

THE HOLY FAMILY

THE SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

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- Sun. THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY**
- Dec. 31 The Call to Newness within the Familiar**
A reflection taken from a text by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller
- Mon. The Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God**
- Jan. 1 Mary Shows us Jesus and Jesus Shows us God**
A reflection by Leon Joseph Cardinal Suenens
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- 2 The Adventure of Living a Spiritual Life**
A reflection based on a St. Basil's Treatise "On the Holy Spirit"
- Wed. Wednesday of Christmas Week prior to Epiphany**
- 3 Helping Each Other Bear Weakness**
A reflection in "Letters from the Desert" by Carlo Carretto
- Thurs. Memorial of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton**
- 4 Making the Most of our Opportunities to Love**
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The Call to Newness within the Familiar

A reflection based on a text by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller

God calls us to be bearers of life, and new life, to our families and neighbors. We can only do this if we do not act so differently that others don't know how to relate to us. The life of an individual, or a family, of a small community always had to fit within the cultural framework that shapes our relationships to one another. So, we find advice in Scriptures that sometimes offend us—as when St. Paul speaks of a wife's submission to her husband or slaves' obedience to their masters. God can communicate a message of saving newness only by speaking to people “where they already are”, even if that sounds like acceptance of what will later be seen not to be the case or true.

The readings at today's Eucharist ask us to live at peace within our families and communities, and within present culture and society. If we are to be patient and know contentment, and share them with others, we need to remember that God does this for us as well. What is stressed is forgiveness and patience and acceptance of one another's differences.

Jesus, we are told, was obedient to Joseph and Mary, and yet suddenly he is off to the Temple learning from the rabbis teaching there. He not only answered their questions, as was expected, but asked them question, which was not expected. And he did all this without asking permission from his parents. They were upset when they found him. But he wasn't repentant. Yet he followed them back to Nazareth and resumed his obedience.

Our ordinary behavior is like a fine line and if we step off it we enter the new and unfamiliar. There are mysteries, not only in God but in each of us. There are potentials for newness in us that God will bring out, and in them lie gifts that we can share with others, if they are willing to accept that there are depths hidden within us to enrich lives and perhaps even change our society and culture. It is part of what Scripture calls “the mystery hidden from ages past but now revealed to God's holy ones”. Can you accept and believe that truth God tells us?

It seems that in practicing ordinary community virtues like forgiveness and patience we are doing more than overlooking others' faults or giving them a second chance, as we say. Like Mary we keep what surprises us in our heart and reflect on what God may be leading us to that is new. There are wonders we do not grasp hidden in spouses, children, neighbors and friends. Today these are presented as mysteries hidden in “family life”. Today's liturgy points this out to us and calls us to accept God's design for human life that makes all this happen. We have to accept this about ourselves as much as about others. Are you willing to live the mysteries God has hidden, like precious pearls or treasures in a field, so that we can disclose not only old things but new ones, and realize they lead us to God?

How Mary and Jesus Show Us Our God

A reflection by Leon Joseph Cardinal Suenens

Our world is God's gift to us of an unparalleled adventure. Think of space exploration and what it symbolizes for us of possibilities and hopes. But this one adventure doesn't stand alone as we use science to probe more and more deeply into the human organisms we are. What does the possibility for a refashioning of our humanity by genetic engineering suggest as opportunity and danger? This is a dangerous and sometimes frightening situation for us.

One problem is that though science seems to give us access to infinite horizons it can't deal with our most elementary questions about the meaning, and especially the ultimate meaning, of our lives. Even if death could be postponed what lies in wait for us when it comes? We insist on seeking, even finding, answers to these questions.

It is in this situation that Mary offers her Son to humanity as the only one who can show us "eternal life"—life's ultimate and never-ending meaning. Mary is the revelation of the Incarnation, the mystery by which God reveals to us what life can and should mean. She points us to Jesus, who for all ages will be the way and the truth and the life. If this means anything practical we need to come to Jesus and Mary points the way.

We are in the situation of the Magi. Through desert and darkness, they kept their eyes fixed on the light that eventually led them to Jesus. They found a house and in it they found Mary and the child. They fell down in adoration. But they couldn't know that they had found what they sought apart from Mary and what she told them. She enables us all to grasp the meaning of the mystery of God's incarnation. This is symbolized by her title, "the God-Bearer", *theotokos*.

Mary is openness to God's call to newness. That is the heart of obedience and virgin-motherhood. Mary is compassion and gentleness; this is the heart of her human motherhood. Mary is love that never gives up or ceases to reflect on what she doesn't understand but only believes. She doesn't understand Jesus but she knows Jesus is "Son of the Most High" and so the revelation of God's care for us who are God's adopted children.

Today's world needs to rediscover the face of its Savior and of his mother. The world is glutted with philosophies and ideologies that don't answer our most vital needs and fundamental questions. Mary is the vibrant and living reality realized by believing God reveals in Jesus just what we need to do, as well as know. She shows us Christ as wholly divine and totally human. Mary is the safeguard of the realism of the Incarnation. She shows us facts not theories. She shows us how to live a genuinely "divine" life because she lives it through her son. That is how she is mother of our life in God, a life we live for one another and for the whole world of those wandering in darkness.

The Adventure of Living a Spiritual Life

A reflection based on St. Basil's Treatise On the Holy Spirit

What do we mean when we speak of a person as being “spiritual”? We mean simply that the person is led by the Spirit of God, is called a child of God, and has taken on the likeness of the Son of God. Such persons no longer live by the standards of the world. A normal person has an ability to see. A spiritual person has the ability to judge by the Spirit's teaching. Living within one, the Spirit may cry out in our hearts—as when we cry “Father” to God, or the Spirit may use the words of Scripture to speak to another about how to live imitating Jesus.

But there is another way of thinking of these matters. Think of the Spirit as having in itself the power to use all your natural abilities and skills to do the work of God. The Spirit has within itself, as it were, all gifts. It wants to share with us those gifts that will make the potentials born within us into channels of new and divine life for others. St. Paul reminds us, “the eye can't say to the hand, ‘I can manage without you’, nor can the head say to the feet, ‘I don't need you’.” Nor can we say, because of the talents given us at birth, that we don't need the Spirit to serve the needs of others in ways that lead them to God.

All of us together make up the Body of Christ, and we do it in the unity that the Spirit gives. Because we are one we see one another's needs and are moved by love to serve one another according to the needs we see in one another. The various parts of the Body of Christ exist in a kind of spiritual fellowship that makes it natural to share each other's feelings and be mutually concerned. Again citing St. Paul, “When one member suffers all the members suffer and when one is honored all rejoice.”

The Father is seen in the Son and likewise the Son is seen in the Spirit. We cannot worship God without opening our minds to the divine light that is the Spirit. We learn this from the Lord's words to the woman of Samaria he met by a well. She wanted to know where one must adore God to find God's favor. He told her that one worships God “in Spirit” and in “truth”, which means everywhere that we perceive God's presence—e.g., in any child of God. Where do we perceive this? Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Wherever there is need and you can help meet that need in a loving and God-revealing fashion you can worship God by serving and loving that needy person.

What is a “spiritual life”? It is a life lived by allowing the Spirit to guide us to help one another in our needs. But our greatest need is spiritual. You can't help another meet this need if you don't let the Spirit transform your human talents and skills as instruments of spiritual healing, refreshment and new life. The first task is to learn how these talents can be so transformed and then let the indwelling Spirit carry out that transformation. This is the adventure that is living a “spiritual life”.

Helping Each Other Bear Our Weakness

A reflection taken from “Letters from the Desert” by Carlo Carretto

At the watershed which was the passage from the covenant with Israel to the covenant given in Jesus, there stand two persons called by God to a unique and magnificent vocation. They were supremely persons of faith, Joseph and Mary by name. Mary became the mother of the Word, giving flesh and blood to the Son of God. Joseph veiled the mystery, as God told him to, placing himself at Mary’s side so that everyone would believe that Jesus was his son.

For Mary and Joseph, the night of faith they lived was not only dark but also painful. There came a day when Joseph, engaged to Mary, realized that she was going to give birth to a child which he knew was not his. Think of Mary’s task as she tried to convince her betrothed that the birth to come was due to nothing less than the power of God.

No reasoning could give Joseph peace and serenity to accept his vocation. Only faith could do it. And it is precisely this faith which had to sustain him, placing him next to the Mother of God to accompany her in her destiny. He was to take a full part in her mission. It won’t be easy for us to follow the example of one who was destined to suffer—as spouse of one who is called mother of sorrows—and do it by sheer faith.

The baby is born. A few angels came, it is true, to chase away a little of that darkness that faith walks in. But at once the sky closed and a yet greater darkness descended—the murder of the children of an entire village. Joseph and Mary fled, because they were told to, but as they fled did they hear the screams and lamentation of the women of Bethlehem? Wasn’t it because of their baby that this horror was happening? How would does one live with that?

Why is the All-Powerful silent? Why doesn’t he just kill Herod? There is no answer, except that we must live by faith. Flee into Egypt, become an exile and refugee, let cruelty and injustice triumph. So, it seems it will last until the end of time. God doesn’t soften the path of those he places beside his Son. He doesn’t ask of them anything but a faith so pure that it can live and be serene in such situations and such a world.

What an adventure! You live a lifetime in a house where God lives in the flesh. You eat with such a person and listen to that person speak and see that person sleep and sweat and work hard. And all this is to be something quite normal and every day. It is so normal that no one will unveil the mystery for us, as no one did for the house where the carpenter’s son lived—the Word made Flesh, the New Adam, the maker and savior of heaven and earth!

My God, what great faith! You, Mary and Joseph, inspire us, correct us, support our weakness—as you did for each other. As you were beside Jesus you are beside us—all the way to eternal life—as small and poor and hidden and humble, as courageous in trial, faithful in prayer, and ardent in love—until Jesus comes again.

Making the Most of our Opportunities to Love

A reflection on St. Elizabeth Ann Seton illustrated from a homily by St. Augustine

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton was a convert to the Catholic Church and one of the richest heiresses in the United States. She saw her vocation as one of using her wealth to do charity and, if possible, to institutionalize particular works of charity. She cared much for education and for helping those others ignored. She founded a religious congregation to carry on the various works she had begun, and to expand them as might prove possible. This vocation made use of the gifts God had given her, in her nature and by reason of her family's wealth. She turned wealth into a powerful instrument for helping the marginalized.

To profit from her example consider first what St. Augustine teaches about a Christian's call to live charity. The Lord, he says, has come in the fullness of his love to teach us how to love. Call to mind his two commandments. He summed them up thus: "You must love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind; and you must love your neighbor as yourself." Think on these all the time, act on them, fulfill them. Love of God is first commanded yet love of neighbor is first to be observed. We can't see God, but by loving neighbor we come to be made able to see God. Love of neighbor cleanses our eyes and makes them capable of seeing God.

St. John the Apostle explains this. God is love, he teaches, and anyone who lives in love lives in God. Look within yourself for the power to love God and there, as far as may be, you will see God. So begin to love your neighbor. If we do this, we are told, our light will break forth like dawn. Our light is our God. By loving and caring for your neighbor your advance on your journey to the One Lord, your God. We have not yet come into the Lord's presence but our neighbor is with us now. If you travel toward God with your neighbor you will find that neighbor is a support. Together you will reach your common goal.

In a lot of short quotations, St. Elizabeth Seton make it clear that she saw service of neighbor as something that enables one to forget self, and all sorts of discomforts and privations, so as to immerse oneself wholly in practical care for another. If one looks around one will see how many needs there are and how many who can't help themselves but need the support of others. She saw clearly that what she had and what she was came to her from others; they had shaped her and enabled her to become a very competent and loving woman, wife, mother, religious founder, and worker of charity. She was convinced that everything she was and had could be used to love and care for others. Her message is to call us to do likewise because we see the same thing is true for us.

The Work of Spreading Knowledge of Christ's Way

A reflection based on a Letter of St. Thomas Becket

If one is solicitous as a bishop in reality and not merely in name one has to understand the meaning of one's call by keeping our eyes fixed on the One who appointed us, our eternal High Priest, Jesus Christ. On the cross he offered himself for our sake and now from heaven looks down upon our every action and intention. Having undertaken to act as his vicars on earth, bishops have a dignity matching their title. They hold the highest rank in their churches but the purpose of all this is that sin and death be destroyed and the Church built up in faith and by growing in virtue.

There are many bishops. At ordination each promises to teach and feed the flock of Christ with earnest and persevering care. We daily profess to do this. John Neumann's deeds conformed to his public profession, especially as he built up his church's schools so that his people might know and love and live their faith. Truly, the harvest was great. A single laborer, or even a small number, is not enough to gather into the Lord's granary all that his grace has cause to grow. That is why John Neumann persuaded so many groups of holy women to work with him in spreading knowledge of Christ's way of life.

Who would doubt that the Roman church is the head of all the churches and a prime source of Catholic teaching? Who doesn't know that the keys of the kingdom of heaven were given to Peter? And all this is to ensure that Christ's church may reach its maturity in a unity of faith and of knowledge of God's Son. Many are needed to plant and many to water, now that the word has spread so far and wide and the population has vastly increased. Numerous teachers are needed. But no matter how many plant or who waters God gives the increase only to those who plant in the true Petrine faith and accepts all the apostolic teachings.

Let us remember how our ancestors worked out their salvation. Let us recall the trials through which the church has had to grow and expand, and what storms it has weathered. John Neumann has to work with many ethnic groups, often in mutual conflict, especially about the use of their own language. John Neumann, though he could speak six languages, was very hard to understand in English because of his accent. People complained and even rejected his ministry due to this. But the victor's crown is won by those whose faith shines out all the more brightly for their sufferings. No one is crowned who has not really done battle. John Neumann died at the age of 48, collapsing in the street on the way to his rectory. He had worn himself out in labors for Christ and now wears a crown. He exhorts us to give ourselves without reserve to whatever community of faith needs our support, whether in the form of labor or of prayer.

The Daily Renewal of Christ's Presence among Us

A reflection based on a text by St. Maximus the Confessor

The Word of God, born once for all in Bethlehem, according to the flesh, is born anew at every instant according to the Spirit. He is born anew to all those who long for him. You see, he delights in goodness and humaneness and so he became a little child to cloth himself in just these qualities. He knows that all can accept one who is good and humane and thus seeks to free us from every trace of ill-will or aversion. He is taking the measure of those who long for Him.

This is why St. John, with truly wise insight into the meaning of the mystery of the Incarnation, exclaimed: "Jesus Christ, yesterday and today and the same forever!" He perceives that the mystery is always new and never grows old in the understanding of those who give themselves to Him. Christ our God is born. The one who created all things out of nothing takes flesh and a human soul and is made a human being. A star guided Magi to the place where the Word made flesh lay. The truth confounds the evidence of the senses and guides all nations toward the fullest light of understanding and truth. The Law and the prophets mysteriously directs us to the Word, if we interpret them with reverence. Then they are like a star leading those called by the power of grace the incarnate Word.

God has become a perfect human being. Nothing of human nature is changed but sin is no part of his living. In the beginning, after all, it was no part of what is genuinely human. God makes his human body a kind of bait to lure the dragon. When this evil one attempts to devour Jesus the very assault on his flesh proves that dragon's undoing. By the power of the Godhead within it this flesh brings the devil to utter destruction. At the same time, this flesh is the sovereign medicine that restores to mankind the grace that was offered it in the beginning.

The serpent infused the poison of disobedience into the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and so ruined those who tasted it. But when he tried to repeat this stratagem with Jesus he ruined himself. The power of Godhead within Jesus brought this about.

The great mystery of the divine incarnation remains a mystery forever. How can the Word truly and substantially exist in human flesh, while at the same time his whole being is with the Father? How can that same Word, who is wholly divine by nature, have become completely human without in any way disowning either his divine nature, in which he subsists as God, or our nature in which he was made human? Only faith can perceive the truth of these mysteries. They themselves are truly the essence and foundation of truths which surpass what the mind can either see or understand. And this faith has been given us! And from this gift springs that love which binds us to our God and leads us to serve and love one another. What a marvelous exchange!