

**THE SUNDAY OF THE HOLY FAMILY
&
THE SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD
(NEW YEARS DAY)**

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Sun. The Sunday of the Holy Family
Dec.29 **GOD'S LIBERATION AND HUMAN LIBERATION**
 A reflection by Jurgen Moltmann

Mon. The Sixth Day of the Octave of Christmas
30 **CHRIST'S HISTORY AND OUR OWN**
 A reflection by Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez

Tues. The Seventh Day of the Octave of Christmas
31 **THE GRAND MIRACLE**
 A reflection by C.S. Lewis

Wed. **THE SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD**
Jan.1 **MARY'S PRESENCE WITH JESUS**
 A reflection taken from a text by Fr. Romano Guardini

Thurs. Memorial of Sts. Basil the Great & Gregory Nazianzen
2 **THE EQUALITY CREATED BY GOD'S LOVE**
 A reflection from a sermon by St. Gregory of Nazianzen

Fri. A Weekday Before Epiphany
3 **SHARING IN ALL THAT GOD IS**
 A reflection taken from Refutation of All Heresies by St. Hyppolytus

Sat. Memorial of St.. Elizabeth Ann Seaton
4 **BELONGING TO GOD**
 A reflection taken from a homily on the St. Elizabeth Ann Seaton webpage

GOD'S LIBERATION AND HUMAN LIBERATION

A reflection from a text by Jurgen Moltmann

To us a child is born, to us a son is given. The government is upon his shoulders." The liberator is a child and will lead us to a new world of peace. That is why his rule means life and not death, peace and not war, freedom and not oppression. Why does sovereignty lie on the defenseless, innocent and hope-filled shoulders of this child? God has become a child and one who grew up to pray on the Cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do".

In 1934 columns of troops loyal to Adolph Hitler sang as they marched: "One day will be the day of revenge! That day we shall be free!" But that zeal led only to Auschwitz and to Stalingrad. Rulers have always liked to link their names with peace. They, and all liberators, have come and gone. Their zeal did not work the will of the Lord and they have come and gone.

When we celebrate the Holy Family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus we like to think that this models a family which can bring peace to its members, and to all who live as its members live together. But it actually brought Mary and Jesus to the cross, as perhaps it had Joseph. What it did was model turning to God and giving one's entire life into God's hands. It points us beyond the sociological reality we call a family and to the People within which the family exists and beyond all human creations. Only in God is there true peace and fullness of life!

There is nothing wrong with dreams—if they are good. The prophets gave a People who lived in darkness, and us as well, an unforgettable dream. We should remain true to it. But that dream is embodied in a mere child. In the child we can see only a shadowy outline of what we hope for. He is called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty Hero, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He is Jesus Christ, the child that lay in a manger, the preacher on the mount, the tormented one hanging on the cross, the risen Liberator.

According to the New Testament the dream of a liberator and the dream of true peace, are not merely dreams. The liberator is already present and his power already works among us. We can follow him and so begin to make visible something of the peace, righteousness, and liberty that is his Kingdom. He will complete it. But not in the form of the world we know. He calls us to participate in the creation of a new world—new in every way.

If it is new we can't look to human creations to bring it about—the creations, for instance, that we call families or nations or cultures or civilizations. We can only look through these to something that lies beyond them and that no one actually knows how to describe concretely. The zeal of the Lord will create this! We mustn't cling to our human creations, no matter how noble we think they can be if only we could act rightly and with love. We are called to look beyond. Our families are called, like the Holy Family, to look beyond all the human imagination can encompass. We are called to follow the child in the manger, and in Nazareth and in Jerusalem, and in the Garden of Gethsemane, and look beyond everything else to the Heavenly Father, as we inadequately call our God. God will lead us beyond our imaginings to a Kingdom that is beyond all kingdoms like we can imagine and so to a peace that is the fullness of life. That is what Mary and Joseph taught Jesus, and what Jesus taught them. Let us teach one another. They we will experience where love leads.

CHRIST'S HISTORY AND OUR OWN

A reflection by Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez

The Gospel of Luke tells us that “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled.” This simple text conveys a profound message. Jesus was born in a particular place at a particular time and under the Emperor Octavius, who had himself renamed Augustus when he reached the pinnacle of his power. It was also during the reign of Herod, a traitor to his people who had sold out to the occupying power. It was during this time that Jesus was born, a person of no importance in the eyes of the cynical and arrogant authorities. He was born in Bethlehem, “one of the little clans of Judah”, where at birth he was surrounded by shepherds and their flocks. His parents had come to a stable after vainly knocking at numerous doors. There, on the fringes of society, the Word became history, contingency, solidarity and weakness. But we can also say that by this, history itself, our history, became Word.

It is often said at Christmas that Jesus is born into every family and every heart. But this mustn't make us forget the primordial, massive fact that Jesus was born of Mary among a people that at the time were dominated by the greatest empire of the age. If we forget that fact the birth of Jesus becomes an abstraction or symbol. Events lose their meaning. To the eyes of Christians the incarnation is the irruption of God's self into human history. It is an incarnation into littleness and service in the midst of overbearing power exercised by the mighty of this world who think they alone are important.

The Son of God was born into a little people, a nation of little importance. Further, he took flesh among the poor in a marginal area, Galilee. He lived with the poor and emerged from among them to inaugurate a kingdom of love and justice. That is why many have trouble in recognizing him. The God who became flesh in Jesus is the hidden God of whom the prophets speak to us. Jesus reveals himself precisely through the anonymous people of history—those who aren't controllers of history or mighty or socially acceptable.

Christian faith is an historical faith. God is revealed in Jesus Christ and, through him, in human history and in the least important and poorest sector of those who make up our world. Only with this as a starting point can we come to God and believe in the real God. Believers can't go aside into various dead ends or corners of history and watch it go by. We must believe in the concrete settings and circumstances of our lives—even under repression and oppression and amid the struggles and hopes that are real in our time and place.

The Lord isn't intimidated by darkness or by rejection. God's light is stronger than all the shadows. If we are to dwell in God's tent, the one the Son of Man has pitched in our midst, we must enter into our own history here and now. We must nourish our hope on the will to live that we see in the poorest and most ignored. That will to live has to be transformed into a will for love and justice and for a live that will go beyond what any human power can create. Are you ready to do this? Are you ready to start now and in the circumstances that are actually your own? That is what God calls you to do.

THE GRAND MIRACLE

A reflection by C.S. Lewis

Suppose you had before you the manuscript of some great work, a symphony or a novel. Then someone comes to you saying, "Here is a new bit of that manuscript which I found; it is the central passage and everything is incomplete without it". The only thing you could do would be to put this new piece in the central position and see how it reflected on the whole of the rest of the work. If it constantly brought out new meanings from the whole of the rest, if it made you notice things you had not noticed before, then I think you would decide that it was authentic. On the other hand, if it failed to do that, however attractive it was in itself, you would reject it.

Now what was missing is what Christians are offering. It is the story of the incarnation, the story of a descent and resurrection. When I say 'resurrection' here, I am not referring simply to the first few hours or the first few weeks of the Resurrection. I am talking of this whole huge pattern of descent, down, down, than then up again. What we ordinarily call the Resurrection being just, so to speak, the point which is the turning point.

Think what that descent is. The coming down, not only into humanity but into those nine months which precede human birth, in which we all go through what were pre-human or sub-human forms of life. Or think of going into being a corpse, a mere thing, which if there were no ascending movement, would presently have passed out of organic existence entirely and gone back into the inorganic, as all corpses do. One might picture someone going right down to the sea bottom and then back up again to the green and warm and sunlit water and out into the sunshine, holding what was found deep down. This thing is human nature. But it is inseparable from all nature and from it will emerge a new universe.

Now as soon as you have thought of this divine diving down to the bottom, to the depths of the universe, and coming up again into the light, you see at once that it is imitated and echoed by the very principle of the natural world. There is the descent of the seed into the soil, and its rising again as a plant. These are also such things in our own spiritual life, where something has to be killed and broken in order that it may then become bright and strong and splendid.

In the incarnation we get the idea of vicariousness as well. In its highest form one person's profiting by what another does, is the center of being Christian. This is a kind of steady motif in nature's symphony. In the natural universe no being can exist on its own. Everything is hopelessly indebted to everyone and everything else. Of course, it can be used badly but everything good in nature shows how it is used well. What is implied in the incarnation fits in exactly which what we see in nature. It is the missing part of the manuscript we had before us and were told was incomplete. This Grand Miracle is the missing part of a masterwork.

The incarnation is a miracle that has already happened. We can glimpse in it the first fruits of the cosmic summer that is to come. Christ has risen and so shall we. There will be a remade universe where we shall be those "gods" that we are described as in Scripture. One ought not say: "The Resurrection happened two thousand years ago!", unless one says it as one says, "I saw a crocus yesterday". We know what is coming after the crocus. It may be a spring that comes slowly for us. It remains with us so as to follow our Lord and Leader into summer, or to die in winter. Let us go on into the spring and into that summer which lasts forever.

MARY'S PRESENCE WITH JESUS

A reflection taken from a text by Fr. Romano Guardini

From the first hour to the last, Jesus' life is enfolded in the harness of his mother. The strongest part of their relationship is her silence. Nevertheless, if we accept the word Jesus speaks to her, simply as they arise from each situation, it seems almost invariably as though a cleft gaped between him and her. Take the incident in the temple of Jerusalem. He was, after all, only a child when he stayed behind without a word, at a time when the city was over-flowing with pilgrims of all nationalities, and when not only accidents but every kind of violence was to be expected. Yet his reply expresses only amazement. No wonder they failed to understand.

It is the same with the wedding feast at Cana. He is seated with the wedding party, apparently poor people who haven't much to offer. They run out of wine. Pleadingly, Mary turns to her son: "*They have no wine.*" But he replies, "*What would you have me do? My hour has not yet come!*" In other words, I must obey the voice of my Father. Soon he does save the situation, but only because suddenly his hour has come. Another time, Mary comes to see him, and he is told that she is seeking him. "*Who is my mother and brother?*", he answers, "*Whoever does the will of God.*" No doubt he goes out to her and receives her with love, but the words remain and we feel a shock at his replay. He lives in a kind of remoteness.

Even his reply to the words, "*Blessed is the womb that bore you!*" sometimes interpreted as an expression of nearness, could also mean distance. And finally, on Calvary, his mother under the cross, thirsting for a word, her heart crucified with him, he says to her, with a glance at John, "*Woman, behold your son*" and to John, "*Behold, your mother*". An expression of a dying son's solicitude for his mother's future yet her heart must have cringed. Once again she is directed away from him. Christ must face the fullness of his ultimate hour, huge, terrible, all-demanding, but alone.

Everything that affected Jesus affected his mother. Mary believed, blindly. Again and again she has to confirm that belief, and each time with more difficulty. For years she had to combat an only too natural confusion. Who was this "Holy One" whom she, a mere girl, has borne and suckled and known in all his helplessness? She had to struggle against the pain of seeing him steadily outgrow her love and even flee it to a realm of ineffable remoteness. Not only did she have to accept this but rejoice in it as the fulfillment of God's will.

It is this heroic faith which places her at Christ's side in the work of redemption. What is demanded of us, as of her, is a constant wrestling in faith with the mystery of God and with the evil resistance of the world. Mary's vital depths of faith supported the Lord throughout his life and death. Again and again, he left her behind to feel the blade of the sword piercing her heart. But each time, in a surge of faith, she caught up with Him and enfolded him anew. Until at last he severed the very bond of sonship by appointing another, to take his place. On the highest, thinnest pinnacle of creation Jesus stood alone. From the depths of her co-agony on Golgotha, Mary, with a final bound of faith, accepted this double separation, and, once again, stood beside him. Indeed, "*Blessed is the one who has believed!*"

THE EQUALITY CREATED BY GOD'S LOVE

A reflection from a sermon by St. Gregory of Nazianzen

Do we wonder how it is that we come to exist, to breathe, to think and understand, and to know God? Do we wonder how it is we can hope for the Kingdom of Heaven and the full and perfect vision of God? We know we are children of God. We know we are joint heirs with Christ. We know we are even made divine ourselves. To what and to whom do we owe all this?

Let me speak of ordinary things. Look around you and see the sky's beauty, the sun's course through the day, the moon's disk and the myriads of stars. Who has established the whole universe in order and in harmony? By whose gift do we contemplate all this?

Who has given us rain, crops to cultivate, food and drink? What of our arts and crafts, of the homes we live in and the laws and government, of our civilization, of our families and friends? And who has given us the animals we either train for our service or raise for our sustenance? In short, who has appointed us to be lords and masters of the earth and made us superior to all the rest?

Surely, this was done by God, who now asks us to show kindness to all fellow human beings in return for these accumulated benefits. We have received so much from God and hope for still more. Shouldn't we be ashamed to refuse him this one request, this love for our fellows?

He is our God and Master. Yet he is not ashamed to be called our Father. Are we to refuse to acknowledge our own kin? Let us not be unjust stewards of all that God has given us. If we made ourselves unjust we will recall the words of Peter. "Shame on you, who withhold from others what is their due! Make God's impartial justice your model, and then there will be no poor among you."

Why should we wear ourselves out amassing and guarding wealth, while others toil in poverty? Why should we hear stinging threats like those of Amos the prophet? *"Listen to this, you who say, 'When will the new moon be over so we can sell grain? When will the sabbath be past so we can get back to business?'"* It would be much better if we modelled ourselves on the foremost and greatest commandment of the God who sends rain on the just and the unjust and makes the sun shine on all alike.

At the creation, when the soil had not yet been tilled, God gave the freedom of the earth, with its springs, rivers and woods, to all the inhabitants of dry lands. The air he gave to birds and the sea to water creatures and upon all he bestowed life's basic necessities in abundance. Nothing had to be acquired by force, restricted by law or separated by boundaries. Though everything was given to be enjoyed by all in common, the abundance of the supply was not diminished for any of them. All creatures were equal in value and held equally in honor by God.

God has given us an example. Many have failed to follow it. God came among us as one of us and showed us how to love all equally. He taught us that we can give to all knowing that God will give to us all we truly need. God is displaying his bounty and goodness, and we only have but to imitate his example.

SHARING IN ALL THAT GOD IS

A reflection from the Refutation of all Heresies by St. Hyppolytus

Our faith doesn't rest on empty words. We aren't to be carried away by mere whim or taken in by specious arguments. However, we don't want to turn a deaf ear when a message comes from the Power of God. This is what God entrusted to his Word. He delivered it to humankind in order to cure us of our disobedience, not by reducing us to slavery or using force but by calling upon our freedom. God's is a call to liberty.

In these "last days" the Heavenly Father sent the Word in person. He no longer wanted to have it spoken by prophets or proclaimed in obscure ways. He didn't want it to be understood dimly. So he instructed the Word to reveal himself openly. He wanted people to be won over by what they actually saw.

We know the story. He took a body from the Virgin and so remade our fallen nature. We know that he was of the same clay as we are. Otherwise, a precept about following our teacher would have been given in vain. He wanted us to realize that he was like us, and so he worked hard and experienced hunger and thirst and slept. Without protest he endured his passion, submitted to death, and then showed himself as risen from the grave. He showed us his own humanity to keep us from losing heart when suffering comes our way. He made us look forward to receiving the same reward as he did.

When we have come to know God as God is, our bodies will be immortal and incorruptible like our souls. We who have paid homage to the Heavenly King during our life on earth will receive the Kingdom of Heaven. We will be friends of God and co-heirs with Christ. We won't any longer be subject to wrong desires or passions or disease or death. We will share the Divine Nature.

God, by the very fact that we were created human, made us sharers in suffering. But when we have been made immortal sharers in his Godhead, he promises that his attributes shall be ours. This explains the saying: Know yourself! Thus you will learn to know the God who made you in his own image. When a human person is called by God it is a call to know God and be known by God.

It isn't for us to be at enmity with one another. We are to change our way of life without delay. Christ, who is God exalted above all, has determined to renew our nature by washing away our sins. In deciding to do this he gave proof of his love for us. If we obey his holy commandments and imitate his goodness by our own he will honor us by making us like He is. God doesn't lack means. For the sake of his own glory he will admit us to a share in divinity.

BELONGING TO GOD

A reflection from a homily on the St. Elizabeth Ann Seaton webpage

When the Virgin Mary said her yes to God she couldn't imagine exactly what it would cost her personally. Elizabeth Seaton decided that she wanted God and that God wanted her to belong to the Catholic Church. She had been raised as an Episcopalian and had read the bible daily but hungered for more of Christ than she found there and was convinced that she would find it in the Catholic church.

How she experienced this longing can be seen from an incident she recounted. She was on a trip to Europe. She was walking down a street when a priest passed carrying the Blessed Sacrament to a sick person. Suddenly she fell on her knees and cried out to God to bless her. "Bless me if you are there! My whole soul desires only you!" She used her shipboard time returning to the U.S. visiting with an Italian knowledgeable of his faith. He taught her a great deal and by the time she had gotten back she was determined to join the Church.

This caused her family to ostracize her and leave her on her own to raise her five children now that their father had died of tuberculosis. She did it as a journey of faith. People close to her remember her traveling from her parish to another on Sunday so she could receive the Blessed Sacrament twice. This reflected her reaction to her first communion after becoming Catholic: "At last, God is mine and I am His! I have received him!"

She moved to Baltimore and with the help of a priest there founded a group of women to work in education and for the poor. She did raise her children and give them a good education in spite of her family's refusal to help. She did find ways to make the group she founded a success. "I can remember a time, when I was still in Anglicanism, when my heart knew that I must enter the Catholic Church. I knew at that moment that this would be the only way to continue to say "yes" to the work the Lord was doing in my life. At that moment I didn't know how it would take place, when it would happen or what would be the ultimate destiny of my decision. I knew, however, that it would come".

Without resources the Lord enabled her to draw other women to work for the poor and to educate children. She founded the first free school, for children of any faith, in this country. The heart of this all was the Eucharist and the study of Holy Scripture. She didn't have a great deal of time to do what she felt called to do. Her husband had died of tuberculosis and she died of it too. At her death she was only 46 years old. We celebrate her feast day on the very day of her death, January 4th.

A prayer found in her papers shows us the spirit that animated her: "Lord, If I am walking in the right way, impart the grace to stay in that way. If I am wrong, teach my heart to find the better way!" She had great trust in God's grace as leading her personally. We too can live truly in God only by a like trust.