



Journey to Our Lady

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My Dear Friends,

Now is the time for preparation. While much of our energy is spent preparing the gifts we buy for one another and decorating our homes with holiday cheer, how much time and energy do we spend preparing ourselves for the greatest joy of all?

The coming of Jesus Christ is an event of such immensity that God willed to prepare for it over centuries, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Events, rituals, sacrifices, symbols of the First Covenant and all the prophets awakened hearts to the expectation of our Lord's first coming.

During this time of year, we relive this awakening to the expectation of Christ's birth—the coming of our Savior which helps us to prepare for His second coming. Truly, now is the time to open our hearts to allow Christ to live within us and through us so that His loving presence will always be known. To do so, we must decrease so that our Lord can increase in our lives.

Let us ponder that to unite with us, our Almighty Savior in all humility became little to enter our world as a baby born in a stable, helpless and dependent. To complete this union, each of us must recognize our own littleness and humbly place ourselves in God's hands so that His love can grow to fruition in our souls.

Mary, our Blessed Mother, shows us the way. In all humility and by her own free will, Mary said yes at the Annunciation so that Jesus Christ could enter our world to show us the greatness of God's loving mercy. Let us say yes to God's calling and may we use this season to prepare our hearts, minds, and souls to be God's living instruments of His love. Let us continue our journey.

The Immaculate Conception

From the moment of her conception, Mary was clean and pure with no stain of original sin. There were no barriers, no obstacles in her humanness to hold Mary back from saying yes to God. By giving herself completely to God, we are given the hope of redemption.

Without sin, Mary was filled with God's love—with God's grace. "Hail, full of grace. The Lord is with you," said the Archangel to Mary at the Annunciation [Luke 1:28]. Through the perfection of Mary as a human being, we are able to see how our lives should be led—with the fullness of God's love living in us and through us for the sake of our salvation and the salvation of the world.

True, we are not perfect and although baptism washes away our original sin, we are still vulnerable to temptations which lead us away from God's love just as temptation and sin drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden. Mary's purity—freedom from all sin—enabled Mary to give herself entirely to the work of her Son Jesus Christ which is the work of our redemption.

Therefore, when we walk with Mary—when we pray to her and ask for her intercession—we can become better human beings and because Mary is without sin, we can become less sinful. Mary shows us that nothing will be impossible for God. During her life on earth, the love of God lived in Mary and through Mary, and with that love and her obedience, Mary untied the knot of disobedience created by Adam (See story, pg.2) >

(Immaculate Conception, cont'd from pg. 1)

and Eve.

By loosening our bond to sin, Mary gives us the hope and the grace to bond with her Son who came to earth to lead us on the path to Heaven. With Mary by our side, we see the steps to take for a life of holiness to begin and we can overcome the obstacles and barriers that separate us from God's love.

The Immaculate Conception of Mary and the human life she led should serve as inspiration for each of us to live life the way God wants us to live it. When we are free from sin, we are able to love God fully and without hesitation or doubts. Our faith, love, and obedience become one as we conform to God's will which is to love one another as God loves us.

Let us consider the definition of immaculate and conception. Immaculate means no flaws or blemish, and conception is the beginning of a new life. Perhaps, when we contemplate these words, we see a state of being that is out of reach. But with Mary's Immaculate Conception, we are given a new beginning in life with an opportunity to be free from the blemish of sin.

We can strive for such perfection by loving God more. The more we love God, the more faithful and obedient we become and the less likely we are to sin. The less we sin the more room we have within ourselves to be filled with God's grace. Mary is considered the dispenser of God's grace—the help that God gives us to answer His call to become His children, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Grace introduces us into the intimacy of Trinitarian life—the loving unity with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Being full of grace, Mary was the one human being perfectly united with the Holy Trinity. Like Mary, when we unite with the Holy Trinity, we become God's living instruments that share His love on earth, bringing ourselves and our world closer to a new life without blemish. #

Prayer

*Dearest Mother,
You who are
without blemish,
help me
to live a better life.
Just as you
untied the knot
of disobedience,
keep me from
temptation and vice
so that
I am not entangled
in sin.
May the tender,
loving mercies
of God
strengthen my faith
and give me
hope of salvation
and
may my love for God
grow with each
passing day.
Amen.*

Great Expectations

When the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and the power of the Most High overshadowed Mary, the Blessed Virgin was given a great expectation—the coming of her Son Jesus Christ. With each passing day, Mary felt the love of God grow inside herself—love that was—and is—eager to be shared.

Mary went in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth whose own great expectation was soon to be realized. Together, Mary and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, stood in the midst of God's wonders, not as passive observers, but as active participants in God's plan so that what was spoken by the Lord would be fulfilled. How does this relate to our expectations as we await the celebration of Christ's birth?

We know that the coming of John the Baptist, the prophet of the Most High, was meant to prepare the way of Jesus Christ, "to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God," said Zechariah, the father of John [Luke 1:77-78]. The coming of Christ fulfills that promise. While our expectation is salvation, to realize that expectation we need to partake in God's plan.

To prepare ourselves for salvation, we are called to repent and believe in the Gospel. The word became flesh in Jesus Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life for each of us. The word came to life in Jesus Christ and can come to life in us by way of the Holy Spirit, which works with the Father and the Son from the beginning to the completion of the plan for our salvation, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Just as the hearts, minds, and souls of Mary and Elizabeth were open, allowing them to be filled with the Holy Spirit, we must be open so that the love of God can take hold in us. And as our love for God grows with divine grace, so does our calling to live life free from sin and proclaim the greatness of God by selflessly helping others who have greater needs than ourselves. When we answer this call with faith, hope, and charity, our great expectation of salvation will come to realization. #

Share the Joy

“Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all people...a Savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord,” said the angel of the Lord [Luke 2:10-11] to shepherds in the field on the night of Jesus’ birth.

Are we afraid? What prevents us from truly embracing and sharing this great joy? To know that Christ our King entered the world in all humility to become one with us and to forgive our sins so that we may enter the Kingdom of Heaven is cause for celebration. Of course we celebrate the first coming every December 25th by attending Mass and exchanging gifts with loved ones, but do we honestly appreciate what we are celebrating?

Consider Mary. Our Lady did not hide her joy. With Jesus living in her and radiating through her, Mary shared the Savior with her cousin Elizabeth. When Mary’s greeting reached her cousin’s ear, the child within Elizabeth leapt with joy. “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior,” said Mary [Luke 1:46-47]. And Mary did not try to hide Jesus when the shepherds came to the stable on the night of His birth to see what had been told to them. They too rejoiced and praised God.

Joy is fruit of the Holy Spirit that is meant to be embraced and shared, not only on Christmas day, but each day of our lives because this joy is not fleeting. It comes with faith, hope, and love. The joy of knowing that we are not alone, we are loved by God, and Heaven awaits us can comfort us and carry us through our most difficult challenges.

Christ’s coming tells us that with God’s merciful love we can start our life anew because there is much more to life than what we know and possess. The fact that Jesus was born and lived in this world with no material wealth tells us that the riches in this world cannot compare to the treasures in Heaven. With the greatness of God’s love in our hearts, may the joy of our Lord shine through us this Christmas and each day of our lives.

To Give and to Receive

Consider the saying: It is better to give than to receive. Whether it is giving a gift to a loved one or lending a helping hand to someone in need, ours is a calling to spread love and kindness in a selfless manner. But to give of ourselves selflessly, we also need to receive—grace from God.

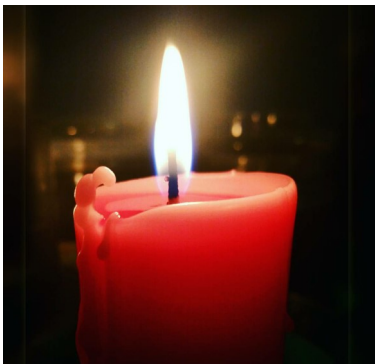
Grace is God’s gift to us and helps us to live life better than we are able to do on our own. “Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; if ministry, in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; if one exhorts, in exhortation; if one contributes, in generosity; if one is over others, with diligence; if one does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.” [Romans 12:6-8]

Truly, when we accept God’s grace into our lives, we are not on our own. Grace unites us to Christ in love. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, grace is a participation in the life of God; we become children of God. As God’s children, we have a responsibility; we are called to be Christ-like in our daily living.

Christ is the light of the world. “Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life,” said Jesus [John 8:12]. With the grace of

God, we can be beacons of Christ’s light. Let us consider our Blessed Mother. During her visit with her cousin Elizabeth, the light of the Lord shone through Mary who was full of grace.

When the light of the Lord shines through us, we are able to help others find their way toward God. By receiving the grace of God, we are able to share His grace by the way we live our lives, giving inspiration to those around us to follow the Lord’s way. God gives to us and what we receive we then give to others with faith, hope, and love. #



Prayer

*Heavenly Mother,
With the aid
of your intercession,
may I receive
God’s graces
so that I may become
a better person.
Help me to share
the fruits of
the Holy Spirit
and
truly appreciate
God’s gift of love.
Your Son,
the light of life,
keeps me
out of darkness.
Help me
to never lose
sight of Him
as I go
about my daily life.
May I always remain
united to Him
in love.
Amen.*

Dear Angel,

Another Christmas is upon us. In all that goes on this time of year, help me not to lose sight of baby Jesus lying in the manger. Help me to remember why Mary said yes at the Annunciation so that this little baby could be born. For my sake and for the sake of the world, He came to live and to die so that we may have eternal life in Heaven; there is no greater gift than this.

As Mary embraced Jesus, may I also embrace our Lord in my heart and soul. May I learn humility and accept my littleness so that I may be worthy of being one of God's loving children. Amen.



The Gift of God

God so loved the world that the Son of God made man, who is God Himself, entered our world in all humility. No trappings befitting the Almighty; instead He came to us body, blood, soul and divinity as a baby born in a stable with a humble handmaid as His mother and a manger for His bed.

From heaven to earth, Our Lord entered the world with no material wealth in order to give us everything we need for a heavenly existence. How do we accept this wondrous gift of God? How do we show our gratitude? The answer comes in the way we live day to day.

When we accept Christ our Savior into our lives, we say yes to entering into a divine union with the Holy Trinity. In that divine union, we share in the exchange of love of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This love was evident at the Annunciation when the Angel Gabriel said to Mary, "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 called holy, the Son of God." [Luke 1:35]

In this exchange, Christ humbled Himself to live and grow among us to share our humanity. In return, we too must humble ourselves to become children of God in order to share in the glory of God's kingdom. "Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it," said the Lord [Mark 10:15].

As a child depends on a parent, we must allow ourselves to depend on divine grace—the love of God—to sanctify our lives. Unless we allow ourselves to decrease so that our Lord can increase in our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit, we will never truly grow in faith, hope, and love.

To appreciate the gift of God, let us ask ourselves: How do faith, hope, and love guide us in our daily living? Do we really share this great and wondrous gift? Or do we set it aside when worldly matters press upon us? Or is it something that we only use on special occasions?

Left to our own resources, we are tempted to not look beyond our own needs and wants. The gift of God is meant to guide us in our joys and our sorrows and in the way we treat one another—family, friend, foe, and stranger. Through triumphs and trials, the gift of God helps us to respond in every moment with faith, hope, and love.

Let us never forget that each one of us shares in the dignity of the image of God and we are animated by a spiritual soul, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In the hope and spirit of Christ, may we learn to live a faith-filled life, thereby making a loving gift of self to others and humanity.

Journey to Our Lady

Pray to Our Lady on the last Sunday of each month in the Great Upper Church at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Mass begins at 2 p.m., followed by Eucharistic Adoration, Benediction, the Rosary, and prayers. The Shrine is located at 400 Michigan Avenue, NE in Washington, D.C.

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