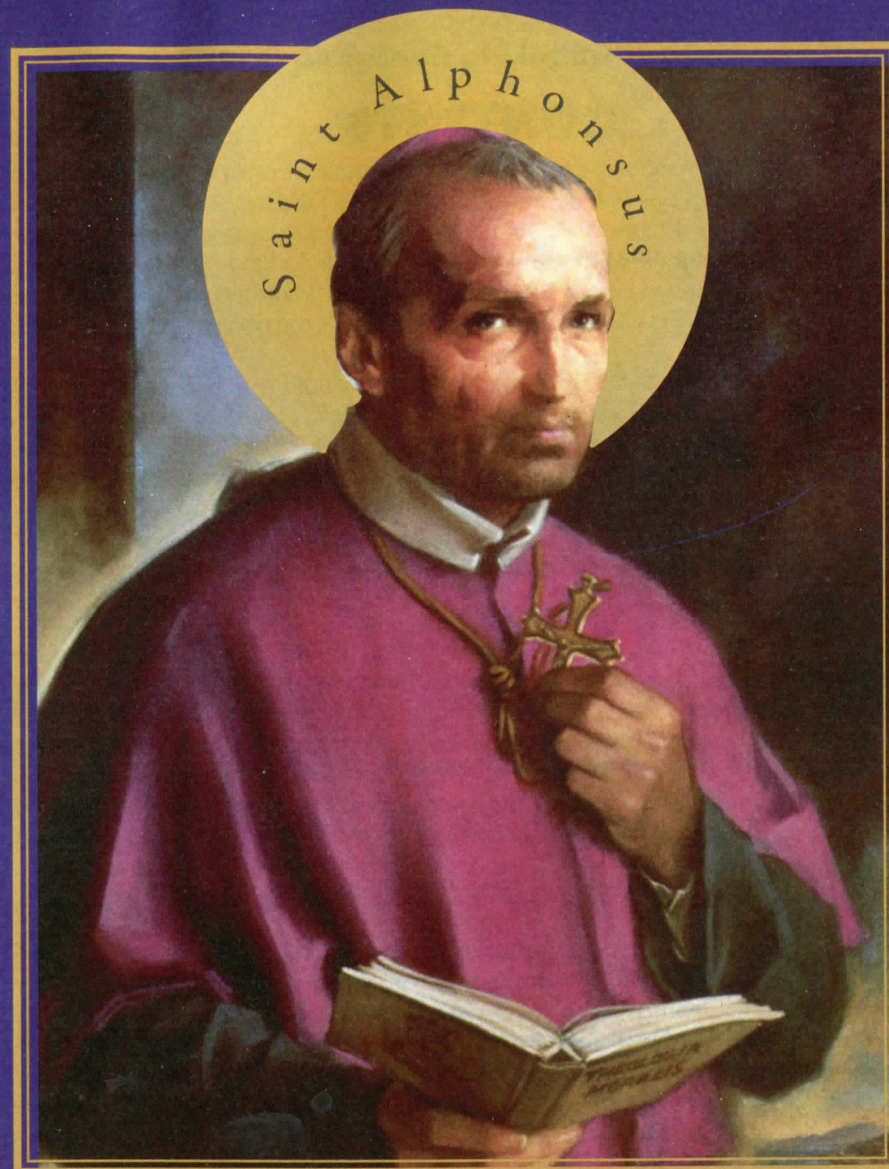


**“All the Saints
have become
Saints by mental
prayer. Mental
prayer is the
blessed furnace
in which souls
are inflamed
with the
Divine love.”**

**- St. Alphonsus
Liguori**



The Fatima Center
CANADA: P.O. Box 602, Fort Erie, ON L2A 5X3 | **U.S.A:** P.O. Box 1470, Buffalo, New York 14240
CALL US TOLL-FREE: 1-800-263-8160 or 1-905-871-7607
www.fatima.org | E-mail: info@fatima.org



**Meditations
for the Sundays of Advent
by St. Alphonsus Liguori**

CONTENTS

A Brief Explanation of Meditative Prayer	3
First Sunday of Advent	6
The Day of the Last Judgment	6
The Nations in the Valley of Josaphat	8
Second Sunday of Advent	10
The Advantages of Tribulations	10
The Poverty of the Infant Jesus	12
Third Sunday of Advent – Gaudete Sunday	15
The Joy of Jesus' Coming	15
"The Way of the Lord"	18
1. We Must Put Away All Self-Confidence	18
2. We Must Have Great Confidence in God	19
Fourth Sunday of Advent	21
The Salvation of the Lord	21
Joseph and Mary at Bethlehem	23
December 24: Vigil of Christmas	26
Jesus Comes to Cast Fire upon the Earth	26
Jesus Comes to Call Sinners	29

A Brief Explanation of Meditative Prayer

Everyone Must Pray

Prayer is necessary for salvation. This should be an obvious truth for every Catholic. Our Lord clearly taught that without Him we can do nothing good (*cf.* Jn 15:5), and the *salvation of one's soul* is the most essential good we strive for in this life. Christ also exhorted us to 'watch and pray' (*cf.* Mt 26:41) and to *ask* so that we may receive that which we need (*cf.* Mt 7:7). It is thus a natural duty, a necessity of means, and a divine precept that man pray, and all good things, including salvation, hinge upon it.

Nevertheless, prayer remains a difficult thing for most people, and is in most cases woefully neglected. Prayer requires not only faith, but also self-discipline and consistent application, and we do well to ask God to strengthen us for the task. Do not neglect to pray for the grace to be able to pray well! Our salutary prayers are themselves a gift of God, given in proportion to our desire for it.

Kinds of Prayer

Very simply, prayer is an intimate and affectionate conversation with God. Prayer can be offered out loud (vocal prayer) or silently (mental prayer). The latter may consist of planned, structured exercises (daily meditations, such as are contained in this volume), or unguided, often spontaneous transports of the soul among the things of God (contemplation). Yet all prayer, regardless of its external dimension, is primarily an interior spiritual reality. You see, prayer is meant to be an elevation of our soul to God to offer Him our homage, to thank Him for His benefits, to seek His pardon for our sins, and to ask His favors in order to grow in holiness for His glory.

The Importance of Making Daily Meditations

This volume is meant to introduce meditative prayer and to provide a simple means by which one can practice it. *Why is this important?* St. Alphonsus Liguori, the Moral Doctor of the Church, teaches that a priest who does not practice mental prayer will not attain Heaven, and that it is a moral certitude that a layman who does practice mental prayer *will* go to Heaven. Saint Alphonsus explains that he who wishes to grow in holiness **MUST** practice mental prayer consistently. *Do you want to become a saint? Then develop the habit of daily mental prayer!*

Basic Elements of Meditation

Mental Prayer is a *silent* elevation and application of our *mind and heart* to God in order to offer Him our homage and promote His glory by our advancement in *virtue*. Please note these three crucial characteristics. (1) It is silent. This allows for the greatest intimacy between God and the soul. (2) It is carried out by the mind and the heart. The mind must consider the truths of God. The heart must stir up its affections to a greater desire and love for God. (3) Its purpose is for the person to grow in virtue (*holiness!*) in the particular and personal way which will bring him into greatest union with God.

Common to all methods of meditation are the following: an unrushed application of the mind to the truths of God by means of certain pre-selected **Considerations**, either of one's own choice or suggested in a manual, and typically pointed toward growth in a particular virtue; an **Examination** of one's conscience in light of those considerations; a **Petition** for the graces needed to progress in virtue; and a **Resolution** to perform certain simple and concrete acts toward this end. (The more specific the petition, and the more measurable the resolution in subsequent examinations, the better.)

These various elements make each meditation unique, even as often as a person considers the same subject matter. The concrete situations and challenges one is currently experiencing also tend to shape one's considerations, making the meditation highly applicable and exceptionally personal. Your meditation is a privileged means by which God speaks to your soul.

Practical Methods of Meditation

There are many different methods for practicing meditation. For example, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Frances de Sales, and St. Teresa of Avila each advance a particular method. Yet, all the methods require consistency. A beginner should commit himself to just five, ten, or at most fifteen minutes a day. It is most important to establish the habit of daily mental prayer. Consistency is the necessary firm foundation upon which a life of prayer must be built.

Common to all methods of practicing meditation is the following three-fold structure:

[I] Preparation

- (1) The *remote preparation* consists of all the efforts you make each day to live in accordance with the Will of God.
- (2) The *proximate preparation* is a prior reading of the meditation subject. You should read it the night before or earlier in the day. This "warms up" your mind.
- (3) The *immediate preparation* begins your meditation. Place yourself in the presence of God. Put aside worldly concerns and cares. Acknowledge your unworthiness and beg the Holy Ghost for grace. Invoke your guardian angel and the saints most connected with the subject selected for meditation.

[II] Reflection

- (1) *Engage your Intellect* (understanding) to consider a few simple points which will excite your affections. This is not spiritual reading with the end of acquiring knowledge; rather it has the goal of putting oneself in God's presence so as to converse with Him.
- (2) *Excite your Will* (affections of the heart) to fill it with good impulses and virtuous desires. Allow God to enlarge and confirm your soul in these holy affections.
- (3) *Resolution*. Turn your affections into specific resolutions to amend your life and grow in virtue.

[III] Conclusion

- (1) *Act of Thanksgiving* – Thank God for the graces received through this meditation.
- (2) *Act of Oblation* – Offer your affections and resolutions to God in union with the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, renewed daily in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.
- (3) *Act of Intercession* – Beg the Holy Ghost to help you keep your resolutions. Seek the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints. Briefly pray for the Church, the Pope, priests, your family, etc.

Doorway to the Spiritual Life

Do the above steps seem daunting, constrictive, overwhelming? Please do not be discouraged. In fact, having a pattern to follow in one's meditation is essential for keeping on track, or more likely getting back on track. Such is the state of our fallen nature, that we are scarcely capable of saying so much as a single *Our Father* or *Hail Mary* without distraction. As Archbishop Alban Goodier, S.J., once wrote:

"When we examine our prayer or our failure in it, the first thing we usually have to say is that our minds have been far afield. We began well enough – or we did not, which is much more common than we are always willing to allow – but almost immediately we were lost. People we know wandered through our brain, above all two classes: those we like best and those we like least. With the former we built our castles in the clouds; the latter we pelted with torrents of abuse, and saw ourselves in imagination triumphantly stamping on their prostrate forms; or events of the past, or imaginary events of the future, turned themselves over and over, distorted themselves, mixed themselves up, and usually left us either humbled at our proneness to evil, or grumbling at somebody's imagined injustice towards us. Let us humbly confess it; this or such as this is often the sum total of our morning meditation."

Even the masters struggle to pray well! Saint Francis de Sales tells us that even if we spend the entire time of our Meditation trying to drive away such distractions, our prayer will still bring tremendous profit and merit to our souls. So, do not be discouraged by the ridiculousness of your efforts to pray; and, above all, do not give up. By following the basic structure given above and by using the meditations contained in this volume you will be well on your way to growing in virtue through a vibrant life of prayer. God Himself will draw you into a deeper union with Him and thereby grant you the graces you need to save your soul and the souls of many others. Your spiritual merit will garner immeasurable graces for the Pope to consecrate Russia in union with all the Catholic bishops of the world, and greatly advance the promised Triumph of the Immaculate Heart of Mary!

Note: If interested in learning more, we recommend Father Rodríguez's talks on "Mental Prayer," available through the St. Vincent Ferrer Foundation (www.svfonline.org). In five conferences, he explains the fundamentals and provides several step-by-step meditations.



The Virgin of the Apocalypse (1760) by Miguel Cabrera

First Sunday of Advent

Morning Meditation

The Day of the Last Judgment

“That day *is* a day of wrath... a day of calamity and misery” (Sophonias 1:15).

On the Last Day will be verified the prediction of St. John: “And they shall say to the mountains and the rocks: Fall upon us, and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth upon the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb” (Apocalypse 6:16).

Send forth O Lord, the Lamb, the Ruler of the earth, Who by sacrificing Himself shall satisfy Thy justice for us, and so reign in the hearts of men. O Lamb of God, pardon me before the arrival of that day on which Thou shalt judge me.

I. The Last Day is called in Scripture a day of wrath and misery; and such it will be for

all those unhappy beings who have died in mortal sin; for on that day their most secret crimes will be made manifest to the whole world, and themselves separated from the company of the Saints, and condemned to the eternal prison of hell, where they will suffer all the agonies of ever dying yet always remaining alive. Saint Jerome, in the cave at Bethlehem, devoted to continual prayer and penance, trembled at the bare thought of the General Judgment. The Blessed John Juvenal Ancina, hearing that Sequence for the Dead sung, *Dies ire, dies illa*, was so struck with the anticipation of Judgment that he left the world and embraced the Religious life.

O Jesus! what will become of me on that day? Shall I be placed on Thy right hand with the Elect, or on Thy left with the reprobate? I know that I have deserved to be placed on Thy left, but I know also that Thou wilt still pardon me if I repent of my sins: therefore do I repent of them with my whole heart, and am resolved rather to die than offend Thee any more.

II. As this will be a day of calamity and terror for the reprobate, so will it be a day of joy and triumph for the Elect; for then, in the sight of all mankind, will the blessed souls of the Elect be proclaimed queens of Paradise and spouses of the Immaculate Lamb.

O Jesus! Thy Precious Blood is my hope. Remember not the offences that I have committed against Thee, and inflame my whole soul with Thy love. I love Thee, my sovereign Good, and I trust that in that day I shall be associated with those loving souls who will praise and love Thee for all eternity.

Choose, my soul; choose now either an eternal crown in that blessed Kingdom, where God will be seen and loved face to Face in the company of the Saints, of the Angels, and of Mary, the Mother of Jesus; or the prison of hell, where you must weep and lament forever, abandoned by God and by all.

“O Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy on us!” O Divine Lamb, Who, to deliver us from the pains of hell, wast pleased to sacrifice Thy Divine Life by a bitter Death upon the Cross, have compassion on us; but more particularly upon me who has, more than others, offended Thee. I am sorry above every evil for having dishonored Thee by my sins, but I hope on that day to honor Thee before men and Angels, by proclaiming Thy mercies towards me. O Jesus! help me to love Thee; I desire Thee alone.

O Mary, holy Queen! protect me on that day.



Saint Jerome (1610s) by Lionello Spada

Spiritual Reading
The Nations in the Valley of Josaphat

St. Jerome spent his days in the Cave of Bethlehem in prayer and penance, and trembled at the thought of Jesus coming at the Last Day to judge the world.

At present God is not known, and therefore He is as much despised by sinners as if He could not avenge, whenever He pleases, the injuries offered to Him. The wicked “looked upon the Almighty as if He could do nothing” (Job 22:17). But the Lord has fixed a day, called in the Scriptures, the day of the Lord, *Dies Domini*, on which the Eternal Judge will make known His power and majesty. “The Lord,” says the Psalmist, “shall be known when He executeth judgments” (Psalm 9:17). On this text St. Bernard writes: “The Lord, Who is now unknown while He seeks mercy, shall be known when He executes justice.” The Prophet Sophonias calls the Day of the Lord “a day of wrath, a day of tribulation and distress, a day of calamity and misery” (Sophonias 1:15).

This day shall commence with fire from the heavens which will burn the earth, all men then living, and all things upon the earth. “And the earth and the works which are in it, shall be burnt up” (2 Peter 3:10). All shall become one heap of ashes.

After the death of all men, “the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall rise again” (1 Corinthians 15:52). Saint Jerome used to say: “As often as I consider the Day of Judgment, I tremble. Whether I eat or drink, or whatever else I do, that terrible trumpet appears to sound in my ears, ‘Arise ye dead, and come to judgment,’” and St. Augustine

declared that nothing banished earthly thoughts from him so effectually as the fear of the Judgment.

At the sound of that trumpet the souls of the Blessed shall descend from Heaven to be united to the bodies with which they served God on earth; and the unhappy souls of the damned shall come up from hell to take possession again of those same bodies with which they offended God. Oh! how different the appearance of the former, compared with that of the latter! The damned will appear deformed and black, like so many firebrands of hell; but “then shall the just shine as the sun” (Matthew 13:43). Oh! how great will then be the happiness of those who have mortified their bodies by works of penance! We may estimate their felicity from the words addressed by St. Peter of Alcantara, after death, to St. Teresa: “O happy penance! which merited for me such glory!”

After the Resurrection they shall be summoned by the Angels to appear in the Valley of Josaphat. “Nations, nations in the valley of destruction, for the day of the Lord is near” (Joel 3:14). Then the Angels shall come and separate the reprobate from the Elect, placing the latter on the right, and the former on the left. “The Angels shall go out, and shall separate the wicked from among the just” (Matthew 13:49). Oh! how great will then be the confusion which the unhappy damned shall suffer! This punishment alone, says St. John Chrysostom, would be sufficient to constitute a hell for the wicked. Brother shall be separated from brother, husband from wife, son from father.

But, behold! the heavens are opened – the Angels come to assist at the General Judgment, carrying, as St. Thomas says, the Standard of the Cross and the other instruments of the Passion of the Redeemer. The same may be inferred from the twenty-fourth Chapter of St. Matthew: “And then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in Heaven: and then shall all tribes of the earth mourn” (Matthew 24:30). Sinners shall weep at the sight of the Cross; for, as St. John Chrysostom says, the nails will complain of them – the Wounds and the Cross of Jesus Christ will speak against them.

Most holy Mary, the Queen of Saints and Angels, shall come to assist at the Last Judgment; and lastly, the Eternal Judge shall appear in the clouds, full of splendor and majesty. “And they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of Heaven with much power and majesty” (*Ibid.*). Oh, how great shall be the agony of the reprobate at the sight of the Judge! “At their presence,” says the Prophet Joel, “the people shall be in grievous pains” (Joel 2:6). According to St. Jerome, the presence of Jesus Christ will give the reprobate more pain than hell itself. “It would,” he says, “be easier for the damned to bear the torments of hell than the presence of the Lord.” Hence, on that day the wicked shall, according to St. John, call on the mountains to fall on them and to hide them from the sight of the Judge. “And they shall say to the mountains and the rocks: Fall upon us, and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth upon the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb” (Apocalypse 6:16).



Liberation of St. Peter (1665-1667) by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo

Second Sunday of Advent

Morning Meditation

The Advantages of Tribulations

"For what things soever were written, were written for our learning: that through patience and the comfort of the Scriptures, we might have hope" (Epistle of Sunday, Romans 15:4).

In tribulations God enriches His beloved souls with the greatest graces. It is in his chains that St. John comes to the knowledge of the works of Jesus Christ. "Let us believe that these scourges of the Lord, with which...we are chastised have happened for our amendment, and not for our destruction" (Judith 8:27).

I. By tribulation we atone for the sins we have committed much better than by voluntary works of penance. "Be assured," says St. Augustine, "that God is a physician, and that tribulation is a salutary medicine." Oh, how great is the efficacy of tribulation in healing the wounds caused by our sins! Hence, the same Saint rebukes the sinner who complains of God for sending him tribulations. "Why," he says, "do you complain?

What you suffer is a remedy, not a punishment." Job called those men happy whom God corrects by tribulation; because He heals them with the very hands by which He strikes and wounds them. "Blessed is the man whom God correcteth... For He woundeth, and cureth: He striketh, and His hands shall heal" (Job 5:17-18). Hence, St. Paul gloried in his tribulations: "We glory also in tribulations" (Romans 5:3).

Tribulations enable us to acquire great merits before God, by giving us opportunities of exercising the virtues of humility, of patience, and of resignation to the Divine Will. Saint John of Avila used to say that one "Blessed be God" in adversity is worth more than a thousand in prosperity. "Take away," says St. Ambrose, "the contests of the Martyrs, and you have taken away their crowns." Oh, what a treasure of merit is acquired by patiently bearing insults, poverty, and sickness! Insults from men were the great object of the desires of the Saints, who sought to be despised for the love of Jesus Christ, and thus to be made like unto Him.

My Jesus, I have hitherto offended Thee grievously by resisting Thy Holy Will. This gives me greater pain than if I had suffered every other evil. I repent of it and I am sorry for it with my whole heart. I deserve chastisement: I do not refuse it: I accept it. Preserve me only from the chastisement of being deprived of Thy love, and then do with me what Thou pleasest. I love Thee, my dear Redeemer! I love Thee, my God! And because I love Thee, I wish to do whatever Thou wishest. Amen.

II. St. Francis de Sales used to say: "To suffer constantly for Jesus is the science of the Saints; we shall thus soon become Saints." It is by sufferings that God proves His servants, and finds them worthy of Himself. "God hath tried them, and found them worthy of Himself" (Wisdom 3:5). "For whom," says St. Paul, "the Lord loveth, He chastiseth; and He scourgeth every son whom He receiveth" (Hebrews 12:6). Hence, Jesus Christ once said to St. Teresa: "Be assured that the souls dearest to My Father are those who suffer the greatest afflictions." Hence, Job said: "If we have received good things at the hand of God, why should we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10) If we have gladly received from God the goods of this earth, why should we not receive more cheerfully tribulations, which are far more useful to us than worldly prosperity? Saint Gregory informs us that, as a flame fanned by the wind increases, so the soul is made perfect when she is oppressed by tribulations.

In fine, the scourges of Heaven are sent, not for our injury, but for our good. "Let us believe that these scourges of the Lord, with which like servants we are chastised, have happened for our amendment, and not for our destruction" (Judith 8:27). "God," says St. Augustine, "is angry when He does not scourge the sinner." When we see a sinner in tribulation in this life, we may infer that God wishes to have mercy on him in the next, and that He exchanges eternal for temporal chastisement. But miserable the sinner whom the Lord does not punish in this life! For those whom He does not chastise here, He treasures up His wrath, and for them He reserves eternal chastisement.

O Will of God, Thou art my love! O Blood of Jesus, Thou art my hope! I hope to be from this day forward always united to Thy Divine Will. It shall be my guide, my desire, my love, my hope. Thy Will be done! My Jesus, through Thy merits grant me the grace always to repeat: Thy Will be done! Thy Will be done!

Ah, my blessed Mother Mary, Thou hast been pleased to suffer so much for me. Obtain for me, by Thy merits, sorrow for my sins, and patience under the trials of life which will always be light in comparison with my demerits for I have often deserved hell. Immaculate Virgin, from Thee do I hope for help to bear all crosses with patience. Amen.



The Nativity (1888) by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones

Spiritual Reading **The Poverty of the Infant Jesus**

“What went you out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Behold they that are clothed in soft garments, are in the houses of kings” (Gospel of Sunday, Matthew 11:8).

Instead of soft garments the Infant Jesus has but a few poor, rough, cold, damp rags. “The Creator of the Angels,” says St. Peter Damian, “is not said to be clothed in purple but to have been wrapped in rags.” Everything that is in Heaven and on earth is God’s: “The world is Mine, and the fullness thereof” (Psalm 49:12). But even this is little. Heaven and earth are but the least portions of the riches of God. The riches of God are infinite, and can never fail, because His riches do not depend on others, but He, Who is the Infinite Good, possesses them Himself. It was for this reason that David said: “Thou art my God, for Thou hast no need of my goods” (Psalm 15:2). Now this

God, Who is so rich, made Himself poor by becoming Man, that He might thereby make us poor sinners rich: “Being rich He became poor, for your sakes; that through His poverty you might be rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

What! a God become poor? And why? Let us understand the reason. The riches of this world can be nothing but dust and mire; but it is mire that so completely blinds men that they can no longer see which are the true riches. Before the coming of Jesus Christ, the world was full of darkness because it was full of sin: “All flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth” (Genesis 6:12). Mankind had corrupted the law and reason, so that, living like brutes, intent only on acquiring the riches and pleasures of this world, men cared no more for the riches of eternity. But the Divine Mercy ordained that the very Son of God Himself should come down to enlighten these blind creatures: “To them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death, Light is risen” (Isaias 9:2).

Jesus was called the Light of the Gentiles: “A Light to the revelation of the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32); “The Light shineth in darkness” (John 1:5). Thus did the Lord from the first promise to be Himself our Master, and a Master Who should be seen by us; Who should teach us the way of salvation, which consists in the practice of all the virtues, and especially that of holy poverty: “And thy eyes shall see thy Teacher” (Isaias 30:20). Moreover, this Master was not only to teach us by His words; but still more by the example of His life.

St. Bernard says that poverty was not to be found in Heaven – it existed only on earth; but that man, not knowing its value, did not seek after it. Therefore, the Son of God came down from Heaven to this earth, and chose it for His companion throughout His whole life, that by His example He might also render it precious and desirable to us: “Poverty was not found in Heaven, but she was well known on earth, and men knew not her excellence. So the Son of God loved her and came down from Heaven to take her to Himself that we might learn to value her when we see how He regards her.” And behold our Redeemer as an Infant, Who at the very beginning of His life made Himself a Teacher of poverty in the Cave of Bethlehem; which is expressly called by the same St. Bernard the “School of Christ,” and by St. Augustine the “Grotto of Doctrine.”

For this end was it decreed by God that the Edict of Caesar should come forth; namely, that His Son should not only be born poor, but the poorest of men, causing Him to be born away from His own house, in a cave which was inhabited by animals. Other poor people, who are born in their own houses, have certainly more comforts in the way of clothes, of fire, and the assistance of persons who lend their aid, even if it is out of compassion. What son of a poor mother was ever born in a stable? In a stable beasts only are born. Saint Luke relates how it happened. The time being come that Mary was to be delivered, Joseph goes to seek some lodging for Her in Bethlehem. He goes about and enquires at every house, and he finds none. He tries to find one in an inn, but nei-

ther there does he find any: "There was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). So that Mary is obliged to take shelter and bring forth Her Son in that cave.

When the sons of princes are born, they have warm rooms prepared for them, adorned with hangings, silver cradles, the finest clothes, and they are waited on by the highest nobles and ladies in the kingdom. The King of Heaven, instead of a warm and beautiful room, has nothing but a cold grotto, whose only ornament is the grass that grows there; instead of a bed of feathers, He has nothing but a little hard, sharp straw; instead of fine garments He has but a few poor, rough, cold and damp rags: "The Creator of Angels," writes St. Peter Damien, "is not said to have been clad in purple, but to have been wrapped in rags. Let worldly pride blush at the resplendent humility of the Savior." Instead of a fire, and of the attendance of great people, He has but the warm breath and the company of two animals; finally, in place of the silver cradle, He must lie in a vile manger.

"What is this?" asks St. Gregory of Nyssa. "The King of kings, Who fills Heaven and earth with His presence finds no better place in which to be born than a stable for beasts! He Who encompasses all things in His embrace is laid in the manger of brute cattle." Yes, this King of kings for our sake wished to be poor and the poorest of all. Even the children of the poor have milk enough provided for them, but Jesus Christ wished to be poor even in this; for the milk of Mary was miraculous, and She received it not naturally, but from Heaven, as Holy Church teaches us: "The Virgin gave Him milk from a breast filled from Heaven." And God, in order to comply with the desire of His Son, Who wished to be poor in everything, did not provide Mary with milk in abundance, but only with as much as would barely suffice to sustain the life of Her Son; whence the same Holy Church says: "He was fed on a little milk."

And Jesus Christ, as He was born poor, continued in poverty all His life long.



Angels Announcing the Birth of Christ to the Shepherds (1639) by Govert Flinck

Third Sunday of Advent – Gaudete Sunday

Morning Meditation

The Joy of Jesus' Coming

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice!... The Lord is nigh" (Epistle of Sunday, Philippians 4:4-5).

Take comfort, take comfort, O men, saith the Lord, by the mouth of Isaías: "Be comforted, be comforted, My people, saith your God. Speak ye to the heart of Jerusalem, and call to her: for her evil is come to an end, her iniquity is forgiven" (Isaías 40:1-2). God hath discovered a way of saving man, while at the same time His Justice and His Mercy shall both be satisfied: "Justice and peace have kissed" (Psalm 84:11).

I. Speaking of the coming of the Redeemer, Isaías made this prediction: "The land that was desolate and impassable shall be glad, and the wilderness shall rejoice, and shall flourish like the lily" (Isaías 35:1). The Prophet had been speaking of the pagans (among whom were our own unfortunate ancestors) who were living in heathendom, as in a desert land void of a single man that knew or worshipped the true God, but peo-

pled only with those who were slaves of the devil – a land desolate and impassable, because there was no path of salvation known to those wretched people. He foretold that the world, though so miserable then, would yet rejoice at the coming of the Messiah and would see itself filled with followers of the true God, strengthened by His grace against all the enemies of their salvation; and that the whole land would blossom as the lily by purity of morals and the sweet odor of all virtues. Wherefore Isaias proceeds to say: “Say to the fainthearted: Take courage, and fear not: God Himself will come and save you” (Isaias 35:4).

This very event, foretold by Isaias, has already happened. Let me, then, acclaim with gladness: Go on joyfully, O children of Adam! Go on joyfully! Be no more faint-hearted! Even though you perceive yourselves weak and unable to stand against so many enemies, “Fear not! God Himself will come and save you.” God Himself has come on earth, and has redeemed us, by imparting to us strength sufficient to combat and to vanquish every enemy of our salvation.

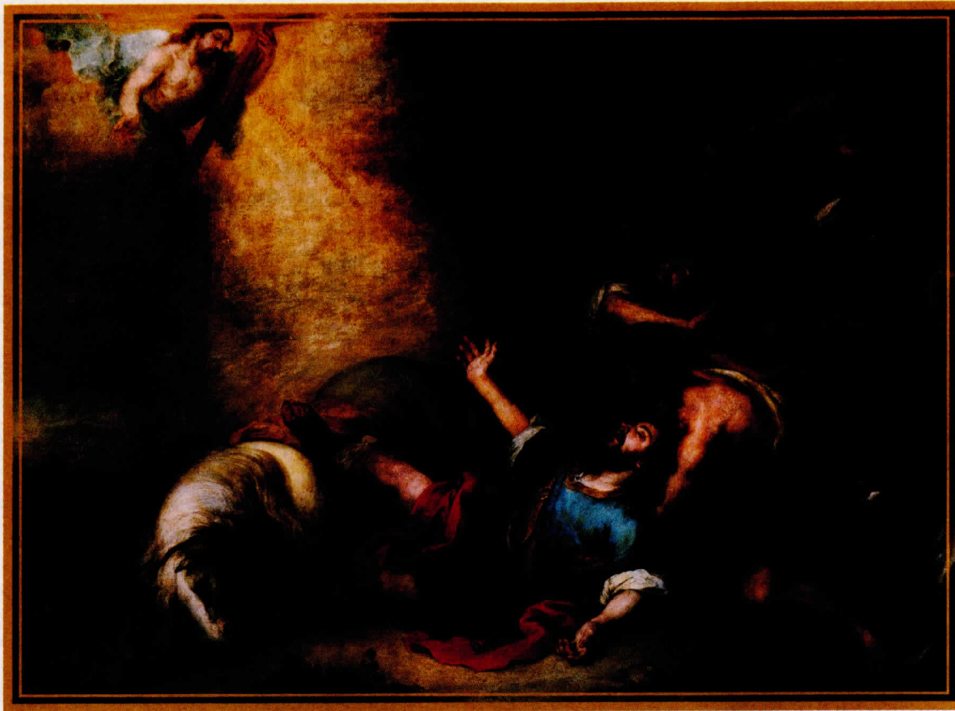
Oh, happy me, if from this day forward I shall be able always to say with the Sacred Spouse: “My Beloved to me, and I to Him!” (Canticle of Canticles 2:16) My God, my Beloved has given Himself all to me. It is but reasonable for me to give myself all to my God, and to say: “What have I in Heaven? And besides Thee what do I desire upon earth?” (Psalm 72:25) Oh, my beloved Infant, my dear Redeemer, since Thou hast come down from Heaven to give Thyself to me, what else shall I care for or seek in Heaven or on earth besides Thee, Who art my Sovereign Good, my only Treasure, the Paradise of souls! Be Thou, then, the sole Lord of my heart and do Thou possess it wholly. May my heart obey Thee alone! May my soul love Thee alone and mayest Thou alone be its portion! Amen.

II. You have no grounds for being sad any more, says St. Leo, on account of the sentence of death fulminated against you, now that life itself is born for you; “Nor is there any lawful room for sadness when it is the birthday of life.” And St. Augustine exclaims: “O sweet day for penitents! Today sin is taken away!” Speed on then with gladness, O ye souls that love God and hope in God, speed on your way with gladness! What if Adam’s sin and still more our own sins, have wrought sad ruin on us? Let us understand that Jesus Christ, by the Redemption, has infinitely more than repaired our ruin. “Where sin abounded, grace did more abound” (Romans 5:20).

The Lord said: “I am come that they may have life, and may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). I am come to give life to men and a more abundant measure than that which they had lost by sin. “Not as the offence, so also the Gift” (Romans 5:15). Great has been man’s sin; but greater, says the Apostle, has been the gift of Redemption. “And with Him there is plentiful redemption” (Psalm 129:7). For this reason the Church styles the fault of Adam a happy fault: “O happy fault which deserved to have such and so great a Redeemer!”

Oh, how much more are we bound to thank God for having brought us into life after the coming of the Messiah! How did the Prophets and the Patriarchs of the Old Testament long to see the Redeemer born! But they saw Him not! “Drop down dew, ye Heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain the Just!” (Isaias 45:8), was their incessant exclamation. “Send forth, O Lord, the Lamb, the Ruler of the earth!” (Isaias 16:1) Such were the longing exclamations of the Saints! But for all that, during the space of four thousand years they had not the happy lot to see the Messiah born. We, however, have had this happiness! But what are we doing? Do we know how to love this amiable Redeemer? Very great would be your ingratitude to your God, O Christian soul, if you were not to love Him, after He has been pleased to be bound in swaddling-clothes that you may be released from the chains of hell; after He has become poor that you may be made partaker of His riches; after He has made Himself weak to give you strength against your enemies; after He has chosen to suffer and weep, that by His tears your sins may be washed away.

O sweet Infant, give me Thy love and then do with me what Thou wilt. I was once a slave of hell, but now that I am free from those unhappy chains, I consecrate myself entirely to Thee. I give Thee my body, my goods, my life, my soul, my will and my liberty. I desire no longer to belong to myself, but only to Thee, my only Good! Ah, bind my heart to Thy feet that it may no more stray from Thee! O most holy Mary, obtain for me the grace of living united to Thy Son by the blessed chains of love. He grants all that Thou askest. Pray to Him! Pray to Him for me! This is my hope. Amen.



La Conversión de San Pablo (1675 - 1682) by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo

Spiritual Reading **"The Way of the Lord"**

In his preaching St. John the Baptist exclaimed: "Make straight the way of the Lord" (John 1:23). In order to be able to walk always in the way of the Lord, without turning to the right or to the left, it is necessary to adopt the proper means. There are two very important means about which we will speak to you here.

1. To put away confidence in self.
2. To have confidence in God.

I. We Must Put Away All Self-Confidence.

"With fear and trembling," says the Apostle, St. Paul, "work out your salvation" (Philippians 2:12). To secure eternal salvation we must be always penetrated with fear, we must be afraid of ourselves – with fear and trembling – and distrust altogether our own strength; for without the divine aid we can do nothing. "Without Me," says Jesus Christ, "you can do nothing" (John 15:5). We can do nothing for the salvation of our souls. Saint Paul tells us that of ourselves we are not capable of even a good thought. "Not that we are sufficient to think anything of ourselves as of ourselves: but our suf-

ficiency is from God" (2 Corinthians 3:5). Without the aid of the Holy Ghost, we cannot even pronounce the Name of Jesus so as to deserve a reward. "And no man can say the Lord Jesus, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Miserable the man who trusts to himself in the way of God! Saint Peter experienced the sad effects of self-confidence. Jesus Christ said to him: "In this night before the cock crow, thou wilt deny me thrice" (Matthew 26:34). Trusting in his own strength and his goodwill, the Apostle replied: "Yea, though I should die with Thee, I will not deny Thee" (Matthew 26:35). What was the result? On the night on which Jesus Christ had been taken, Peter was reproached in the court of Caiphas with being one of the disciples of the Savior. The reproach filled him with fear; he thrice denied his Master, and swore that he had never known Him! Humility and diffidence in ourselves are so necessary for us, that God permits us sometimes to fall into sin, that by our fall we may acquire humility and a knowledge of our own weakness. Through want of humility David also fell: hence, after his sin, he said: "Before I was humbled I offended" (Psalm 118:67).

Hence, the Holy Ghost pronounces the man blessed who is always in fear: "Blessed is the man that is always fearful" (Proverbs 28:14). He who is afraid of falling distrusts his own strength, avoids as much as possible all dangerous occasions, and recommends himself often to God, and thus preserves his soul from sin. But the man who is not fearful, but full of self-confidence, easily exposes himself to the danger of sin: he seldom recommends himself to God, and thus he falls. Let us imagine a person suspended over a great precipice by a cord held by another. Surely he would constantly cry out to the person who supports him: "Hold fast, hold fast; for God's sake, do not let go!" We are all in danger of falling into the abyss of every crime, if God does not support us. Hence, we should constantly beseech Him to keep His hand over us, and to succor us in all dangers.

On rising from bed, St. Philip Neri used to say every morning: "O Lord, keep Thy hand this day over Philip; if Thou do not, Philip will betray Thee." And one day, as he walked through the city, reflecting on his own misery, he frequently said: "I despair, I despair." A certain Religious who heard him, believing that the Saint was really tempted to despair, corrected him, and encouraged him to hope in the Divine Mercy. But the Saint replied: "I despair of myself, but I trust in God." Hence, during this life, in which we are exposed to so many dangers of losing God, it is necessary for us to live always in great diffidence of ourselves, and full of confidence in God.

II. We Must Have Great Confidence in God.

St. Francis de Sales says that mere self-diffidence on account of our own weakness would only render us pusillanimous, and expose us to the great danger of abandoning ourselves to a tepid life, or even to despair. The more we distrust our own strength, the

more we should confide in the Divine Mercy. This is a balance, says the same Saint, in which the more the scale of confidence in God is raised, the more the scale of diffidence in ourselves descends.

Listen to me, O sinners who have had the misfortune of having hitherto offended God, and of being condemned to hell: If the devil tells you that but little hope remains of your eternal salvation, answer him in the words of the Scripture: "No one hath hoped in the Lord, and hath been confounded" (Ecclesiasticus 2:11). No sinner has ever trusted in God and been lost. Make, then, a firm purpose to sin no more; abandon yourselves into the arms of the Divine Goodness; and rest assured that God will have mercy on you, and save you from hell. "Cast thy care upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee" (Psalm 54:23). The Lord one day said to St. Gertrude: "He who confides in Me, does Me such violence that I cannot but hear all his petitions."

"But," says the Prophet Isaias, "they that hope in the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall take wings as eagles, they shall run, and not be weary, they shall walk, and not faint" (Isaias 40:31). They who place their confidence in God shall renew their strength; they shall lay aside their own weakness, and shall acquire the strength of God; they shall fly like eagles in the way of the Lord, without fatigue and without ever failing. David says, that "Mercy shall encompass him that hopeth in the Lord" (Psalm 31:10). He who hopes in the Lord shall be encompassed by His mercy, so that he shall never be abandoned by it.

St. Cyprian says that the Divine Mercy is an inexhaustible fountain. They who bring vessels of the greatest confidence, draw from it the greatest graces. Hence, the Royal Prophet has said: "Let Thy Mercy, O Lord, be upon us, as we have hoped in Thee" (Psalm 32:22). Whenever the devil terrifies us by placing before our eyes the great difficulty of persevering in the grace of God in spite of all the dangers and sinful occasions of this life, let us, without answering him, raise our eyes to God, and hope that in His goodness He will certainly send us help to resist every attack. "I have lifted up my eyes to the mountains, from whence help shall come to me" (Psalm 120:1). And when the enemy represents to us our weakness, let us say with the Apostle: "I can do all these things in Him Who strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13). Of myself I can do nothing; but I trust in God, that by His grace I shall be able to do all things.

Hence, in the midst of the greatest dangers of perdition to which we are exposed, we should continually turn to Jesus Christ and, throwing ourselves into the hands of Him Who redeemed us by His death, say: "Into Thy hands I commend my spirit: Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, the God of truth" (Psalm 30:6). This prayer should be said with great confidence of obtaining eternal life, and to it we should add: "In Thee, O Lord, have I hoped; let me never be confounded" (Psalm 30:2).



The Adoration of the Shepherds (1650) by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Morning Meditation

The Salvation of the Lord

"And all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (today's Gospel, Luke 3:6).

The Savior of the world, Whom, according to the Prophet Isaias, men were to see one day on the earth – "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God" – has come. And He came on earth, says Saint Augustine, that men might know how much God loves them. And how is it, O my dear Jesus, that Thou dost meet with so much ingratitude from the greater number of men?

I. Adam, our first father, sins, and is condemned to eternal death along with all his posterity. Seeing the whole human race doomed to perdition, God resolved to send a Redeemer to save mankind. Who shall come to be man's salvation? Perhaps an angel or a seraph? No, the Son of God, the supreme and true God, equal to the Father, offers Himself to come on earth, and there to take human flesh and die for the salvation of men. O prodigy of Divine Love! Man, says Saint Fulgentius, despises God and separates himself from God, and through love for him God comes on earth to seek after rebellious man. Since we would not go to our Physician, He deigned to come to us, says St. Augustine. And why did Jesus resolve to come to us? Christ came, says the same holy Doctor, that man might know how much God loves him.

Hence, the Apostle writes: "The goodness and kindness of God, our Savior, appeared" (Titus 3:4). "The singular love of God towards men appeared," as the Greek text has it. And what greater love and goodness could the Son of God show us than to become Man and a worm like us, in order to save us from perdition? What astonishment should we not feel if we saw a prince become a worm to save the worms of his kingdom! And what shall we say at the sight of a God made Man like us to deliver us from eternal death! "The Word was made flesh" (John 1:14). A God made flesh! If faith did not assure us of it, who could ever believe it?

O my sweet, amiable, holy Child, Thou art at a loss to know what more to do to make Thyself loved by men! It is enough to say that from being the Son of God, Thou wert made the Son of man, and that Thou didst choose to be born among men like the rest of infants, only poorer and more meanly lodged than the rest, selecting a stable for Thy abode, a manger for Thy cradle, a little straw for Thy bed. And yet few there are who know Thee! Few there are who love Thee!

II. Tell me, O Christian, what more could Jesus Christ have done to win Thy love? If the Son of God had engaged to rescue from death His own Father, what lower humiliation could He have stooped to than to assume human flesh and to lay down His life in sacrifice for His salvation? Nay, I say more, had Jesus Christ been a mere man instead of one of the Divine Persons, and wished to gain by some token of affection the love of His God, what more could He have done than He has done for thee? If a servant of thine had given for thy love his very life-blood, would he not have riveted thy heart to him, and obliged thee to love him out of mere gratitude? And how comes it that Jesus Christ, though He has laid down His very Life for thee, has still failed to win thy love?

Men appreciate the good graces of a prince, of a prelate, a nobleman, of a man of letters, and even of a vile animal, and yet these same persons set no store by the grace of God – but renounce it for mere smoke, for a brutal gratification, for a handful of earth, for a whim, for a nothing! What sayest thou, my dear brother? Dost thou wish still to be ranked among the ungrateful ones? Go, seek for thyself one who is better able than God to make thee happy in the present life and in the life to come. Go, find thyself a prince more courteous, a master, a brother, a friend more amiable, and who has shown thee a deeper love. O "Lord, who is like to Thee?" (Psalm 34:10) O Lord, what greatness shall ever be found like to Thine?

Love, then, love, O souls, love this little Child, exclaims St. Bernard, for He is exceedingly to be loved. Great is the Lord, and exceedingly to be praised! The Lord is a little One and exceedingly to be loved!

O my dear Jesus, how is it that Thou dost encounter such ingratitude from the greater number of men? In the time past, I, too, have not known Thee; but heedless of Thy love, I have sought my own gratification, making no account whatever of Thee and of Thy friendship. But now I am sorry for it. I grieve over it with my whole heart. O my

sweet Child, and my God, forgive me for the sake of Thine Infancy. Thou knowest my past treasons; for pity's sake do not abandon me or I shall fall away even worse than before.

O Mary, great Mother of the Incarnate Word, do not Thou abandon me! Thou art the Mother of perseverance and the Stewardess of Divine Grace. With Thy help, O my Hope, I trust to be faithful to my God till death.



Herbergssuche (1865) by Carl Rahl

Spiritual Reading **Joseph and Mary at Bethlehem**

Octavius Augustus, the Emperor of Rome, wishing to know the strength of his empire, decreed that there be a general numbering of all his subjects; and for this purpose he ordered the governors of all the provinces – and, among the rest, Cyrenus, governor of Judea – to make every one come to enroll himself, and at the same time pay a certain tribute as a sign of vassalage: "There went out a decree... that the whole world should be enrolled" (Luke 2:1).

As soon as this decree was promulgated, Joseph obeys immediately; he does not even wait till his holy Spouse should be delivered, though the time is near. I say he obeyed immediately, and set out on his journey with Mary, then pregnant with the Divine Word, to go and enroll himself in the city of Bethlehem: "to be enrolled with Mary his espoused Wife, Who was with Child" (Luke 2:5). The journey was a long one – for,

according to some authors, it was ninety leagues; that is, a four-days' journey – long and difficult, for they had to traverse mountains and steep paths, through the wind, the rain and the cold.

When a king makes his first entry into a city of his kingdom, what honors are not prepared for him! What preparations are not made, and triumphal arches erected! Do thou, then, O happy Bethlehem! prepare thyself to receive thy King with honor; for the Prophet Micheas has told thee that He is coming to thee, and that He is Lord, not only of all Judea, but of the whole world. And know, says the Prophet, thou, out of all the cities of the earth, art the fortunate one that has been chosen by the King of Heaven for His birthplace, that He may afterwards reign, not indeed in Judea, but in the hearts of men who live in Judea and in all the rest of the world: "AND THOU, BETHLEHEM Ephrata, art a little one among the thousands of Juda: out of thee shall He come forth that is to be the ruler in Israel" (Micheas 5:2).

But behold these two illustrious pilgrims, Joseph and Mary, who bears within Her womb the Savior of the world, are about to enter into Bethlehem. They enter and go to the house of the imperial minister to pay the tribute, and to enroll themselves in the book as subjects of Caesar, where they also inscribed the offspring of Mary, namely, Jesus Christ, Who was the Lord of Caesar and of all the princes of the earth. But who acknowledges them? Who goes before them to show them honor? Who salutes them, and who receives them? "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not" (John 1:11). They travel like poor people, and as such they are despised; they are treated even worse than the other poor, and are driven away.

Yes; for "it came to pass, that when they were there, Her days were accomplished, that She should be delivered" (Luke 2:6). Mary knew that the time of Her delivery was come, and that it was here, and on this night, that the Incarnate Word willed to be born, and to manifest Himself to the world. She therefore told Joseph, and he hastened to procure some lodging in the houses of the townspeople, so as not to take his Spouse to the inn to be delivered, as it was not a becoming place for Her to be; besides which, it was then full of people.

But Joseph found no one to listen to him; and very likely he was insulted, and perhaps called a fool by some of them, for taking his Wife about at that time of night, and in such a crowd of people, when She was near Her delivery. So, at last he was obliged, unless he would remain all night in the street, to take Her to the public inn, where there were many other people lodging that night. He went there; but they were refused admittance even there, and they were told that there was no room for them: "There was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). Room was found for all, even for the lowest, but not for Jesus Christ.

That inn was a figure of those ungrateful hearts where many find room for miserable creatures, but not for God. How many love their relatives, their friends, even animals,

but do not love Jesus Christ, and care neither for His grace nor His love! But the ever-blessed Mary said once to a devout soul: "It was the dispensation of God that neither I nor My Son should find a lodging amongst men, that those souls who love Jesus might offer themselves as a lodging-place, and might affectionately invite Him to come into their hearts."

These poor travelers, then, seeing themselves repulsed on every side, leave the city to try to find some place of refuge without its walls. They walk on in the dark; they go round about and examine, till at last they see a grotto, which was cut out of stone in the mountain under the city. Barradas, Bede, and Brocardus say that the place where Jesus Christ was born was a rock that had been excavated under the walls of Bethlehem, divided off from the city, and like a cavern, which served as a stable for cattle.

When they came to it, Mary said to Joseph: There is no occasion to go any farther; let us go into this cave and remain here. What! replied Joseph, My Spouse, dost Thou not see that this cave is quite exposed; that it is cold and damp, and that water is running down on all sides? Dost Thou not see that it is no lodging for men, but it is a shed for beasts? How canst Thou stop here all night and be delivered here? Then Mary said: It is nevertheless true that this stable is the royal palace in which the Eternal Son of God desires to be born on earth.

Oh, what must the Angels have said when they saw the Divine Mother enter into this cave to bring forth Her Son! The sons of princes are born in rooms adorned with gold; they have cradles enriched with precious stones, fine clothes, a retinue of the first lords of the kingdom; and has the King of Heaven nothing but a cold stable, without a fire, to be born in, some poor swaddling clothes to cover Him, a little straw for His bed, and a vile manger in which to lie? "Where is the palace," asks St. Bernard, "where is the throne?" Where, says the Saint, is the court, where is the royal palace for this King of Heaven? For I see nothing but two animals to keep Him company, and a manger for cattle, where He must be laid.

O happy grotto that witnessed the Birth of the Divine Word! Happy manger to have had the honor of receiving the Lord of Heaven! Happy straw which served as a bed to Him Who sits on the shoulders of the Seraphim! Ah, when we think of the Birth of Jesus Christ, and of the manner in which it took place, we ought all to be inflamed with love; and when we hear the names of cave, manger, straw, milk, tears, in reference to the Birth of our Redeemer, these names ought to be so many incitements to our love, and arrows to wound our hearts. Yes, happy was that grotto, that crib, that straw; but still happier are those souls who love this amiable Lord with fervor and tenderness, and who receive Him in Holy Communion into hearts burning with love. Oh, with what desire and pleasure does not Jesus Christ enter into and repose in a heart that loves Him!



Madonna del Parto (14th Century) by Antonio Veneziano

December 24: Vigil of Christmas

Morning Meditation

Jesus Comes to Cast Fire upon the Earth

"I am come to cast fire on the earth: and what will I, but that it be kindled? (Luke 12:49)

Before the coming of the Messiah, who loved God upon the earth? He was known, indeed, in one corner of the world; that is, in Judea; and even there how very few loved Him when He came! Even today few there are who think of preparing their hearts for Jesus to be born in them! What sayest thou? Dost thou wish to be ranked amongst the ungrateful ones?

I. The Jews solemnized a day called by them *Dies ignis* – the day of fire, in memory of the fire with which Nehemias consumed the sacrifice upon his return from the Captiv-

ity of Babylon. Even so, and indeed with more reason, should Christmas Day be called the Day of Fire on which a God comes as a little Child to cast the fire of love into the hearts of men.

I am come to cast fire upon the earth; so spoke Jesus Christ. Before the coming of the Messiah, who loved God upon the earth? Some worshipped the sun, some the brutes, some the very stones, and others again even viler creatures still. A few years after the Redeemer was born, God was more loved by men than He had been before from the creation of man. Ah, truly every man at the sight of a God clothed in flesh, and choosing to lead a life of such hardship, and to suffer a death of such ignominy, ought to be enkindled with love towards a God so loving! "That Thou wouldst rend the heavens, and wouldst come down: the mountains would melt away at Thy presence... the waters would burn with fire" (Isaiah 64:1, 2).

Oh, surely Thou wouldst enkindle such a furnace in the human heart that even the most frozen souls would catch the flame of Thy blessed love! And, in fact, after the Incarnation of the Son of God, how brilliantly has the fire of Divine love burnt in loving souls! How many youths, how many of those nobly born, and how many monarchs even, have left wealth, honors, and even kingdoms, to seek the desert or the cloister, that there, in poverty and obscure seclusion, they might the more unreservedly give themselves up to the love of their Savior! How many Martyrs have gone rejoicing, making merry on their way to torments and death! How many tender young virgins have refused the proffered hands of the great ones of the world in order to go and die for Jesus Christ, and so repay in some measure the affection of a God Who stooped down to take human flesh and to die for the love of them!

O Jesus, Thou hast spared nothing to induce men to love Thee! O Word Incarnate, Thou wert even made Man to enkindle Divine love in our hearts. I love Thee, O Incarnate Word! I love Thee, O sovereign Good! Suffer me not to be separated from Thee! Suffer me not to be separated from Thee!

II. It may, indeed, be asserted without fear of contradiction that God was more loved in one century after the coming of Jesus Christ than in the entire forty centuries preceding His appearance on earth. Yes; all this is most true; but now comes a tale for tears. Has this been the case with all men? Have all men sought to correspond with the immense Love of Jesus Christ? Alas! my God, the greater number have combined to repay Him with nothing but ingratitude! And you also, my brother, tell me what sort of return have you made up to this time for the love your God has borne you? Have you always shown yourself thankful? Have you ever seriously reflected what these words mean – a God to be made Man, a God to die for Thee?

A certain man while hearing Mass one day without devotion, as too many do, at these concluding words of the Last Gospel: "And the Word was made flesh" (John 1:14), made no external act of reverence. At the same moment a devil struck him a blow,

saying: "Thankless wretch, thou hearest that a God was made Man for thee, and dost thou not even deign to bend the knee? Oh, if God had done the like for me I should be eternally engaged in thanking Him!"

Tell me, O Christian, what more could Jesus Christ have done to win thy love? If the Son of God had engaged to rescue His own Father from death, to what lower depth of humiliation could He have stooped than to assume human flesh and lay down His life in sacrifice for His salvation? Men appreciate the good graces of a prince, of a prelate, of a nobleman, of a man of letters, and even of a vile animal; and yet these same people set no store by the grace of God, but renounce it for mere smoke, for a brutal gratification, for a handful of earth, for a nothing!

What sayest thou, dear brother? Dost thou wish to be ranked among such ungrateful ones? Go, find thyself a prince more courteous, a master, a brother, a friend more amiable, and one who has shown thee a deeper love.

Ah, how comes it that we are so ungrateful towards God, the same God Who has bestowed His whole Self upon us, Who has descended from Heaven to earth, has become an Infant to save us and to be loved by us? Come, let us love the Babe of Bethlehem! Let us love Jesus Christ Who, in the midst of such sufferings, has sought to attach our hearts to Him.

O my sweet, amiable and holy Child, Thou art at a loss what more to do in order to make Thyself loved by men! And how is it that Thou shouldst have encountered such ingratitude from the majority of men! I see that few, indeed, know Thee, and fewer still love Thee! Ah, my Jesus, I too desire to be reckoned among this small number. But Thou knowest my weakness. Thou knowest my past treasons. For pity's sake do not abandon me, or I shall fall away even worse than before.

O Mary, my Mother, Thou art "the Mother of fair love" (Ecclus. 24: 24). Do Thou obtain for me the grace to love my God. I hope it of Thee.



Madonna with Baby Jesus (17th Century) by Anonymous

Spiritual Reading
Jesus Comes to Call Sinners

"I am not come to call the just, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13).

St. Thomas of Villanova gives us excellent encouragement, saying: "What art thou afraid of, O sinner?... How shall He reject thee if thou desirest to retain Him Who came down from Heaven to seek thee?" Let not the sinner, then, be afraid, provided he will be no more a sinner, but will love Jesus Christ. Let him not be dismayed, but have full trust. If he abhor and hate sin, and seek God, let him not be sad, but full of joy: "Let the heart of them rejoice that seek the Lord" (Psalm 104:3). The Lord has sworn to forget all injuries done to Him, if the sinner is sorry for them: "If the wicked do penance... I will not remember all his iniquities" (Ezekiel 18:21, 22). And that we might have every motive for confidence, our Savior became an Infant: "Who is afraid to approach a Child?" asks the same St. Thomas of Villanova.

"Children do not inspire terror or aversion, but attachment and love," says St. Peter Chrysologus. It seems that children know not how to be angry; and if perchance at odd times they should be irritated, they are easily soothed; one has only to give them a fruit, a flower, or bestow on them a caress, or utter a kind word to them, and they have already forgiven and forgotten every offense.

A tear of repentance, one act of heart-felt contrition, is enough to appease the Infant Jesus. "You know the tempers of children," St. Thomas of Villanova goes on to say. "A single tear pacifies them and the offense is forgotten. Approach, then, to Him while He is a little One, while He would seem to have forgotten His majesty." He has put off His Divine majesty, and appears as a Child to inspire us with more courage to approach His feet.

"He is born as an Infant," says St. Bonaventure, "that neither His justice nor His power might intimidate you." In order to relieve us from every feeling of distrust – which the idea of His power and of His justice might cause in us – He comes before us as a little Babe, full of sweetness and mercy. "O God!" says Gerson, "Thou hast hidden Thy wisdom under a Child's years, that it might not accuse us." O God of mercy, lest Thy Divine wisdom might reproach us with our offenses against Thee, Thou hast hidden it under an Infant's form. "Thy justice under humility, lest it should condemn." Thou hast concealed Thy justice under the most profound abasement, that it might not condemn us. "Thy power under weakness lest it should punish." Thou hast disguised Thy power in feebleness, that it might not visit us with chastisement.

St. Bernard makes this reflection: "Adam, after his sin, on hearing the voice of God: 'Adam, where art thou?' (Genesis 3:9), was filled with dismay. 'I heard Thy voice in Paradise; and I was afraid' (Genesis 3:10)." But, continues the Saint, the Incarnate Word now-made Man upon earth, has laid aside all semblance of terror: "Do not fear; He seeks thee, not to punish, but to save thee. Behold, He is a Child; the voice of a child will excite compassion rather than fear. The Virgin Mother wraps His delicate limbs in swaddling clothes: and art thou still alarmed?" That God Who should punish thee is born an Infant, and has lost all accents to affright thee, since the accents of a child, being cries of weeping, move us rather to pity than to fear; thou canst not fear that Jesus Christ will stretch out His hands to chastise thee, since His Mother is occupied in swathing them in linen bands.

"Be of good cheer, then, O sinners," says St. Leo, "the Birthday of the Lord is the birthday of peace and joy." The Prince of Peace (Isaias 9:6), He was called by Isaias. Jesus Christ is a Prince, not of vengeance on sinners, but of mercy and of peace, constituting Himself the Mediator betwixt God and sinners. If our sins, says St. Augustine, are too much for us, God does not despise His own Blood. If we cannot ourselves make due atonement to the justice of God, at least the Eternal Father knows not how to disregard the Blood of Jesus Christ, Who makes payment for us.

A certain knight, called Don Alphonsus Albuquerque, being on one occasion at sea, and the vessel driven among the rocks by a violent tempest, at once gave himself up for lost; but at that moment seeing near him a little child, crying bitterly, what did he do? He seized him in his arms, and lifting him up towards Heaven, "O Lord," said he, "though I myself am unworthy to be heard, give ear at least to the cries of this innocent

child, and save us." At that same instant the storm abated, and all were saved.

Let us miserable sinners do in like manner. We have offended God; already has sentence of everlasting death been passed upon us; Divine justice requires satisfaction, and rightly. What have we to do? Should we despair? God forbid! Let us offer up to God this Infant, Who is His own Son, and let us address Him with confidence: O Lord, if we cannot of ourselves render Thee satisfaction for our offenses against Thee, behold this Child, Who weeps and moans, Who is benumbed with cold on His bed of straw in this cavern. He is here to make atonement for us, and He pleads for Thy mercy on us. Though we ourselves are undeserving of pardon, the tears and sufferings of this Thy guiltless Son merit it for us, and He entreats Thee to pardon us.

This is what St. Anselm advises us to do: He says that Jesus Christ Himself, from His earnest desire not to have us perish, animates each one of us who finds himself guilty before God with these words: O sinner, do not lose heart; if by thy sins thou hast unhappily become the slave of hell, and hast not the means to free thyself, act thus: Take Me, offer Me for thyself to the Eternal Father, and so thou shalt escape death, thou shalt be in safety. What can be conceived more full of mercy than what the Son says to us: Take Me, and redeem thyself. This was, moreover, exactly what the Divine Mother taught Venerable Frances Farnese. She gave the Infant Jesus into her arms, and said to her: "Here is My Son for you; be careful to make His merits your gain by frequently offering Him to His Heavenly Father."

And if we would have still another means to secure our forgiveness, let us obtain the intercession of this same Divine Mother in our behalf; She is all-powerful with Her blessed Son to promote the interests of repentant sinners, as St. John Damascene assures us. Yes, for the prayers of Mary, adds St. Antoninus, have the force of commands with Her Son, in consideration of the love He bears Her: "The prayer of the Mother of God has the force of a command." Hence Saint Peter Damian wrote that when Mary entreats Jesus Christ in favor of one who is dearest to Her, "She appears in a certain sense to command as a Mistress, not to ask as a Handmaid, for the Son honors Her by denying Her nothing." For this reason St. Germanus says that Mary can obtain the pardon of the most abandoned sinners. "Thou, by the power of Thy maternal authority, gainest for the most enormous sinners the most excellent grace of pardon."