humble and elderly peasants (look at the man's dirty feet) honoured with a vision of the mother and Child as they finish a pilgrimage. St Augustine's is near the Piazza Navona and was the second-last stop for pilgrims making their way to St Peter's. Caravaggio's point? It is not the proud and haughty whom God will raise up, but the poor and lowly. Mary's Magnificat is being played out on a dark and dusty Roman street.

Loretto is Italy's holiest shrine and contains what is commonly believed to be the Holy House of Nazareth.

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Sceptical? Certainly, the image of angels transporting the house through the air is far-fetched. But the archaeological evidence is compelling. Loretto's basilica holds the remains of a three-sided brick house (the fourth side having been the cave on to which it was built, common in the Holy Land). The brick is certainly native to Israel, and recent studies have found Crusader crosses embedded in the mortar between the bricks. For the true story is that when they saw the holy places about to be destroyed by marauding saracens, English crusaders dismantled the Holy House and transported the stones to Italy. In fact, the first representation of the transportation of the Holy House is of a dwelling sitting on a ship (angels hovering above in poetic license by the artist.) The answer given to critics is a paraphrase of Pope St Gregory's comment when he saw English slaves in the Roman market, "non angli sed angeli" (they're not English, they're angels)—"non angeli sed angli": the house was not carried by angels but by the English!

Caravaggio seems to give an illusion to the Holy House in his painting—the partly decrepit wall of flaking brick inside the doorway. It is in Mary's house that the pilgrims find Jesus. Hence the universal custom of naming churches after Our Lady, for she is the very image of the Church. Her "yes" to God was the Church's first word, and her Magnificat the Church's first hymn.

In revising the liturgical calendar, the Second Vatican Council returned to the custom of the early Church in venerating Our Lady and her role in the Incarnation on the Octave Day of Christmas (pre-Vatican II this was the feast of the Circumcision.) Some years later, Pope St Paul VI wisely named this date as World Day of Prayer for Peace, and entrusting the Church and the world to Our Lady's intercession. What was the result of her intercession at Cana? Christ's first miracle, "And his disciples believed in him" (Jn 2:11). We are those two pilgrims in the painting. And our prayer today? Peace in Europe.

MGR GRAHAM SCHMITZER

**Just give the word
and my servant will be cured.** MT 8:8

We learn a lot more than we realise about the centurion in today's Gospel. Not only is he a man of authority who expects his orders to be carried out, but he is a man of his word. If he says he will do a thing, he does it. We know this because of the way that he assumes that Jesus has the same integrity and is prepared to trust that if Jesus agrees to "give the word", he will follow through, and the servant will be healed. In St John's version of this story, as soon as Jesus gives his word, the centurion immediately started for home, and was nearly there before he was met with the news that the healing had in fact occurred.

What about us? Do we have faith in Jesus' word?

As Catholics, we generally excel at trusting some of his words: "This is my Body.... This is my Blood," for instance. But I suspect that there are others that really stretch us. Words like: "Your sins are forgiven," or, "I am with you always," or, "Ask and you will receive." If we're honest with ourselves, we struggle with some of these words of Jesus, and our actions often suggest that we're not as sure of him as we'd like to be.

Perhaps the challenge for today, or this week, or this Advent, might be to allow God to show us one of these areas of struggle to trust him, and to ask for the faith of the centurion in this area.

Lord Jesus, you know that I would like to be able to trust you completely. Please help me to step out in faith like the centurion and take you at your word. Amen.

KATHERINE STONE MGL

1 DECEMBER 2022

Thursday of the 1st week of Advent

Isaiah 26:1–6
Psalm 117(118):1, 8–9, 19–21, 25–27
Matthew 7:21, 24–27

Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on rock. MT 7:24

Whilst sitting in the park on my retreat, having just reflected on this Gospel, two tradies passed by. They were discussing a building job, when one of them thanked the other for his work. The other commented saying, “Nah mate, you’re right, it’s all good, I’ve worked with a builder who is very particular. Once you get your foundations right, then everything around it is much easier and is sweet as.”

This is exactly what today’s Gospel is all about. Jesus mentions that those who listen to his words and act on them are like those who build their house on solid rock. He uses the analogy that if we listen to his words and *not* act on them, we are laying our foundations on sand—the house won’t last; storms will come and knock it down. Our life is the house. When we centre our life in Jesus—solid and grounded in his love and formed by his Word—everything else around us, even during the storms that come our way, will be secure.

There was a time in my life when I had to question the foundation of my own life. Was I building my life on his love for me or on the things of the world—addictions, other people, material possessions, comforts? During the times in my life when I was swayed by the conflicting voices of those around me, unsteady in my convictions and feeling as though I was sinking and alone, my life was not centred in God. When I chose to live my life grounded in his love, my life became joyful and full of promise and purpose, and most the time, *sweet as!* Grasping onto Jesus’ Word and trusting in God helps us to remain steadfast when the storms of life hit.

Jesus, help me to build my life centred in your love. Amen.

THERESE MILLS MGL

14 DECEMBER 2022

Saint John of the Cross

1 Corinthians 2:1–10
Psalm 37(38): 37:3–4, 5–6, 30–31
Luke 14:25–33

What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart. 1 COR 2:9

The Church puts before us today the example of someone—John of the Cross—who, while solidly walking this earth, had his heart fixed on the eternal; on that which his eye hasn't seen or ear heard.

Blessed Julian of Norwich said that when we die, we will be amazed. We expect that God will have a great deal to say to us about our mistakes. We even think we will be treated to a fair bit of justifiable anger for the ways in which we have messed up, and some of us quite badly. But that is not what Julian learned from him. She learned that when it is time for us to go home, you and I will be covered with such great love that we will say: "I never knew, if only I had known."

That love will change everything. The things that have eluded us all our lives will be there. If we have been lonely, we will know a companionship that wipes out those empty years. If we have known poverty, the richness will chase it from our memory. We won't deserve any of this, but God doesn't work on that basis.

We are going home to that place where we are assured of our welcome, where we belong, where no explanations are needed, and our place at the table is assured, where there is a warm fire and an easy chair.

St John of the Cross knew a little of what we are in for, and it shaped his life. Why not let it shape yours?

A little prayer to pray: Fix my gaze on you my Father as you fix your gaze on me. Amen.

MOTHER HILDA SCOTT OSB

But with everlasting love I have taken pity on you, says the Lord, your redeemer. IS 54:8

I distinctly remember settling in at home to watch a movie at around 11pm on September 12th, 2001. I switched on the television and saw live coverage of a plane flying into a building—it was 8:46am in New York, September 11th. From that night, there would always be a “before” and “after” that moment. You would have your own version of this. Perhaps it is a revolutionary memory, like the fall of the Berlin wall; mournful, like the death of Martin Luther King Jr; joyous, like the birth of a child. We remember where we were, who we were with, facial expressions and even mundane things like the colour of the room. These events are like bookmarks in our lives—they split our story into “what was” and “what will be”.

The incarnation of Jesus, this celebration we call Christmas, is a world-sized bookmark that God slides into the middle of the human story. And the “Jesus” side of the bookmark continues to grow. After all, time had a beginning, but we are now, with hope and by God’s grace, on our way to eternity with him. So, when God says to the Israelites, “I did forsake you for a brief moment.... but with everlasting love I have taken pity on you” (Is 54:7–8), it is a reminder that whatever comes before is always brief compared to the love of God. Whatever pain, sadness, sorrow, brokenness, loneliness, will melt in his love and presence. Our task is to invite him in.

Lord Jesus, you transform sorrow into joy and mourning into dancing. I invite you again into my heart and life. Amen.

PETER GILMORE

The Lord is with you.... Do not be afraid. LK 1:28–30

An angel appears unexpectedly in a little-known village in Palestine to an equally unknown young woman. No wonder Mary was a little afraid!

We all experience fear, albeit in very different ways, which can sometimes be paralysing. However, as Pope Benedict XVI has explained, ordered fear can actually be liberating.

We may fear ordinary but genuinely difficult things such as long-term illness, unemployment, and so on. We sometimes fear things that, in the light of truth and growing maturity, are unfounded—such as a childhood fear of the dark.

More fundamentally, within our culture of materialistic atheism, we can experience an inner fear about our very being: Why do I exist? What is my purpose? If there is nothing beyond the material world, then we fear that this life—my life—is absurd.

However, Pope Benedict suggests that the solution is a healthy fear of God: not a terrified submission to a whimsical or vengeful deity, but a trusting respect for God who is love, holds everything in existence and invites us into an eternal destiny of freedom and peace.

This exemplified by the Blessed Mother who trusts in God's loving plan for her. In complete freedom, she responds by giving her whole self to him, and so enters into a future so grand she could never have imagined it—to be the mother of God and a conduit of salvation for the whole world.

Mary, pray that I might have healthy fear of our loving God, so that by His grace I can bravely enter more fully into His eternal plan for me, just as you did. Amen.

Free from fear. LK 1:74

In 2008, my sister, Gemma, gave birth to a baby girl, and with her husband, Rodger, named the baby Amelia. I will always remember one occasion when I held Amelia in my arms. As I looked at her, she wriggled her arms and legs and the thought entered my mind that even though she was able to wriggle her arms and legs, she was not able to hit or hurt me. As I continued to look at her, she sneezed, sighed, made some sounds and noises, but she was incapable of saying anything to me; she could not criticise me, insult me, condemn me or send me away. As I looked into her eyes once more, she looked up, the corners of her mouth moved and she gave me the most wonderful smile before falling back to sleep. And as I held her in my arms, I realised there is no reason to be afraid of this little child. And, so it is with our God.

For when the Almighty—all-powerful God—first appeared to us on this earth, it was not as a powerful warrior, wealthy king or political leader as many people expected and hoped for, but it was as a helpless baby “lying in a manger” (Lk 2:12). A reminder that just as a little baby cannot hurt us or harm us, so also, God did not come to hurt or harm us. And just as a little baby cannot insult us, condemn us or send us away, so, also, God did not come to insult us or to condemn us, or to send us away. And just as we do not need to be afraid of a tiny helpless baby, so, also, we do not need to be afraid of God when we turn to God with a humble heart.

*Lord, help me always to turn to you with a humble heart.
Amen*

FR ANTONY JUKES OFM

Mary treasured these things and pondered them in her heart. LK 2:19

The vocation of every Christian is holiness of life. This means the pursuit of one's own personal holiness and relationship with Christ and being a leaven in the world, influencing it by our Christian beliefs and practices. Before Mary conceived the Incarnate Word in her womb, she first conceived him in faith in her heart. While the mind is where we seek to understand faith and give ascent to it, it is in the heart that we conceive and ponder the mystery of faith and live it out. Thus, Mary “treasured and pondered these things in her heart”.

As we begin another year by honouring Our Lady today, let us turn our gaze upon her who is the Mother of God and our spiritual mother, and the perfect pattern and model of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. It was because she opened herself completely with humble faith and trust to God and his will for her life that he was able, through her, to enter the world by sending the Incarnate Word in her immaculate womb.

As she continued to ponder the mystery of Christ—her Son and her Lord—by living her life with total obedience to God, she invites us to do the same. It will not always be easy, but we will, like Mary, become “vessels of Christ” bringing him and his love into a world which has a profound and urgent need to once again be converted to Christ—the one Redeemer of the world and the Saviour of the human race.

As Christian disciples, each one of us has an indispensable part to play in this mission of our own, and the world's, salvation. Now that's a New Year's resolution worth striving for!

Mother of God, and our mother, pray for us. Amen.

FR CHRISTOPHER G. SARKIS

2 JANUARY 2023

Saints Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen

1 John 2:22–28

Psalm 97(98):1–4

John 1:19–28

“Who are you? What do you have to say about yourself?” JN 1:22

In his recent apostolic letter on the liturgy, Pope Francis turns our thinking about reality upside-down (or perhaps right-side up). He teaches us that, “God created water precisely with Baptism in mind” (*Desiderio Desideravi*, 13). Usually, we understand cause-and-effect in a chronological sequence. But God is outside of our space and time; for him, all is an eternal “now” (and if that’s hard for you to imagine, welcome to the human race!) From our point of view, Baptism comes “after” water, and we might see God choosing water for Baptism due to its purifying and cleansing qualities, but from God’s point of view, Baptism—his plan for our “new birth” as his daughters and sons—comes first, and water was created as the perfect instrument.

In today’s Gospel, John the Baptist shows us how to define ourselves not as the result of a cause-and-effect chain of events, but as a perfect creation in God’s plan. He does not find his identity in imitating those who have gone before him, or even in his accomplishments. His identity lies ahead of him, in the One who is coming. John is the voice, waiting for the Word.

Jesus wants to help us to define ourselves not by where we’ve been, but by where we’re going. The first reading encourages us to hold fast to what we have been taught and what has been promised to us: “You are anointed with truth, not with a lie, and as it has taught you, so you must stay in him” (1 Jn 2:27). We are pilgrims on a journey; eternal life starts here and now.

Jesus, please help me hold fast to your promises this year, so that everything that comes my way may not drag me along, but rather draw me up into your embrace. Amen.

SR SUSANNA EDMUNDS OP