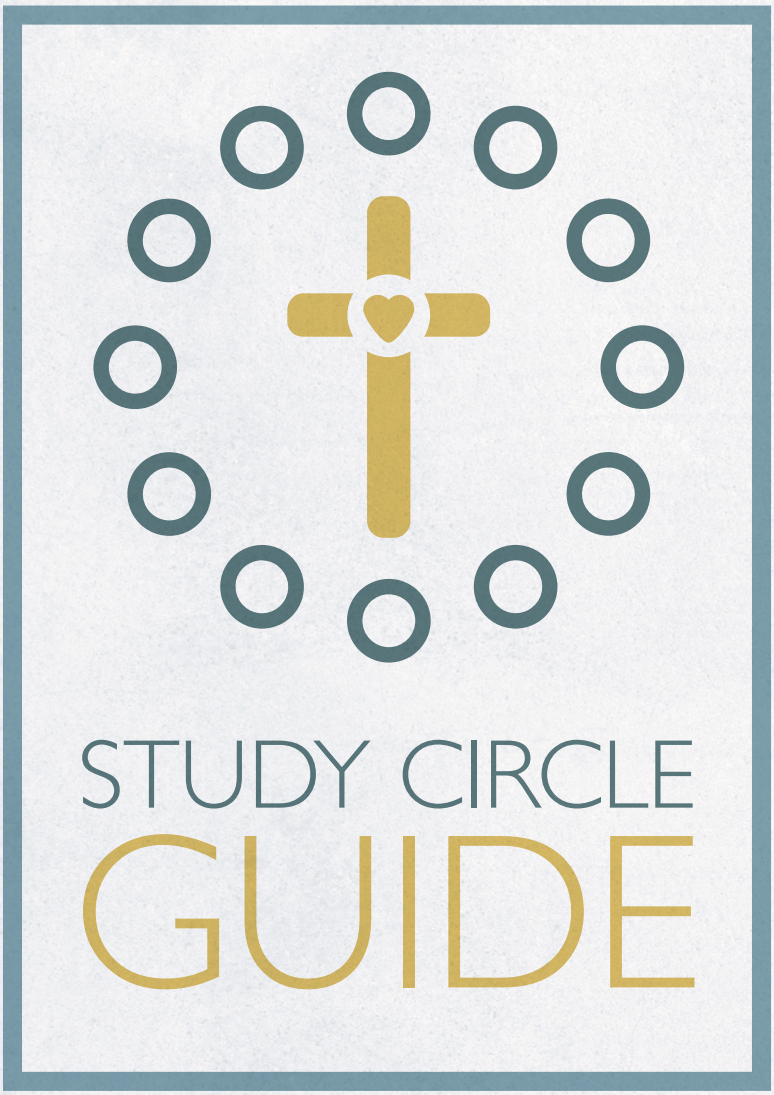

STUDY CIRCLE
GUIDE

THE BETTER PART: ADVENT MEDITATIONS—YEAR B

MEDITATIONS FOR SUNDAYS DURING ADVENT,
CHRISTMAS DAY, AND NEW YEAR'S DAY

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OVERVIEW

THE BETTER PART: ADVENT MEDITATIONS—YEAR B

SUMMARY

This Study Circle Guide is only a pointer to a ready-to-go resource perfect for ongoing study of the four Gospels: *The Better Part: A Christ-Centered Resource for Personal Prayer*. This book was designed from the beginning to be useful for individuals, small groups, and even classrooms. It provides sufficient structure for effective small-group meetings, but avoids an overabundance of stifling material.

It focuses on understanding the four Gospels from the point of view of what do these sacred texts reveal to me about Jesus Christ and how to know, love, and follow him more completely?

The book provides various types of explanations of the Gospel texts – apologetics, historical, theological, spiritual—all woven together in a format designed to foster greater and better informed love for Christ and his Church.

CATEGORIES OF INTEREST

Catholic Doctrine; Bible; Advent; Christmas; Prayer and Spiritual Growth; General

RECOMMENDED NUMBER OF SESSIONS

Using *The Better Part* for a Study Circle can happen in any number of ways. This Study Circle Guide is designed for the season of Advent following the four Sunday Gospels during the Year B.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- At least one copy of either the book, *The Better Part,* or a printed copy of this Study Circle Guide. Ideally, each participant would have a personal copy. But the relevant sections for each session could also simply be photocopied and distributed.
- **OPTIONAL:** At least one copy of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. At the end of each Unit in *The Better Part*, relevant articles from the *Catechism* are referenced. Reading these together can add a lot to the discussion and study. It may be a good idea for one participant (or for the moderator) to read all the references before the meeting, so as to be able to identify the one or two that would most stimulate the group discussion.
- **OPTIONAL:** "The Better Part Group Study Guide" published at www.SpiritualDirection.com and available there as a free download. This is a leader's guide that explains how to use *The Better Part* in a group discussion setting that emphasizes encountering Christ more than simply studying the Gospels. This Guide incorporates many of the principles used in the traditional Regnum Christi *Encounter with Christ*, but it does not include the review of a life-event. This Guide is short and extremely helpful for any small group activity. We recommend that everyone read through it.

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

Anyone. Since the Gospel passages themselves are included in the book, and since the focus of the discussion is always on the Gospel passages, this resource can be fruitful for beginners in the faith (even for inquirers) as well as for proficients and those who are advanced.

The questions for reflection and discussion at the end of each Unit reflect the Christ-centered and apostolic nature of the spirituality proper to the ecclesial movement Regnum Christi, but nothing in them would exclude or confuse any Catholic (or Christian, for that matter) who is eager to know, love, and follow Jesus more completely.

HOW MUCH HOMEWORK?

None. The resource is entirely self-contained. Each Unit consists of quotations from the saints, a Gospel passage, a four-part Christ-centered commentary, questions for reflection and discussion, and references to the *Catechism*.

Ideally, at least the moderator would preview the Unit being studied, and prepare their own answers to the questions. But even this is not strictly necessary.

The structure of a study session using this resource could be this simple (although individual groups could adjust it as they see fit):

1. Opening prayer
2. Reading aloud the Gospel passage
3. Either:
    - Time for silent reading and reflection of the commentary
    - Reading aloud together the commentary, then allow time for silent reflection
4. Discussing the passage and the commentary, either using the questions for reflection and discussion, or simply diving in according to the spontaneous reaction of the participants.
5. Conclusion
    - It is a good idea to vocalize at the end the major discoveries or insights that the discussion brought about.
    - It can also be a good idea to finish by vocalizing some personal commitments that can help the participants inject into their daily lives the wisdom they discovered in the passage. These commitments can be reviewed at the beginning of the next session.
    - Concluding prayer

NOTES

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

NOVEMBER 29, 2015

GOSPEL READING

"Jesus said to his disciples: 'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand. … Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap. For that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth. Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man.'"
—Luke 21:25–28, 34–36

"He hid the time from us so that we would be on the watch and so that each of us might think that the coming will happen in his own lifetime." —St. Ephraem

CHRIST THE LORD

In this second half of Jesus' speech answering the question about when the destruction of the Temple would occur Jesus changes his imagery. He employs phrases and allusions that all of his Jewish listeners would have recognized as referring to the Day of the Lord that the Old Testament prophets had predicted. The Day of the Lord referred to the coming of the Messiah and the inauguration of the new Messianic Kingdom, which also included the end of the Old Covenant. From the Jewish perspective, this would be the line of demarcation for all human history. By making these allusions, therefore, Jesus associates the events that will occur in the first Christian generation ("Before this generation has passed away all will have taken place") and conclude with the destruction of Jerusalem as that fateful Day of the Lord. But the Day of the Lord doesn't end with the fall of the Temple; it is extended throughout the rest of human history. During that time, the experience of the first generations of Christians—persecution, growth, conversions of whole cities and cultures, wars and disasters—will be repeated by successive generations until Jesus comes again. So Jesus' comments about those days apply to every age of the Church, and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple at the end of Old Covenant history is a foreshadowing of the destruction of heaven and earth at the end of New Covenant history. Jesus Christ is the Lord of history. When we read the history books and watch the daily news it may not seem so, but in reality he is. At some point in the future, the story that mankind has been putting together since the dawn of time will come to an end; the way things are will be radically changed. Thus the imagery Jesus provides of "signs" in the sun, the moon, and the waves of the sea indicate that the stable order of the universe in which we make history will be uprooted and history will end. When that happens, Christ's Lordship will be fully manifest to everyone (he will come again in "a cloud with power and great glory") and will bring to fruition his eternal reign. All human history is moving towards that final, climactic moment. Everyone's personal contribution to the human story will be made known to all at the end, when the Lord renews heaven and earth and takes his place on the everlasting throne.

CHRIST THE TEACHER

Jesus doesn't tell us the exact day and hour of his second coming. He prefers for us to stay ready for it at every moment; this is the lesson of the fig tree. If we keep our hearts awake, resisting the sweet lullaby of earthly pleasures and concerns, we will recognize the signs of his approach and be prepared to greet him when he comes. He also warns us that we will have to face tribulations before we are able to stand before him in glory; it will not be easy to stay faithful to God throughout the trials of life. (Otherwise, why would he tell us to pray for "strength to survive all that is going to happen"?) Though millennia have already passed without his appearance, his warnings are as urgent as ever. For even if another millennium or two unfold before history as a whole concludes, our personal histories have a much more predictable endpoint. As individuals, we could find ourselves standing before him any day. It is up to each one of us to heed his warnings now, before "that day is sprung on [us] suddenly, like a

trap." Every year the Church reminds us of this as the Solemnity of Christ the King concludes the liturgical year. We will have no one to blame but ourselves if we don't take the reminders to heart—and that doesn't mean shivering with fright and terror, but simply staying faithful to God's will for our lives, the true source of joy and meaning both in time and in eternity.

CHRIST THE FRIEND

JESUS: *"Do you think I had fire and brimstone in my eyes when I spoke these warnings? Do you think I spoke them quietly, in intimate conversation with my disciples? You know that I never take pleasure in the destruction of sinners. I only seek their salvation, as I have sought yours. I wanted you to know what the human heart has always wondered about—the end of history will come, and I will make a new creation, and the justice that was not given during the course of your earthly life will be given, and my mercy will shine out in all of its infinite glory. I want you to know that, so that you are able to stand up to the trials that following me always brings with it. I know you trust me, but now you have one more reason to do so. You don't have to fear the future; you already know what it holds. You can be ready, and be at peace, and you can dedicate yourself to loving me and loving those I give you to love. And even though I am with you all the time now, you can already start looking forward to that day when we will be together without the veil of faith."*

CHRIST IN MY LIFE

I have to thank you again for the gift of these Gospels. Here you speak to me directly—you who created me and love me more than I love myself. And you nourish my soul with the truth of your words and examples. Lord, I want to become an expert in the Gospels – not an academic expert, but a loving expert in knowing and following you, my Lord and my God … It isn't easy to stay ready, Lord. Why do you delay your coming? You don't need to tell me—I already know. In your love and your wisdom you are waiting until the right moment. I want to live faithfully while my life lasts. I want to experience your love and your joy, and I want to spread it to those around me. Fill my heart with your grace and my mind with your truth … I know that being faithful to you, to what is true and right and good, will bring trouble upon me, just as it brought trouble upon you. But you will never let me be tempted beyond my power to endure, and you will always give me whatever strength I need. I am not afraid, Lord. I keep seeing you on the cross, gazing down at me, telling me not to fear, telling me just to be faithful, courageous …

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What struck you most in this passage? What did you notice that you hadn't noticed before?
2. What influences around us tend to "make our hearts coarsened"? In other words, how do Christ's examples of "debauchery, drunkenness, and the cares of life" apply to us?
3. How can we better follow Christ's advice about "staying awake, praying at all times"?
4. At the risk of scaring us off, Christ has told us about the seriousness of our life decisions in light of his second coming. We should be equally charitable in telling those around us about these fundamental truths. What are some good ways and appropriate times to do so?

Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 673–674, 1040 on the uncertainty of the time of the Lord's coming; 522–526 on the meaning of Advent and Christmas

NOTES

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 6, 2015

GOSPEL READING

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert. John went throughout the whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" —Luke 3:1–6

"For Jesus Christ reigns over the minds of individuals by his teachings, in their hearts by his love, in each one's life by the living according to his law and the imitating of his example." —Pope Pius XI

CHRIST THE LORD

Great personages announce their official visits ahead of time. This provides people with an opportunity to prepare for the visit, so as to be able to take be ready for it. John the Baptist is Christ's precursor, the one sent to announce his coming and get people ready to welcome him. He plays a central role in the liturgy of Advent, the season during which the Church recalls Christ's first coming, readies itself to welcome him at his new, spiritual coming each Christmas, and looks forward to his definitive, second coming at the end of history ("Advent" derives from the Latin for "coming towards"). Luke emphasizes the incomparable importance of Christ's coming by pointing out how Isaiah had prophesied not only the arrival of Jesus but even the appearance of the precursor, John. God had long been preparing this pivotal moment in the world's history, and wanted to do everything possible to alert his people of its imminence. Although Christ has come to the earth, and although he has come to dwell in many human hearts and societies, many more have still not heard of him or welcomed him. The Lord has his eye on those and is planning advents for each one of them. With each person, he continues to use this same methodology: he sends his heralds ahead of him. We are those heralds. Every Christian is another John the Baptist, boldly drawing others' attention to the truth and grace of Christ with his words, deeds and example. Among the many responsibilities each of us has, none is greater or more rewarding than teaming up with the Holy Spirit to prepare hearts for the Lord.

CHRIST THE TEACHER

Isaiah's prophecy, which summarizes John's message, offers us two lessons. First it tells us what to do in order to get ready for Christ's comings in our lives and those around us. We are to "prepare the way," filling in valleys, leveling hills, straightening crooked roads, and smoothing out rough paths. The imagery comes from a typical scene in the ancient world (before concrete and asphalt highways). Roads were notoriously unreliable in Isaiah's time, long before the establishment and spread of the Roman Empire. When a king or emperor made the rounds of his territories, his officials would travel ahead of him, making sure that the roads were safe and in good condition so that he wouldn't be delayed and would be less vulnerable to enemy ambushes. Likewise, we are called to examine our own souls on a regular basis, especially in the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, to see where selfishness has encroached upon our relationships with God and with other people, and where laziness and self-indulgence have worn away our self-discipline. We may need to fill in some spiritual potholes or clear away some unwelcome debris, so that the graces God has in store for us during each season of our lives will be able to stream unhindered into our hearts. Second, Isaiah tells us why we should prepare our hearts for Christ's comings: "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." He reminds us that we (the entire human family, as well as each of us individually) need God's grace. The peace, meaning, and joy that we thirst for above all else is out of our sinful reach; we need someone to bring it us, to search us out in this desert of our earthly exile and give us the waters of eternal life. Christ is the one to do this. He always wants to bring us closer to God, closer to the fullness of life that

we long for. But he won't force his way in; we need to ready ourselves to welcome him.

CHRIST THE FRIEND

St. Luke begins this chapter of his Gospel curiously: with a list of names and places that seem irrelevant at first glance. Twenty centuries after the fact, we are interested in Jesus, not in tetrarchs and obsolete geography. But these details reveal something crucial about Jesus: he is not an abstract God. He weaves his action and presence into the fabric of our day-to-day lives; he takes up his stance on the crossroads of everyone's personal history and addresses us there. And he does it because he wants to. Jesus Christ is a God who is our friend, not a faceless, aloof divine architect. Jesus: I know where you were born and when. I remember every moment of your childhood, every one of your experiences growing up. I have been with you through it all. I will continue to be with you. Nothing about you is indifferent to me; all the circumstances of your life matter, and I am using them all to draw you closer to me, to show you your mission and guide you to its fulfillment. If you look for me, you will always find me, right there beside you.

CHRIST IN MY LIFE

Am I a good messenger, Lord? Do my words stir up noble sentiments? Do my actions clear the way for your grace? Does my manner point people to the goodness of Christ? Do I even try to help bring others a step closer to you? Life is so busy, Lord. Can I be your ambassador in the midst of my busy-ness? Of course I can, if you will show me the way … I know that my fears and self-centered habits obstruct your action in my life. I want to be free of them. Thank you for always being ready to forgive me and supply me with your grace. I want to take advantage of your generosity, to make use of confession and all the other ways you give me to grow, little by little but surely and constantly, into the saint you created me to be … You teach me so clearly that the drama of salvation history is played out in the mundane reality of my life and the lives of those around me. Tune me in to this drama. Open my eyes. I want to see you in every event and every person. I want to detect and seize every opportunity to love you and make you known. You are my hope, my light, my Lord …

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What struck you most in this passage? What did you notice that you hadn't noticed before?
2. Who were the "John the Baptists" in your own story of becoming a disciple of Christ, and how did they do their job of bringing Jesus into your life?
3. How can we take more seriously the Church's continual call to prepare ourselves for Christ's coming?
4. What can we do to foster the kind of intimate, personal relationship with Christ that God wants us to have (and avoid a distant, abstract, impersonal religiosity)?

Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 717–720 on the role of John the Baptist in the mystery of salvation; 1430–1433 on interior penance; 2566–2567 on the mysterious mutual desire of man for God and God for man

NOTES

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 13, 2015

GOSPEL READING

"The crowds asked John the Baptist, 'What should we do?' He said to them in reply, 'Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise.' Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they said to him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He answered them, 'Stop collecting more than what is prescribed.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And what is it that we should do?' He told them, 'Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.' Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ. John answered them all, saying, 'I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' Exhorting them in many other ways, he preached good news to the people." —Luke 3:10–18

"… So far as I am concerned, to die in Jesus Christ is better than to be monarch of earth's widest bounds. He who died for us is all that I seek; he who rose again for us is my whole desire." —St. Ignatius of Antioch, Martyr

CHRIST THE LORD

Many great teachers and leaders have come and gone throughout human history, but there is only one Jesus Christ. Even John the Baptist, whom Jesus later called "more than a prophet … the greatest of those born of women," can only "baptize with water." In other words, he can only work with souls on a natural level, strengthening them in virtue and helping them understand the requirements of a good life, but that pales in comparison with what Christ does. Jesus "baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire." In him, we come into contact with God himself, and we are completely transformed (as the saints testify), just as fire completely transforms whatever it burns. This is why he is the Messiah, the "anointed one" sent to fill the breach that sin opened between God and man. No one else can be the Messiah, because no one else can bridge that infinite gap. His coming into our midst is an utterly unique event. St. Luke wants to make that clear—over and over again—so that we stop taking it for granted.

CHRIST THE TEACHER

Often John the Baptist is depicted as an ill-tempered, fire-and-brimstone preacher who scared the people into repentance. First of all, such a conception fails to explain how he was able to attract such huge crowds and win over so many hearts. And secondly, it neglects the main point of his message: that salvation is at hand. Salvation, friendship with God, the fullness and security of living in communion with our Creator and Redeemer, of being "gathered into the barns" of his eternal and sublime Kingdom … this is John the Baptist's true message. John teaches his listeners how to please Christ, how to live in communion with the God who wants to save us. His lesson is nothing new (though his personal integrity gives it new weight); he merely applies the Ten Commandments to the particular situations of his hearers. He appeals to the demands of justice and the demands of humility—we are not to take undue advantage of anyone, and we are to help those in need. How different the world would be if everyone followed these simple directives! And how open our souls would be to God's grace if we would combat our selfishness in these apparently trivial ways! Often people reject Christianity not because its theology is too difficult to comprehend, but because its moral demands are too basic. Isn't it much more romantic and titillating to perform esoteric rituals and commune with invisible forces through crystals and spells than to be honest and hardworking? And yet, the glitz of pseudo-religion can't nourish the soul. The real path that leads to life is steep and narrow, as Christ himself would put it later, but why would we want to take any other?

CHRIST THE FRIEND

The human heart longs for a purpose and a joy that no earthly experience can supply; John brings the Good News that Christ is on his way, and that he can provide our hearts with everything they yearn for if

we will accept his offer of friendship. Indeed, it is in our ongoing, growing, changing, maturing, personal, relationship with Jesus that our yearning souls will find what they seek. The Christian life is a journey with Christ. The Christian answer to the human heart's search for happiness isn't a drug or a pill you take once in order to enter into an altered state of bliss. The human heart is made for greater things, and the adventure of friendship with Christ will gradually show us what they are. The heart of this adventure consists in following Christ's example of self-giving, of emptying ourselves, of putting ourselves at the service of Christ and our neighbors. When it becomes our way of life, this Christian charity, this giving away our tunics and sharing our food, leads us to discover the meaning and joy that Christ came to give, which only experience can describe.

CHRIST IN MY LIFE

Why is my life not as fruitful as the lives of the saints? I know you have called me to real holiness, and I believe that the fulfillment I long for will only be found there. But something is still holding me back. I want to see your glory, Lord. I want to experience your love and your greatness so thoroughly that my whole life is polarized around your Kingdom, and all my pettiness and selfishness falls away … Okay, Lord, I believe in you—you know I do. And so I believe the lesson of this Gospel, that I can fulfill your dream for my life simply by living out my normal activities with responsibility, generosity, and faith. Help me to take my sights off some abstract, pie-in-the-sky holiness. I want to love you in the here and now of my life. I know I am not worthy even to untie your sandal strap, but you have given me a chance to serve you by doing all things as you would have me … If I found myself completely alone, I wouldn't quit, because I would still have you. If I found myself kidnapped and thrown into prison, I wouldn't panic, because you would still be with me. If I found myself drowning in failure and rejection or submerged in endless pain, I wouldn't despair, because even there your friendship would be my meaning and salvation …

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What struck you most in this passage? What did you notice that you hadn't noticed before?
2. How does the daily life of someone who really believes in the uniqueness of Christ differ from that of someone who doesn't?
3. John the Baptist knew about the gospel, and he made sure that everyone around him found about it as well. We know about the gospel, but are we being as effective as John in making sure others know about it? If not, why not?
4. How can we keep our hearts filled with fresh joy and the hope of the "good news" of Jesus Christ? In other words, how can we keep ourselves from falling into routine, from becoming "used to" the saving message of Christ?

Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 410, 436–445, 453, 547 on the meaning of Christ as the "Messiah"; 524 on John the Baptist as a model for Advent living; 1803–1845 on the virtues

NOTES

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 20, 2015

GOSPEL READING

"Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.'"
—Luke 3:10–18

"The Holy Spirit heated, inflamed and melted Mary with love, as fire does iron, so that the flame of the Spirit was seen and nothing was felt but the fire of the love of God."
—St. Ildefonsus of Toledo

CHRIST THE LORD

Elizabeth knows what's going on. After years of infertility, God has seen fit to make her the mother of John the Baptist, the Messiah's herald, whom she is still carrying in her womb. In response to such a privilege she has drawn closer to God, filled as she is with humble gratitude and a new appreciation of his mercy and generosity. Therefore, God begins to fill her with the Holy Spirit, who in turn keeps drawing her deeper into the mysterious and wonderful events taking place through and around her. This intimate union with God enables her to perceive God's presence in Christ, even though he is only an embryo in Mary's womb. And she calls him "my Lord." Before he ever worked any wonders, before he mesmerized the crowds with his preaching, before he rose from the dead, indeed, from all eternity, Jesus is "the Lord."

CHRIST THE TEACHER

It's impossible to tell the story of Christmas without including Mary. As Christ's first and most faithful disciple, the first one to welcome him into the world, she shows all of us how to live every Advent and Christmas season—indeed, every season of our Christian life—with faith. Through her example, Christ teaches us how to respond to God's action in and around us: by believing in him and by trusting that whatever he may be asking of us is the best available option. Who are we to argue with God, to disobey him? Will he deceive us? Will he lead us astray? Mary, partially enlightened by her heartfelt knowledge of God's plan as revealed in the Old Testament scriptures, could not see clearly how God's plans would work themselves out in the end. Even so, humbly and trustingly she put her faith in them, and for that wise faith she was "blessed among women," as Elizabeth exclaimed. The Lord is constantly hoping that we will put our trust in him in the same way, so that he can shower his blessings upon us as well. What was Mary's secret? Why was she able to believe so firmly and to fulfill her vocation so magnificently? Why did she succeed where Eve had failed? She reveals her secret in this hymn of praise that bursts from her heart as soon as she greets Elizabeth. During the whole journey from Nazareth to the hill country outside Jerusalem where Elizabeth and Zechariah lived, she had been joyfully contemplating all that God had done in her life and in the whole history of salvation. When she meets Elizabeth and realizes that God has revealed his plans to her as well, she feels free to give full expression to her thoughts and sentiments. She sings the Magnificat, a prayer that still echoes throughout the world every day through the liturgy of the Church. In its simple words, imbued with the prayers of the Old Testament, we glimpse Mary's vision of reality, in which God rules all things with perfect power and with a wisdom that confounds the vain ambition of men. Humility, a serene recognition of our utter dependence on God, unleashes the power of divine grace in the world. Those who depend on themselves—the rich, the self-satisfied, the proud, the powerful—thwart God's action in and through them. This is Mary's secret – and it is a secret no longer. She teaches it to all who are willing to learn.

CHRIST THE FRIEND

God is already caring for us long before we realize it. He has had a plan in mind for us, a particular vocation,

a unique role in his Kingdom, from before we were born, before we were ever conceived. In discovering and living out that plan we find our true and lasting joy. Why else is John the Baptist able to "leap for joy" while he is still in his mother's womb? Only because God had made him the herald, the precursor, the one who would announce the imminent manifestation of the Messiah—this was his God-given mission in life, his vocation. Before he is aware of it, he is already fulfilling it. Likewise, before we hear God's call in our life, he is already preparing us to follow it—and hoping that when the call comes we will respond generously, so that he can make our hearts leap continually with joy until he welcomes us into his heavenly Kingdom.

CHRIST IN MY LIFE

Lord, are you still at work in the world the way you were back when these wonderful happenings were unfolding? I know you are. I know that every time Mass is celebrated, it's a new Annunciation, a new Bethlehem, a new Calvary. I know that you never cease drawing us to yourself. Open my eyes, increase my faith! I want to see you at work in all things … Humility is a mystery to me, Lord. How humble Mary must have been! Un-spoiled, uncontaminated by original sin and the slew of selfish tendencies it sets loose in our souls! Mary, my Mother, teach me your secret. Teach me to be truly humble, truly great in God's eyes, so that my life will bear fruit for Christ's Kingdom … Lord, I know that you really do have something in mind for me. You created me to know you and love you as only I can. My concept of my vocation may not be in perfect sync with yours. But even so, I want to follow you. I want to discover and fulfill your will for me. I want to perceive it and understand it more deeply every day, so that I can embrace it more fully each moment …

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What struck you most in this passage? What did you notice that you hadn't noticed before?
2. How can we be more sensitive, like Elizabeth, to the action of God in our lives? How can we cultivate the beautiful virtue of gratitude?
3. What more can we do to discover our true vocation? How can we follow it more energetically?
4. What aspects of popular culture encourage us to think of life in terms of our God-given mission, as God thinks of us? What aspects discourage that?

Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 484–507 on the privileges and role of Mary in Christ's Kingdom; 456–478 on the mission and uniqueness of Jesus Christ, Son of God and man

NOTES

CHRISTMAS EVE

DECEMBER 24, 2015

GOSPEL READING

"The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab. Amminadab became the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz became the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed became the father of Jesse, Jesse the father of David the king.

David became the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah. Solomon became the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asaph. Asaph became the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, Joram the father of Uzziah. Uzziah became the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah. Hezekiah became the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amos, Amos the father of Josiah. Josiah became the father of Jechoniah and his brothers at the time of the Babylonian exile.

After the Babylonian exile, Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, Zerubbabel the father of Abiud. Abiud became the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, Azor the father of Zadok. Zadok became the father of Achim, Achim the father of Eliud, Eliud the father of Eleazar. Eleazar became the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Christ. Thus the total number of generations from Abraham to David is fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian exile to the Christ, fourteen generations.

Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus." —Matthew 1:1–25

CHRIST THE LORD

Hidden in this passage, so familiar and seemingly so insignificant, is one of Christianity's key ingredients. Almost all pre-Christian world religions (with the obvious exception of Judaism) divided the universe into two completely separate camps: the mythic and the human. In this view, human time was the arena of all human deeds, our own and those of our ancestors—the noble and the despicable, the memorable and the mundane. Mythic time, on the other hand, embraced the events outside of history that had given birth to the universe and the milieu of the gods. And so, no pagan god could (or would) ever claim a human genealogy. But that's exactly the claim Jesus makes. In Jesus, the one true God doesn't just dip into history for a lark (as some of the mythic characters used to do), but he actually enters fully into the human reality – like an artist painting himself into his picture. In Christ, the originator of history becomes historical. He redeems the human family from sin and divinizes it. He forges a real, not merely ritualistic or legendary, communion between God and man. Jesus' genealogy, then, beams with theological significance. It links him to the gritty reality of every epoch – and every person – in the human timeline, all the way back to the beginning. It bridges the mysterious gap, so impenetrable to other religions, between myth and history. Through Christ, God gets involved in our lives. Christianity is no myth or fairy tale; those were just warm-ups for the Story of the Lord.

CHRIST THE TEACHER

St. Matthew's arrangement of the genealogy emphasizes the connection between Abraham, David, the Babylonian exile, and Jesus. It starts with Abraham, the forefather of the Chosen People of Israel. It then divides up the list of names into groups of fourteen. The groups take shape around the references to David "the King" (the only name linked to a title, besides Christ's) and to the exile from Jerusalem (this occurred in 586 when the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar deported the Jews into Babylon). It culminates in Jesus. It's almost like a rosary in which the big beads are Abraham, David, the exile, and Jesus. This emphasis brings God's Providence onto center stage. It drives home a simple message: the Lord really does govern human history. God promised Abraham (probably around the year 1900 B.C.) that he would become the father of kings. That promise was realized most magnificently in Israel's most revered leader, King David (who reigned around the year 1000 B.C.). God promised David that his royal line would never die out. Then David's kingdom sank into division, corruption and idolatry, resulting in the exile to Babylon. At that point, through the Prophets, God promised to send a descendant of David as a Savior, a royal Messiah who would reestablish the Kingdom on a scale hitherto unimagined—that was Jesus Christ. (For this reason the Gospels often use the title "Son of David" to refer to Jesus.) Two thousand years of turbulent historical change, the brilliant rises and crashing falls of human empires, the harrowing upheavals and transformations of entire civilizations—none of it could hinder God from guiding the course of history exactly as he in his wisdom desired. If he did it with the human story, he can certainly do it with each of our stories. That's the Providence of our God.

CHRIST THE FRIEND

Genealogies were common among the Jews of Jesus' time. The Jewish people were keenly aware of their special status as God's Chosen People, so they closely guarded their racial purity and recorded their family trees in detail. Most genealogies, however, only contained the male ancestors. In Jesus' genealogy, St. Matthew makes a point of mentioning four women (not including Mary). None of them were Jewish (Tamar and Rahab were Canaanite, Ruth was Moabite, and the wife of Uriah—Bathsheba—was Hittite), and three of them had been involved in dishonorable escapades. Why would St. Matthew break with custom in order to include these names in his list? Certainly one of the reasons was to emphasize that Christ never held himself aloof from sinners. Later in his Gospel, St. Matthew narrates how Jesus described himself as being sent "for sinners, not the righteous." Jesus never keeps his distance from us when we fail, fall, or falter. Precisely then he runs to our side; it is the lost sheep he longs to embrace and carry home to his flock.

CHRIST IN MY LIFE

The greatness of your mystery, Lord, stirs my soul. You are the Lord of the entire universe, and you decide to come and walk among us, speak with us, and teach us. Let the wonder of this active love of yours penetrate my heart and clear away all the petty, selfish ideas that cloud my understanding. Help me to live in the light of your glory … If you in your Providence can guide the entire course of human history without violating human freedom, you can certainly guide the events of my life. If you brought salvation out of annihilation, surely you can bring joy out of my sorrows and success out of my failures. I believe in your goodness and your power. Jesus, I trust in you … You love without exception. Sinners and the despised are on the top of your list. You smile on the despicable and save them. Why is it so hard for me to follow your example? Why do I play favorites, criticize, and judge others? Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart more like yours …

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What struck you most in this passage? What did you notice that you hadn't noticed before?

2. Do you think there is any significance in St. Matthew's division of the genealogy into groups of fourteen? St. Jerome pointed out that the total number of generations in this arrangement, forty-two, corresponds to the number of encampments the Israelites made on their Exodus from Egypt into the Promised Land. Could there be any spiritual meaning to that coincidence?

3. Why do you think God chose to prepare for the coming of Christ by setting aside a Chosen People, guiding them for hundreds of years, and then letting them be taken into exile?

4. Do you see any similarity between personal spiritual growth and the history of Israel's relationship with God?

Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 522–524 on the preparations for Christ's coming; 464–469 on Jesus as true God and true man

NOTES

CHRISTMAS MASS DURING THE EVENING

DECEMBER 24, 2015

GOSPEL READING

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid;for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.'"
—Luke 2:1–14

CHRIST THE LORD

The universe is not a democracy. Rather, it is ruled directly by God, who is a King, and his Kingdom is one of peace—the interior peace that comes from a clean conscience and the knowledge that our heavenly Father loves us, and the exterior peace that comes from communities built on humility, generosity, charity, and solidarity. Just as David (who was also one "anointed" by God) brought peace to ancient Israel, so his descendant, Jesus Christ, born in David's city, will bring universal peace to all mankind. Those who submit to his rule will begin to experience that peace even now, while his Kingdom is still incomplete. Those who rebel against his rule, ignoring or disdaining his wisdom and authority, will never experience the peace they long for—neither in this world, nor in the world to come. Jesus is the Prince of Peace, but the peace he came to give can only be had if we obey him as our wise and loving Lord. As his followers, we often wonder how we can more effectively communicate this message of peace. Through the mystery of his birth, Jesus teaches us that eloquence in announcing the message comes from obedience in doing God's will. Jesus obeys the divine decision to become a human being, to be born as an infant, unable to utter a word. Yet, at that very moment of his seeming weakness, the angels come and announce the message with a superhuman power and beauty. The Lord is the one who builds his Kingdom; our task is simply to carry out whatever orders he gives us.

CHRIST THE TEACHER

We tend to search for elaborate methods to get into contact with God. We often expect to find God in extraordinary circumstances. But we're usually wrong. The shepherds were responsibly fulfilling their normal, unglamorous duties when the angels appeared to them. Joseph and Mary welcomed the Son of God in a poor stable-cave while they were waiting to register for the census. The great lesson of the Incarnation is precisely that God wants to meet us—and befriend us—right where we are. With Christ, the everyday circumstances of the human condition become occasions of divine revelation and grace-filled salvation. St Teresa of Avila used to say that she found the Lord among the pots and pans; with a simple, childlike faith, we can do the same. The shepherds were shivering in the cold, watching over their tranquil flocks, gazing at the stars, mulling over their worries. They had no reason to expect that anything special would happen that night. But God finds a way to break through the routine. Joseph was concerned for his wife, who had to give birth in a grotto used to shelter livestock. How he would have longed to give Jesus a worthier welcome! Yet he had to do the best he could under the circumstances, and God took his best and turned it into the most eloquent story in human history. God throws off his glory and power and wraps himself in humility and poverty, because he wants to walk with his people and lead them home to heaven.

Mary, whose heart had been beating in sync with Christ's Sacred Heart for nine months now—nurturing in her womb the sacred humanity of our Savior and nurturing in her mind the unfathomable love of God—was most likely not distracted at all by the circumstances. Her gaze was fixed entirely on Jesus. Every detail of the night was emblazoned on her memory, and each one spoke to her of God. The hay, the manger, the cave, the cold, the swaddling clothes, the animals, the darkness … Jesus had chosen to be born in their midst, and that was enough of an explanation for one who believed.

CHRIST THE FRIEND

God is all-powerful. He is all knowing. He could have come to us in any way at all, but he chose to do so quietly. He chose to give us a "sign" by becoming an "infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger." Small, weak, and helpless—that's how our Lord comes to us, because he wants us to welcome him, to let him into our lives. Would we feel drawn to him if he had come in the form of a powerful giant? Probably not. But who can resist the charm of a helpless baby? By making himself weak, in need of constant care and attention, he draws us into a relationship with him, a relationship that God has longed to restore ever since it was shattered in the Garden of Eden. Each Christmas, and each day, when the Bethlehem event is renewed on the altar during Mass, God reissues his gentle invitation. Will we accept? Will we let Christ come into our lives anew, or will we keep him at a distance, afraid to risk our self-sufficiency and comfort for the sake of a helpless, needy child? It's cold in that Bethlehem cave, and he's hoping to be warmed by our embrace.

CHRIST IN MY LIFE

I believe in you, and I want to follow you. I don't want to rule you or rule the universe, or even rule my own life and the lives of those around me. I am your ambassador, your servant, your messenger, your soldier. Do with me as you will, Lord. I ask only that you bring your peace to my heart each day, and make me an instrument to bring that same peace to those around me … Sometimes it's easy for me to find you among the pots and pans, but other times I feel quite alone. How can I see your hand at work in the normal events of my daily life? I want to find you there, to embrace you there, to converse with you there, to obey you and follow you there. Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief … You are so gentle, so respectful. You never force your way into my heart. Teach me to be like you, Lord: full of strength, but a strength that acts with respect, gentleness, and humility. Teach me to love my neighbors, to treat them with the same sincere and attentive kindness with which you have always treated me. And teach me to love all my neighbors, not just the ones who are easy to love …

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What struck you most in this passage? What did you notice that you hadn't noticed before?
2. How can we live our normal responsibilities with greater fidelity, so that we will be more attuned to God's presence and action in and through them?
3. What evidence should there be in the daily life of Christians that Christ is really the Lord of their life?
4. What can we do to live the liturgical seasons (like Christmas) in a way more pleasing to God, more in accord with the reason for which they exist?

Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2544–2547 on poverty of heart (which the shepherds had); 525–526 on the Christmas Mystery; 456–463 on why Jesus came to earth in the Incarnation

NOTES

CHRISTMAS MASS AT DAWN

DECEMBER 25, 2015

GOSPEL READING

"When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them." —Luke 5:15–20

CHRIST THE LORD

When Jesus was born, the angels of heaven could not restrain their joy, so they appeared to some humble shepherds and gave them a Christmas concert they would never forget. The birth of Christ shows that its consequences are unlimited by time and space, and the same goes for his Lordship. This child, this infant, holds the universe in his hands—which is why we sometimes see the infant Jesus depicted as a king, holding a sphere in his left hand (symbolizing the world) and a scepter in his right hand (symbolizing power and authority). Christ is Lord because he is God's Anointed, even when lying in a lowly little manger. Perhaps the most beautiful thing about this absolute, universal Lordship is that it exists entirely for our sake. St. Luke makes a point of telling us about Christ's circumcision day, the day when he shed his first drop of blood, taking his place among sinners so that he could redeem them. It was traditional to give a boy his name on the same day he was circumcised. And so Mary and Joseph give him the name that God had assigned him through Gabriel's message: Jesus, which means "God saves." Luke reminds us that this name was given to him even before he was conceived in Mary's womb. The Word of God created us because he knew we would like it, and now he comes to redeem us because he knows we need it. Christ's whole life, his whole mission, is for our good, for our salvation. Jesus' us-centered orientation wasn't an afterthought; we are the reason Jesus came to earth, lived, taught, healed, suffered, died, and rose again. Perhaps this is why saints throughout the ages have found in the simple name of "Jesus" one of their favorite and most fruitful prayers. Merely invoking our Lord, repeating his name over and over again, gives rest to our souls, because that's exactly what he came to do.

CHRIST THE TEACHER

How are we to respond to the wonders God has done and is doing in the world and in our own lives? We can respond by following the shepherds' example. First, we should "hurry away" to find Christ, go in haste to seek him out in the midst of his family, the Church, here represented by Mary and Joseph. Second, as the shepherds "repeated what they had been told" about Christ, we should make known the message we have received. Third, we should "glorify and praise" the God who comes to save. We must allow the wonder of God's love to burst into our lives, as the shepherds did. We too must let God's marvelous works amaze us, never falling into a blasé attitude, a routine, been-there-done-that Christian mediocrity. Children get excited every Christmas, so why shouldn't we—who know so much more about the real meaning of the story—let it fill us with spiritual enthusiasm every single day? We should also respond as Mary did: "Mary treasured all these things, and pondered them in her heart." God did not tell Mary his entire plan. We know much more than she did about how everything was going to work out. She had to walk in the dim light of faith, one step at a time, trusting in God, witnessing his action, and seconding it whenever she could. But she paid attention. She knew that the life and mission of Christ eclipsed in importance any other concern or event that might surface. She pondered in her heart all of God's gifts to her, all of his words, all of his actions and plans … She was truly a woman of the Kingdom. We need to learn this lesson as well, to be men and women who "seek first the Kingdom," and let everything else fall comfortably (and properly) into second place *(cf. Mt 6: 33).*

CHRIST THE FRIEND

God wants to give us the fullness of life. And he can give it to us—as a matter of fact, he is the only one

who can give it to us. The problem is that we tend not to pay attention to him. His love, however, is determined. So he came up with a radical solution: he became a little baby, a helpless infant. Everyone pays attention to babies. So now we will look at him, even if only to see how cute he is. That's a start. Let's not belittle this reality! Coming to the baby Jesus and letting ourselves be charmed by his simplicity and innocence should be a frequent practice of our spiritual life—not something reserved exclusively to the Christmas season. We should, like the shepherds, gather around the manger with Mary and Joseph, and bask in the warm light of God's love radiating out from the infant Lord.

CHRIST IN MY LIFE

You have revealed your name to me, because you want to stay close to me. Whenever I speak your name from my heart, you turn your attention to me. When I call you, you always come to me. You want to be available, to be close, to stay near. Why don't I call you more often? Why do I let the hustle and bustle of life drown you out? Jesus, please walk with me … More than half the people in this world still don't know you or believe in you. I am one of the privileged minority who has received the Good News. Teach me, Lord, to be full of joy and generosity, like the shepherds, full of wonder and contemplation, like Mary, and full of the eager desire to spread the word … How odd this Christmas story really is! The Creator and Sustainer of the universe becoming a little infant! No other religion has such a strange event. Dear Jesus, let me hold you in my arms. You are so small, so helpless. Let me take care of you. I adore you, Lord. I will never leave you; I will never abandon you. You are my life and my joy. You are safe with me, and you know that I love you. You can trust me, my Child; I love you, and I will watch over you …

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What struck you in this passage? What did you notice that you hadn't noticed before?
2. Why aren't we as eager as the shepherds to share with others our knowledge and experience of Christ?
3. How can we encourage each other to better imitate the Blessed Virgin in her prayerful spirit, "pondering all these things" in our hearts?
4. What do you think St Joseph's reaction to these events was?

Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2673–2679 on praying the way Mary prayed; 2544–2547 on poverty of heart (which the shepherds had); 525–526 on the Christmas Mystery

NOTES

CHRISTMAS MASS DURING THE DAY

DECEMBER 25, 2015

GOSPEL READING

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. A man named John was sent from God. He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him.

But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God. And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. John testified to him and cried out, saying, 'This was he of whom I said, 'The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.' From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace, because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him."
—John 1:1–18

CHRIST THE LORD

St. John wrote his Gospel towards the end of his long life. He addressed it primarily to those coming from a Hellenistic (pagan Greek) background, and only secondarily to his fellow Jews. But by calling Jesus the "Word of God made flesh," John wields a term shocking to both categories of readers. For the Hellenistic Greeks, "Logos," here translated as "Word," referred to the one unifying principle that linked together and put order in the entire cosmos. At the time when St. John was writing, Greek philosophers had developed elaborate behavioral codes that they hoped could put them in touch with this unifying force. Similarly, for the Hebrew mentality, the "Word of God" connoted God's wisdom, often personified in the Old Testament, which informs and directs all his works, including the creation and sustenance of the universe. St. John includes both these dimensions in using the term to refer to Christ, but he corrects and elevates them by adding two additional dimensions. In showing that through the Word "all things were made," he reveals that the Hellenistic concept of Logos had missed the mark: the unity of the cosmos, its order and beauty and glory, is not drawn from some force within itself, but from a transcendent, personal, creating God. Then, in asserting that "the Word became flesh," he challenges his Jewish brethren to broaden their conception of the Messiah from a mere human king to God himself taking on human nature. In the liturgical year, the Church offers us this tightly packed biography of our Savior on Christmas day, so that we can be justly amazed at beholding all of God's infinite power and majesty wrapped in a few strips of swaddling cloth, sleeping helplessly in his mother's arms: Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man, come gently to walk with us. Here indeed is a noble Lord, worthy of our heartfelt praise and silent adoration.

CHRIST THE TEACHER

The little cave at Bethlehem, where the Incarnation of God's Word first became visible, is a torrential fountain of Christ's doctrine. Today, however, St. John draws our attention to a less romantic, more uncomfortable lesson that we often ignore. Jesus Christ came to those who had been created in his image, and they "did not know him." He came to those who had received centuries of preparation through the Old Covenant, and they "did not accept him." Human history is a dramatic struggle of man's attempts to discover meaning in life. It narrates the mostly unsuccessful but always passionate search for order, prosperity, and lasting happiness. You would think that when God himself decided to dwell among us to give us the answer and show us the way, we would welcome him eagerly and gladly. Such was not the case. The answer didn't fit our categories, and the way led out of our comfort zone, and therefore many turned their backs on the Savior. We are all tempted to cling to the darkness and flee the light, and St John teaches us that

overcoming this temptation can be harder than we think, though it's well worth the effort. God will not force salvation upon us. Christ did not come to bring heaven to earth, but to lead those who would accept him from earth to heaven. Of all the world's religions, Christianity is the most respectful of human freedom—which makes perfect sense, considering that the law of Christ's Kingdom is authentic love, the perfect fulfillment of that particularly human characteristic.

CHRIST THE FRIEND

JESUS: *Many people complain that I haven't made myself clear enough, that I haven't done enough to convince everyone to believe in and follow me. But they don't understand the gentle force of love that binds my Kingdom together. Have you ever turned on bright lights after being in a dark room for a long time? You know how it hurts your eyes. If I had come exactly as I am, I would have blinded you. You would have submitted, but out of fear and pain. I didn't create you for that. I created you to live in my friendship. Everything I do is to win back that friendship, which sin destroyed. So I came to meet you right where you are, right in the middle of your normal life. I came to live among you. And through my Church and my missionaries, I do the same thing in every generation all throughout the earth. My presence is bright but soft, like Christmas lights, because I know that your soul is wounded and sensitive. Trust me. Follow me. Let me guide you. I am here for that.*

CHRIST IN MY LIFE

All that exists has come from you. Help me grasp this truth, Lord. You, who call me by my name, who have gone to heaven to prepare a place for me, who suffered on the cross to redeem me from sin, who come to me humbly and quietly in the Eucharist—you are the very same One who created and sustains every molecule, every sub-atomic particle, every galaxy, every activity of this vast, beautiful, incomprehensible universe … It is a terrible thought: you came to give us the fullness of life that every heart longs for, but not every heart is willing to accept it. Lord Jesus, I too resist the inklings of your grace too often. Help me to be strong in doing what is right and resisting temptation. Help me to follow you, to be your messenger to everyone in my life … You are so gentle with me, Lord. You always forgive; you always nudge; you always wait with infinite patience. Thank you. Make me more like you. I want to be your light and your goodness to everyone around me. I want to attract them to you, however far away they may be, as the star of Bethlehem attracted the wise men. Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart more like yours …

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What struck you most in this passage? What did you notice that you hadn't noticed before?
2. The fact of the Incarnation radically altered the course of history. What facts have most radically altered the course of your personal history? What should be influencing most your personal history right now?
3. Why do you think so many people refuse to welcome Christ into their lives, even when they hear about his love and know others who have welcomed him?
4. Christ has come to meet us in very human ways, through family, friends, priests, and other members of the Church. How can we be better channels for bringing him to others?

Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 525–534 on the Christmas mystery; the mysteries of Jesus' infancy and the mysteries of his hidden life; 456–463 on why Jesus came to earth in the Incarnation; 897–913 on the mission of lay people in the Church

NOTES

NEW YEAR'S DAY: SOLEMNITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, THE MOTHER OF GOD

JANUARY 1, 2016

GOSPEL READING

"The shepherds went in haste to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

When eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." —Luke 2:16–21

CHRIST THE LORD

In the chronology of John's Gospel, this event takes place at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. John's point of view, however, rightly interprets it in light of Christ's entire life. Here Jesus is already speaking of his resurrection. Thus we see how clearly Jesus understood his mission from the very start. Christ is the ultimate defender of mankind's authentic relationship with God, and therefore he cleanses the Temple (an architectural symbol of that relationship) of everything that detracts from true faith and heartfelt worship. The officials in charge of the Temple take umbrage at this flouting of their authority, and Christ responds by explaining, albeit indirectly, his own identity and his reason for coming to earth. He calls himself the Temple (the word Jesus used, "sanctuary," was the inner part of the Temple, the most important part), because as true God and true man, he is the paradigmatic meeting place of the divine and the human. This meeting place, this communion between God and man, will be rejected at first (at the crucifixion), but he will assure us that in the end it will take root and endure (from the Resurrection into the age of the Church). God had revealed himself directly to only one ancient nation, the nation of Israel. He had instructed them to build a Temple, a place of worship and communion between the one true God and his Chosen People. Solomon's Temple had housed the altars of sacrifice as well as the Ark of the Covenant itself, the box containing the tablets of the Ten Commandments. No holier place existed on earth—until the coming of Christ. Now, in the aftermath of Christ's coming, the presence of God has spread throughout the globe; every Christian heart is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit, and every Catholic Tabernacle contains the living presence of the very author of the new and everlasting Covenant. Christ would later say that he was "greater than Solomon," for as magnificent as Solomon's Temple was (it was considered one of the wonders of the ancient world), it only foreshadowed the true Temple, the one that human hands could never destroy.

CHRIST THE TEACHER

Few times in the Gospels do we see Christ act or speak out in anger, and when he does, it is always to condemn hypocrisy. By all appearances, the Temple officials were directing their fellow Jews in proper rituals of worship. In actual fact, however, they were adulterating that worship. God had given his people the Temple to be a house of prayer and worship. The buying, selling, and money changing that went on in the Temple area had long been happening there. When pilgrims came to worship, they had to offer victims to the priests, who would sacrifice them to Yahweh on their behalf. Strict rules governed the qualifications of the victims – not just any animal would do. Therefore, businesses cropped up that specialized in making the right beasts easily available. Likewise, pilgrims came from all over the civilized world and brought money of various mintages. These had to be weighed, valued, and exchanged in order to be used for purchasing the sacrificial victims. Gradually, greed had infiltrated even these sacred services—the money changers demanded exorbitant fees and the vendors overcharged. In this way, what was meant to be heartfelt service to God became a path to worldly success. The Temple officials were by all appearances exemplarily religious, but actually they were greedy merchants. This contradiction between appearances and reality is hypocrisy. The frightening thing is how easily we fall into it; we are experts at finding ways to

project ourselves as exemplary Catholics, while on the inside we still seek the kingdom of "me" rather than the Kingdom of Christ.

CHRIST THE FRIEND

St. John tells us that the Lord knew human nature well; he "could tell what a man had in him." Jesus: This should comfort you: I know the contradictions that disturb your mind and heart, the temptations that beset you, the streak of falls and failures that mark your path of discipleship. None of that surprises me. In fact, I came because of them. If you hadn't needed someone to save you, to redeem you, to renew your weary and dying soul, why would I have had to come? You don't need to make yourself perfect before you can have confidence in me. Your trust can be vast, joy-filled, and unrestrained right now, if only you will be honest and open. I came because I want your friendship—but I want your friendship, the one that comes from your heart, not from your masks. Approach me in prayer—just as you are!

CHRIST IN MY LIFE

Lord, only through my friendship with you can I live in communion with God. You are the one Mediator, Lord—the one true Temple. I believe in you, and I have put all my hopes in you. I want to know, love, and follow you more each day, because in you I will become what I long to be: rich in virtue and wisdom, free from selfishness and sin, strong in love and purified from greed, lust, envy, and arrogance … I wish you would come and cleanse the money-grubbing, pleasure-grabbing tendencies out of my heart once and for all. You know that I want to be patient, generous, and wise. So why am I so often impatient, selfish, and foolish? My only comfort is that you know me through and through, and even so, you chose me. No task is too great for you, not even bringing light and order to my dark and disordered soul … I want my life to be fully at the service of what is good, true, and right – of your Kingdom. I want to give myself to you. I believe in you, Lord. All the energy and vitality you have given me, I put back in your hands. The tasks you have given me to do, I do for love of you. I am a Temple dedicated entirely to your glory and your goodness, because all I have I have received from you …

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What struck you most in this passage? What did you notice that you hadn't noticed before?
2. What are some of the hypocrisies that easily creep into our lives as Catholics today?
3. What has helped you most in making your friendship with Christ more heartfelt and personal, and less superficial and mechanical?
4. As Christians, we consider our bodies to be Temples of the Holy Spirit. How should that affect the way we treat our bodies? What does popular culture think of the human body, and how does that affect how popular culture encourages us to treat our bodies?

Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 583–586 on Jesus and the Temple; 2468 and 2505 on hypocrisy; 2559–2564 on praying from the heart

NOTES

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