

THE SEASON OF CHRISTMAS

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Sunday **The Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God**
Jan. 1 **The Mother & Her Children**
 A reflection taken from a sermon by Blessed Gueric of Igny

Mon **Memorial of Sts. Basil & Gregory Nazianzen**
2 **To Accept Christ is to Accept Oneself**
 A reflection taken from a letter by St. Basil the Great

Tues **Christmas Season Weekday**
3 **Sharing the Peace of Christmastide**
 A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

Wed **Memorial of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton**
4 **Walking God's Way to Peace**
 A reflection by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

Thurs **Memorial of St. John Neumann**
5 **A Life of Humble Service**
 A reflection developed from Butler's Lives of the Saints

MONASTIC DESERT DAY

Fri **Christmas Season Weekday**
6 **The Lord's Birthday is the Birthday of Peace**
 A reflection taken from a sermon of St. Pope Leo the Great

Sat **Christmas Season Weekday**
7 **The Message of Christmas**
 A reflection taken from St. Augustine's Commentary on John

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THE MOTHER & HER CHILDREN

A reflection taken from a sermon by Blessed Gueric of Igny

“When the eighth day came, they gave the child the name, Jesus.”

Mary's child was unique. He was the only Son of the Father in Heaven and the only son of his mother on earth. Mary too is unique since she alone was a virgin mother and she alone has borne the Heavenly Father's Only Son. Yet as mother of the God who became human, Jesus our Savior, she embraces with her Son all those she recognizes as being born anew in and with Jesus.

Our ancient mother, Eve, treated us more like a stepmother than a true mother. She passed on to us the sentence of death even before she brought us to the light of day. Her name means “mother of all the living” yet she turned out to be the slayer of all the living and the mother of the dying. Eve was unable to respond faithfully to the mysterious meaning of her name, being caught up in concern for herself. The name “mother of all the living” was rightly expressed only by Mary as mother of us all.

Like the Church of which she is the exemplar, Mary is the mother of all who are born again to new life. She is the mother of the One who is Life and the life by which all live. When she bore Jesus she gave, in a sense, a new birth to all who were to live by Jesus' life. Recognizing the fact that by virtue of this mystery she is mother for all Christians, Christ's blessed mother shows herself a true mother to us all by her loving kindness. She never grows harsh toward her children or is hard on us. She never treats us as though they were not her very own.

The womb that once gave birth to Jesus is not dried up but continues to bring forth fruit in tender compassion. Christ's mother is filled with the inexhaustible love that comes to us through Him and continues to inundate us with gifts. Mary's children themselves recognize her as mother by a kind of natural instinct guided and inspired by faith. They turn to her in every sort of danger and difficulty. They call to her and seek to take refuge in her arms just as all little children do. Through all our lives we feel ourselves sheltered by her.

Mary is mother of the Most High. We shall come to see her glory and share in it even as we know the warmth of her loving embrace. There shall be one joyful voice as all her children proclaim the praise of the Holy Mother of God, who is our mother. In her we find our way to our true and everlasting home.

TO ACCEPT CHRIST IS TO ACCEPT SELF

A reflection taken from a letter by St. Basil the Great

It seems there are some among your people who are doing away with the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, at least as much as they are able. This is nothing new but was begun long ago by the confused Valentinus. He took some isolated texts from St. Paul and interpreted them wrongly. To say Christ took on “the nature of a slave” but didn’t himself become a slave, or to say that the Lord was made “in the form” of humanity but did not assume humanity and make it his own are to speak fictions and sophistries. This teaching was rejected long ago.

Valentinus feared to say that the Lord Jesus took upon himself as God the natural feelings that go with being a human person; he thought them defiling and rejected them as unworthy of the undefiled Godhead. That is true for those feelings which arise from vice; they stain the purity of the soul so he claimed it was only a “likeness”, and an “appearance” of sinful flesh that God assumed in Christ.

But notice that it isn’t denied that Christ took on the likeness of flesh but that he took on the sin sometimes committed by “fleshly” persons. He took on our flesh with its natural feelings but without sin. Even death in the flesh was swallowed up by the Godhead, so too sin was utterly destroyed by the justice of Jesus Christ. We will resume our flesh in the resurrection and it will be liable neither to death nor subject to sin. To reject the incarnation is to reject the grace of the great mystery kept secret from eternity but manifest in Jesus Christ.

Christ bestowed upon us the the mystery of his own sojourn among us as one of us. He took upon himself all that pertains to the good of human nature and our race. As God had given a law to assist us and sent it by angels and through Moses, so God sent prophets to proclaim the salvation to come. And in the last days he has manifested himself in our flesh, born of a woman and under the law, so that all might receive adoption as God’s children.

If the sojourn of the Lord in the flesh and all that naturally goes with it did not take place, the Redeemer did not pay the price for us and did not destroy the dominion of death over us. If that which is subject to death and that which was assumed by the Lord were not the same, death would not have ceased performing its works nor Christ’s suffering become our gain. That which had fallen was restored; that which was shattered was repaired; what had been estranged would not have been restored and made God’s own. All these things are denied by those who claim the Lord’s was a heavenly body. They do not believe the flesh is redeemed and that God loves us even in the flesh.

SHARING THE PEACE OF CHRISTMASTIDE

A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

The excitement that surrounds both Christmas and New Year's Day can prevent us from appreciating the genuine meaning of these feasts. We need to step back and reflect, and are reminded of this repeatedly by the Scripture readings from the Eucharistic celebrations of this season. We need to mull over the mystery of the Incarnation, of the fact that the all-holy and almighty God has become a vulnerable human being, like us. God shares all that we are, except for sin, so that we might share all that God is.

On New Year's Day the Blessing of Aaron was given us, a blessing of peace that comes from God's love for us and the pleasure he takes in us. That is a kind of repetition of the angels' announcement to the shepherds on the night of Christ's birth. Think of what happened when those shepherds told Mary and Joseph of the angels' words. They were amazed. Mary, we are told, treasured the message in her heart and reflected on it. Did you notice that we never witness Mary or Joseph explaining what Jesus' birth means. They were probably as amazed by the Magi as by the shepherds. They were as amazed by Simeon's blessing and prophesy as they were by Joseph's dreams.

This sort of reaction did not stop with Mary and Joseph. Although he is constantly talking about how people should respond to Jesus St. Paul treasured his encounter with Jesus in his memory and reflected on it continually. To declare with St. Paul that Jesus was truly human and not a phantasm is not equivalent to understanding all God had done in becoming human. Whether we chose to walk the path of silent contemplation or to try and digest the wondrous mystery of the Incarnation by talking about it, we are all in the same state as Jesus' parents and the apostles and St. Paul.

To receive the gift of Peace from God is not the same as to receive a gift of understanding. We are being shown that we needn't understand to know inner peace. We needn't understand to lead people to peace, either within themselves or with others. We need only abide with Jesus in wonder and adoration and joy and trust. God has given us so much more than we can take in. God also has given us a time and a season for contemplation of his mighty deeds. We do know that God has become one of us and will never desert us or turn away from us. In Jesus God takes infinite pleasure in the creature each of us is. It is in the knowledge of this love—even if we don't understand it—that we and all the world find the gift of Peace! The point is to share that gift.

WALKING GOD'S WAY TO PEACE

A reflection by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

How often I have felt my soul awakened by your light and warmed by the fire of your love! I draw near to you, I find you, and suddenly, alas, I seem to lose you. Often I think I have deceived myself and then I fear I am rejected. In this continual changing of interior dispositions I seem to walk in darkness and, often enough, to go astray. I desire but I don't know how to desire. I love but I don't know how to love, nor how to find the one I love.

So my soul seems to lose itself without ceasing to hope in you. It knows by its own experience that it desires much, and is unable to do anything. You see my trouble, O Lord. Yet in the happy moment when it is worn out by so many vicissitudes my soul falls into entire mistrust of itself, it is then that you open its eyes and it sees the true way to Peace, and to life!

I know you have been nearer than I imagined. You instruct me all at once and without voice or words. My soul thinks only of the love that possesses it, and abandons all other things. Then my soul possesses you. It sees without knowing what it sees. It hears and is ignorant of what it hears. It knows only who it is to whom it is attentive.

I content myself with loving you. I love you continually more and more. Words cannot express this, nor the mind comprehend what it is receiving from You, O My God! And even in this place of banishment.

How happy is such a moment, O Divine Jesus! How pure is that light, how ineffable is that communion in your blessings. You know, O Lord, how precious that gift is, and your creature who receives it also knows. Ah, if I were faithful, if I never departed from you, if I knew how to preserve the grace I receive—how happy I would be. And yet this is but a drop of the infinite ocean of blessings which one day you will share with me.

O soul of my soul, what is my soul and what good can it have without possessing you, life of my life! What is my life when I do not live in you? Is it possible that my heart is capable of possessing you, of enjoying you all alone, of extending and enlarging itself in you! Can your creature be so raised above self as to rest on your breast, and after that leave you? O Lord, I don't know what to say to you. But listen to the voice of your lover, and of my misery. Live always in me, and let me live perpetually in you and for you, as I live only by you! Separate me from everything that displeases you. Let me remain at your feet!

A LIFE OF HUMBLE SERVICE

A reflection developed from Butler's Lives of the Saints

When John Neumann finished his theological studies his home diocese had no openings for more priests. In order to be ordained he had to become a missionary and he chose to come to the United States to serve immigrants. He was quickly ordained for the diocese of New York and sent to work in the parishes of the Buffalo area.

He found that he loved serving the poor and those who had no parish. He also loved prayer and solitude. Becoming a Redemptorist seemed to combine all these loves while allowing him to live real poverty. He was known as a person who had little. Walking with friends he was caught in a rain storm and was soaked. When his friends suggested he change his shoes he laughed and told them that it would mean putting the right shoe on his left foot, because he owned only one pair. Going to celebrate Mass he ran into a beggar without a decent coat, so he gave him his own and showed up for Mass in what the beggar had been wearing.

Although he was rapidly promoted, because of his pastoral skills and his ability to speak seven languages, he felt himself incompetent for financial administration and steadily suggested he be sent to a missionary diocese, he did tremendously effective work in expanding Catholic schools to meet the needs of immigrant families and in promoting the various orders of sister who staffed them. He was also seen as a friend and supporter for the priests who worked under him. He preached simply and straightforwardly about basics, which is perhaps why his collected sermons haven't been published. He wrote two catechisms for German speakers which were adopted for use all over the U.S. even into the twentieth century.

To read biographies of St. John Neumann, who died of a heart attack at the age of 49 while on his way to do a service for a fellow priest, is to hear endless anecdotes about his self-effacing and humble ways, even as bishop of Philadelphia—at that the the largest diocese in the U.S. in Catholic population and number of parishes. Humility for him meant keeping things like practical love of neighbor in first place and taking refuge in prayer to the Lord whenever he found himself in difficult situations. He consistently thought little of himself and kept his attention on using the talents he had in practical service. What time he had left from such service he used in prayer. In fact, part of his love for missionary work in remote places was the time for prayer he had while riding from one mission to another. His message was: Love God and love your neighbor and share all you have received with those in need.

THE LORD'S BIRTHDAY IS THE BIRTHDAY OF PEACE

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Pope Leo the Great

Although the climax of all the Lord did and of the lowliness he embraced for our sakes was his victorious passion and resurrection, it remains true that the Nativity of Jesus, Son of the Virgin Mary, is a renewal of the sacred beginnings of his life on earth. In celebrating our Savior's birthday we find that we are celebrating our own. The birth of Christ is the fountain head of the whole Christian people and of all that we are. It is our birthday to the new life we have only in Christ.

Each of us is called in a particular time and place and yet all of us, the entire Body that is the Church, are crucified with Christ at the time of his passion, and rise with him at Easter, and ascend with him to the Father's right hand. So too all who are re-born in the baptismal font are born with him on Christmas day. Whatever part of the world a believer may live in when one is born again in Christ one breaks with a former way of life and becomes new. Earthly origins now count for nothing; we belong to the family of our Savior. He became human so that we might become children of God. Unless Christ had come down to us, no merit of our own could have enabled us to reach God.

The greatness of the gift bestowed on us demands a response worthy of its excellence. As St. Paul teaches, "*we have not received the spirit of this world, but that Spirit which is of God, and this in order that we may know what gifts God has given us.*" The only way we can make a fitting response is to offer God his own gifts.

In the treasury of God's bounty what could we find more appropriate than that peace which was first proclaimed by the angel choir at Christ's nativity? It is peace which gives birth to the children of God. It fosters love and is the mother of unity. It is the rest and repose of the blessed and the dwelling place which is eternal. It is also the proper work and the special grace given to those who detach themselves from the world and it unites them to God.

What do we long for except to dwell with God forever? What do we need to make the journey to God? Let all who are born not of blood, nor of the desires of the flesh, nor of human willing, offer God the gift of living in peace with one another. The children of God are those who love one another and share the same sentiments of love for God. Our Lord's is the birthday of the source of this love, and the unity born of it, and so it is the birthday of peace. Christ is our peace, says St. Paul, we have access to all we need for our journey in sharing with one another. To share is to destroy the roots of discord. We create peace by living the life of sharing that Christ reveals to us.

THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS

A reflection from St. Augustine's Commentary on John

The Lord has come in the fullness of love. He has come to teach us how to love. In Him, as was prophesied, Christ sums up the whole of God's message to the world. He shows us that all the Law and the Prophets seek to hand on a twin commandment of charity. Call them to mind. They ought never to be erased from our hearts. Always and above all things we have to remember that we must love God and our neighbor. *"You must love God with all your heart and with all our soul and with all your mind; and you must love your neighbor as yourself."* Dwell on this, hold on to the commands, act on them, and fulfill them.

Love of God is the first to be commanded. But love of neighbor is the first to be observed. In giving a two-fold commandment of love our Lord would not put neighbor before God. No; God first and then neighbor. But since we cannot yet see God we have the assurance that by loving neighbor we will come to see God. Love of neighbor cleanses our eyes and makes them capable of seeing God.

St. John tells us plainly: *"If you do not love the brother you can see how, will you be able to love the God you cannot see?"* Here are our orders. Love God! Show him to me, you might say, so that I can love him. The only answer is St. John's: *"No one has ever seen God."* But St. John doesn't mean for us to think ourselves wholly excluded from the vision of God, for he also says: *"God is love, and anyone who lives in love lives in God."* Love the neighbor and look within yourself for the power to love neighbor and, as far as may be, you will see God.

Begin by loving the neighbor. *"Break your bread for the hungry, and bring the homeless and needy into your own house. If you see a naked person give that person clothes and do not turn away from those who are your own human kin."* What will our reward be? *"Your light will break forth like the dawn."* Your light is your God.

Christ is the dawn who has come to us after the night that is this world. He is the morning star that neither rises nor sets, but endures always. By this light we love and care for neighbors and so advance on the journey shared by all whose one goal is the Lord our God. We are bound to love the Lord with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. We haven't yet come into the Lord's presence, but our neighbor is with us here and now. As we travel with our neighbor, as we support our neighbor, we become able to reach our goal. That goal is the Lord with whom we long to dwell always. In Christ God has come to us to help us come to Him. Our first step is always to help one another.