

**THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT**  
**THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN**

.....

- Sun.      **The Second Sunday of Advent**  
4            **IS OUR WORLD BEING TURNED UPSIDE DOWN?**  
              A reflection by Dianne Bergant
- Mon.      **Monday of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Week of Advent**  
5            **“YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN.”**  
              A Reflection on the Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis
- Tues.     **Tuesday of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Week of Advent**  
6            **THE SHOULDERS OF JESUS**  
              A reflection by Fr. John of Avila
- Wed.      **Memorial of St. Ambrose**  
7            **BECOMING A BEARER OF HOPE**  
              A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini
- Thurs.    **THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN**  
8            **THE GIFT GOD GIVES US SHOWN IN THE VIRGIN MARY**  
              A reflection taken from Mother of the Lord by Fr. Karl Rahner
- MONASTIC DESERT DAY**
- Fri         **Friday of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Week of Advent**  
9            **ENTERING THE SPIRITUAL SPACE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST**  
              From a Reflection by Bishop Robert Barron
- Sat.       **Saturday of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Week of Advent**  
10          **WHAT IS OUR TASK IN PREPARING FOR THE LORD?**  
              A reflection taken from Fr. Alban Goodier’s book  
              on the ministry of Jesus

*Sunday*

## **IS OUR WORLD BEING TURNED UPSIDE DOWN?**

**A reflection by Dianne Bergant**

When Alice fell through the rabbit hole on her way to Wonderland she thought she was going to end up on the other side of the earth and so be upside down. Actually, she found that she had to get much smaller to live in that mysterious world. We may think Advent is turning our world upside down but it is actually showing us our world is upside down and tiny and needs to be turned upside up and enlarged. Like an astronomer, we need the equivalent of a telescope to show us how huge and rich God's reality actually is. That is what faith does.

Everything, starting with our hopes, needs to be enlarged to reach its real size, and then be set right side up. Faith shows us a world where captives are freed, the hungry are all fed, but the rich go in need. If the prophet Isaiah seems to tell us the social world will be turned upside down he is only talking about setting things right from God's perspective. It is not that God wants to make anyone unhappy; God wants to offer all the possibility of the richer world of the Spirit—a world of justice and peace, in which all can accept the good tidings of salvation, in which everyone can enjoy the fulfillment that bride and groom experience on their wedding day.

The metaphors Isaiah uses capture the essence of the inner experience of all who enter God's Kingdom. A wedding is a sign of a new and transformative life and it is a transformation that God calls us to, especially a transformation of our hopes. St. Paul tells us such a transformation is a precondition for entering into

God's Kingdom. The beginning point is the same with John the Baptist; we are to "turn to God", and to "repent" by turning away from what obstructs our very coming to the door of God's Kingdom. Eliminate greed, arrogance, lust for power and all that makes you abusive and selfish and focuses you on having rather than giving and sharing. We witness where such attitudes and ways of dealing with others lead. There is a far better way opened by turning to God.

Advent is a threshold. We are faced repeatedly with the challenge of stepping forward and letting our hopes for our life become those of Jesus, and of God. Are we the poor who will hear the good news of reversal or are we those responsible for poverty? Are we the brokenhearted who will find healing or do we break others' hearts? Advent is a time for inner searching. It is a time to discover where we need to change, both individually and as a community. It is a time to discover what "we" really expect and to compare it with what God expects.

There is one who has the power to heal our own brokenness, to heal fractures in our community, or in our troubled Church, or in our bleeding world. Paul tells us "Christ is coming!" John the Baptist told us the Coming One is already in our midst. We can open our hearts to the saving, healing, transforming power which is his love and mercy—if we let our inner world of expectations and hopes be transformed. Am I willing to be turned right side up within? We and our community can become calls and agents for transformation for many, if we welcome it ourselves.

*Monday*

## **“YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN.”**

### **A Reflection on the Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis**

Pope Francis delivered a homily based on Jesus' miraculous healing of the paralytic. Unable to approach Jesus in the packed house in Capernaum, the four men lowered the paralytic on a mat from the roof.

The Pope drew attention to the first words of Jesus: “Your sins are forgiven.” Jesus later orders him to get up, take up his mat and go home. Jesus, a man of God, the Pope said, heals but He is not a medicine man. He teaches but is more than a teacher and in this episode, He focuses on what is essential.

The Pope said that physical health is a gift that we must preserve but the Lord teaches us that we must also preserve the health of the heart, spiritual health.

The Holy Father picked out other instances where Jesus focuses on the essential. In the episode of the sinful and weeping woman, Jesus says, “Your sins are forgiven”. But those present are scandalized, the Pope said, because there is prophecy, there is strength.

In the same way, to the sick man who never got to the pool on time to be healed, Jesus says, “Do not sin anymore.”

#### **Fear of encounter with the Lord**

To the Samaritan woman who asks so many questions, Jesus goes to what is essential in life. The Pope said that “relationship with God is essential.” “We often forget this as if afraid of an encounter with the Lord, with God”. He said we do a lot for our physical health, we advise ourselves regarding doctors and medicines, which is good, the Pope said, “but do we think about the health of the heart?”

The words of Jesus to the paralytic, the Pope said, can help us in this. Jesus tells him, “Child, your sins are forgiven.” The Pope noted that we get so used to this medicine of forgiveness of our sins and mistakes that it gets watered down and loses the strength and the power of prophecy of Jesus when He focuses on the essential. And today Jesus tells each one of us: “I want to forgive your sins”.

#### **Medicine of forgiveness**

The Pope further pointed out that perhaps someone may not find sins to confess because “there is a lack of awareness of sins”. The medicine needed to be healed from “concrete sins”, “diseases of the soul”, the Pope said, is forgiveness.

It is simple when Jesus goes to the essentials., the Pope said. The health of both body and soul is essential. Watching over our body and the soul, he said, we go to that Doctor who can heal us, who can forgive our sins. He is Jesus who came for this and gave His life for this, the Pope said.

*Tuesday*

## **THE SHOULDERS OF JESUS**

**A reflection by Fr. John of Avila**

“Jesus told this parable: Which of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one, wouldn’t leave the ninety-nine to go look for the missing one until he found it?” Lord Jesus, you came looking for lost sheep and you placed each one on your shoulders. Imagine a prince leaving his Father’s royal palace with its table and its music and coming to wherever there were lost sheep. More, he put on their own garment of humanity and accepted their toils.

Can you imagine a starry sky as beautiful as the sight of Jesus Christ coming with lost sheep in his arms? If a little sheep is a bit rebellious he doesn’t strike it and if it wants to be put down he still doesn’t put it down. O blessed shoulders of Jesus Christ! What does it mean to say Jesus takes the sheep on his shoulders? It means what washing the feet of his disciples meant. He washes them and he kisses them and he says: My disciples, do you understand what I have done? Don’t you see that I mean you to wash one another’s feet as I, your Lord and Master, have washed yours? Then Jesus says, Do you see me coming with this little sheep on my shoulders? I am trying to tell you that you are to bear one another’s burdens and toils and difficulties. Don’t be like those whose shoulders seem made of pastry dough; who answer if they are told to be peacemakers: Why are you trying to involve me in other people’s quarrels?

To travel on the shoulders of Jesus Christ means that your fasting, almsgiving and prayers have special value. Precisely because you are on Christ’s shoulders you are supported by his merits. Apart from them, your words are worthless. So get up on his shoulders. He has gained everything by carrying our sins on his cross, on his shoulders. Get up on his shoulders because while he is carrying you God will not give you what you deserve, justice!

Jesus will say to the Heavenly Father, Lord, if you won’t forgive them because they are my servants consider that they are my brothers and sisters and brides. If this is not enough notice that they are my members and are one with me. If it is not possible to punish the members without punishing the Head, then being my members should be reason enough. And think of yourself! Their being members of Jesus Christ is quite enough reason to love and help others. If you saw Jesus and gave him what he needed that wouldn’t deserve great praise. Even wicked people would do that. But if you receive the poor because they belong to Christ, and because he commands it, that is a sign of great love. Just as he took us on his shoulders so let us take our brothers and sisters on ours. You don’t have wax shoulders that can’t support any weight. The members of Christ have his shoulders.

Wednesday

## **BECOMING A BEARER OF HOPE**

**A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini**

It would be a wonderful thing to enter into the heart of St. Ambrose and so to understand how he lived his mission as a disciple of Christ and a shepherd. What inner trials did he bear and what lights and shadows did he pass through? We can't learn all we would like from his writings because he didn't write about himself. Yet Augustine, who did write a great deal about himself, knew Ambrose and later reflected on this in writing. In the *Confessions*, he says, *"I thought Ambrose a happy person in the eyes of his people, because he was honored by his being such an outstanding person. I was unable, however, to know or experience what sort of hope he was the bearer of, what struggles he had been called upon to undergo against the temptations of his high position, what comfort he experienced in adversity and what savory joys he tasted in his heart as he consumed in silence the bread of your Word."*

Notice the two aspects distinguished in Ambrose. There is the exterior one, of a person honored by the society surrounding him. There is an interior and secret one, full of hope incomprehensible even to Augustine. Of what hope was Ambrose the bearer? Jesus says, *"I am the good Shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father."*

Jesus' relation with the Father and with "his own" is not simple, born of an immediate knowledge lived day by day and growing through encounters and conversations. It is a knowledge growing from the awareness Jesus has of the Father, an awareness rooted in the infinite fullness of the love and mercy of God.

Jesus contemplated God's Plan of action toward His Own as he contemplated the love of the Father. And Ambrose brought to his relationship with the diocese, to his daily encounters, a hope that came to him from the contemplation of the love of the Father and of the Father's project for this community.

This is the great grace we all have to ask for. You must ask for it for me, and I ask for it for each of you, and for the responsibility you bear in your family, at work, in social and civil or public life. Each person has some responsibilities, some daily relationships of which an account must be made to God. So, an interior vision, a hope that can't be won by looking around and calculating circumstances and possibilities. It is only grasped if we are people who walk as if they saw the Invisible, looking upward to the Father's merciful design for us. From this upward gaze, we can draw the consequences and directions for our daily deeds of love. Hope lives by contemplation, and the quality of a life depends on the hope that inspires it.

*Thursday*

## **THE GIFT GOD GIVES SHOWN US IN THE VIRGIN MARY**

### **A reflection from Mother of the Lord by Fr. Karl Rahner**

The Immaculate Conception means that Mary possessed grace from the very beginning. What does that fact signify? It is perhaps a question about what “sanctifying grace” is. This dry and technical term of theology makes it sound like grace is a thing. Yet having sanctifying grace doesn’t signify having a “thing”, not even a mysterious condition of soul lying beyond our world or personal experience and only believed in. Sanctifying grace means God’s very self, God’s gift of self to you and me. God is gift, first and last and always.

Grace, then, is light and love and one’s receptive access to life as a spiritual person in the infinite reaches of the Godhead. Grace means freedom, it means strength and a promise of eternal life. It means the influence of God’s Holy Spirit will predominate in the depths of our being, if we welcome this. It means being adopted as a child of God and given with Jesus an eternal inheritance of all that God is and has.

Mary doesn’t differ from the rest of us because she possessed these gifts. It is her possession of them right from the beginning of her existence, and her incomparable openness to them, that makes her different from us. As far as the gift is concerned its nature and intrinsic meaning is the same. The Eternal Father couldn’t intend anything for the Mother of the Incarnate Son without intending it for us and giving it to us in Jesus Christ. It is given in the sacrament of justification.

For us too, God eternally intended this saving grace from the beginning, from eternity. It was only actually given in experience after we began our earthly life. This makes it plain that nothing in our salvation is from us. God has eternally kept his love in readiness for us and at the moment we call baptism he comes into the depths of our hearts. We too are redeemed, saved, marked with God’s indelible seal. We too have been made holy temples of God. In us too, the triune God dwells. We too are anointed, hallowed and filled with God’s light and life.

This means that we too have been sent by God, from the beginning, into a life that we are to use to carry the light of faith and the flame of love into the world’s darkness. We are to carry it as far as the place where we belong, the eternal radiance of God’s very self.

Are you so different from Mary who was conceived immaculately? God didn’t will the difference that exists because he loved us less. God did what he did in order that through the difference between us and Mary the full richness of grace would be expressed. In Mary and her Immaculate Conception, it is shown that an eternal mercy envelopes all of us from the beginning. We are children of Adam & Eve, sinners, and God doesn’t leave us unaided. We seemed to come into existence graceless but now we must proclaim the truth that we have always been beloved children of God, not by reason of anything we do or have or by reason of our nature, but simply by the sheer gift of God. All that God is and has is given us without any merits of our own simply because God loves us and always has. We will only understand this fully when we are with God. That is what Advent calls us to prepare for.

Friday

## ENTERING THE SPIRITUAL SPACE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST From a Reflection by Bishop Robert Barron

The Cathedral of Chartres is famous for its transcendently beautiful stained glass, but it also boasts hundreds of exquisitely rendered sculptures of biblical figures. On the north porch of the cathedral, there is a statue that I particularly savor. It is a depiction of John the Baptist, and it shows him as an emaciated figure (after all, the Bible tells us that he ate locusts and wild honey) holding an image of the Lamb of God. But what is most striking about the sculpture is the face of the Baptist. He bears an expression that bespeaks an aching, a longing, a looking toward something that he does not have but wants. Some of the saints that surround Chartres Cathedral seem blissful, already in possession of the great good for which they longed. But not John the Baptist. He yearns, pines, hungers still.

And this makes him, *par excellence*, a saint of Advent. This holy season, of course, calls to mind the coming (*adventus*) of Jesus in history, but it also anticipates the arrival of the Lord at the culmination of the age, that time when, as St. Paul puts it, Christ will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). This fulfillment, obviously enough, has not yet happened, for the world is still plagued by wars, famine, floods, earthquakes, and pandemics. And our lives are still marked by depression, failure, sin, and frustrated plans. None of this tells against the fact that God’s creation is good, but it does indeed confirm the intuition that this life is, as the *Salve Regina* puts it, “a vale of tears.” All of us, therefore, wear the expression of the John the Baptist of Chartres: craving an absent good.

Might I suggest some practices for all of us, Advent people, during these upcoming weeks? First, we should deepen our lives of prayer. As John of Damascus told us long ago, to pray is to “raise the mind and the heart to God.” It is to be consciously *aware* of God, present to him. Even if we wear a somewhat anguished expression as we do so, we should turn our faces purposely to God, and as we pray, we should allow our yearning for God to surface. C.S. Lewis told us that the aching of the heart for God—and it is a real suffering—is properly called “joy.” Prayer, in a way, is the cultivation of precisely that sublime form of joy. One of the very best ways to practice this form of spiritual attention is to spend an uninterrupted hour or half hour in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament.

A second Advent suggestion is this: wear the world lightly. The reason that we feel spiritual anguish is that the deepest desire of our heart cannot be met by any merely worldly good. We look to something beyond our ken and capacity precisely because we realize, consciously or unconsciously, that the hungry soul cannot be satisfied by any amount of esteem, riches, power, or pleasure. The attainment of any of these goods produces a momentary bliss followed by a letdown, a disappointment. But this truth mustn’t be allowed to depress us; rather, it should compel us to adopt the spiritual stance that the spiritual masters call “detachment.” This means enjoying wealth and then letting it go; using power for good but not clinging to it; taking in honor and not caring a whit for it. It is to adopt the attitude that St. Ignatius of Loyola calls “indifference.” Advent is a privileged time to practice this virtue.

A third and final suggestion is this: we should devote ourselves to doing one of the corporal works of mercy. These acts—feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, etc.—are concrete acts of love. It is easy enough for religious people to speak of love in an abstract manner, but to love means to will the good of the other. Therefore, it is dense, real, particular, something that shows up. And heaven—that ultimate joy that we long for—is *nothing other than love*, love in the fullest possible sense, love without limit. Aquinas says that in heaven, faith will fade away (since we will see God face to face) and hope will disappear (since we would have attained what we hoped for), but love will remain (since heaven *is* love). So, when we love someone here below, in even the simplest way, we anticipate our return to the homeland, we stir our craving for heaven.

So, as we move into the spiritual space of John the Baptist, as we enter the season of Advent, we should pray, we should let go, and we should perform the works of mercy.

*Saturday*

## **WHAT IS OUR TASK IN PREPARING FOR THE LORD?**

**A reflection taken from Fr. Alban Goodier's book on the ministry of Jesus**

Have you ever tried to picture yourself as one of those who heard John the Baptist when he began his ministry? The world you lived in would have been dominated by an ancient tradition telling you that a great future lay before your people but gave you a no good idea of what that hope would amount to. Most people, probably like you, were dominated by the urgencies of daily affairs. Maybe you were also a bit self-centered, prone to anger, and living a religion that imposed many claims that didn't seem to help realize that great future, at least as far as you could tell. But no one felt authorized to lay aside the old ways because they couldn't separate them from the hope that all nourished in their hearts.

John the Baptist had come at a time when everyone was standing on tiptoes, so to speak, in expectation; all were straining to see the way ahead. Many despaired of anything really new. But here was John! He was in the desert, by the Jordan river, at the gateway into the Promised Land and into Judea, and on the very spot tradition associated with the Prophet Elijah. He wasn't far from a very busy road along which the busy world passed in its concern for all sorts of things other than God and God's Kingdom. John was a weird, uncouth, unkempt and terrible figure out of harmony with all that the road signified. He was of single mind, unflinching before social pressures, fearing no one but God and asking for nothing except total dedication to the Lord and the Lord's way of living.

His preaching showed that he knew his world through and through and came as its censor and perhaps terror. He was a warning. Yet he won many by his sincerity and simplicity. He told the plain truth about what is in people and he almost compelled them to admit that he was right in what he said. He had no pleasing inducements but only words that worked like a kind of lash. He threatened an end of the present order of things and a doom that awaited those who would not listen and obey God's Word as he proclaimed it. It was time to point out the difference between the inward turning to God, and a turning that was really only conformity with religious and secular customs.

John called all, ourselves included, to become "true Israelites" in whom, to use Jesus' later words, there would be no guile or pretense. John's was a fearless voice, almost that of an angel rather than a human person. He fascinated even those who had no taste for his message. He wanted to make the Lord's path in our hearts wholly straight. The goal was to cleanse, then to baptize, then to point to a "true" way of life in the Lord. He told of one who was to come after his ministry was ended and who would lead them all the way into the Kingdom of God which was so close at hand.

We do not live in John's time nor can we go to the Jordan to hear his words. We have already heard the Good News of the one who came after him. He has called us to the same repentance but has presented a different picture of the Lord we seek. He doesn't call us to fear but to love one another in the way Jesus shows us. We too have to step away from many customs and cultural usages in order to follow after the Son who comes to lead us to our God. Are you ready to accept this call and follow Jesus? What do you have to leave behind to answer that call? You have been baptized already. How are you called to walk in a newness of life that washing symbolizes? These things show you that the grace of God is working in you, and in each and all of us, today. Let us walk in the new way of the Lord!