

**THE HOLY FAMILY**  
**THE SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD**  
**Octave of Christmas**  
**29 Dec 2024 – 4 Jan 2025**

---

- Sun.      **The Feast of the Holy Family**  
Dec. 29   **THE HOLY FAMILY OF NAZARETH**  
            **The Angelus Message of Pope Benedict XVI, 31 December 2006**
- Mon.      **Sixth Day in the Octave of Christmas**  
Dec. 30   **THE PRAYER AND THE HOLY FAMILY OF NAZARETH**  
            **From the General Audience Message of Pope Benedict XVI**  
            **31 December 2006 (Part 1)**
- Tues.      **Seventh Day in the Octave of Christmas**  
Dec. 31   **THE PRAYER AND THE HOLY FAMILY OF NAZARETH**  
            **From the General Audience Message of Pope Benedict XVI**  
            **31 December 2006 (Part 2)**
- Wed.      **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**
- Thurs.     **Memorial, Basil the Great & Gregory of Nazianzen**  
2          **THE ADVENTURE OF LIVING A SPIRITUAL LIFE**  
            **A Reflection from St. Basil's "Treatise on the Holy Spirit"**
- MONASTIC DESERT DAY**
- Fri.      **CHRISTMAS WITH ST FRANCIS DE SALES**  
3          **From the General Audience Message of Pope Francis, 28 December 2022**
- Sat.      **Memorial of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton**  
4          **MAKING THE MOST OF OUR OPPORTUNITIES TO LOVE**  
            **A Reflection on St. Elizabeth Ann Seton illustrated with a Homily**  
            **of St. Augustine**

*Sunday*

## **THE HOLY FAMILY OF NAZARETH**

### **The Angelus Message of Pope Benedict XVI, 31 December 2006**

On this last Sunday of the year, we are celebrating the *Feast of the Holy Family of Nazareth*. I address with joy all the families of the world, wishing them the peace and love that Jesus brought us in coming among us at Christmas.

In the Gospel, we do not find discourses on the family but an *event* which is worth more than any words: God *wanted to be born and to grow up in a human family*. In this way, he consecrated the family as the first and ordinary means of his encounter with humanity.

In his life spent at Nazareth, Jesus honored the Virgin Mary and the righteous Joseph, remaining under their authority throughout the period of his childhood and his adolescence (cf. Lk 2:41-52). In this way, he shed light on the primary value of the family in the education of the person.

Jesus was introduced by Mary and Joseph into the religious community and frequented the synagogue of Nazareth. With them, he learned to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, as the Gospel passage offered for our meditation by today's liturgy tells us.

When he was 12 years old, he stayed behind in the Temple and it took his parents all of three days to find him. With this act he made them understand that he "had to see to his Father's affairs", in other words, to the mission that God had entrusted to him (cf. Lk 2:41-52).

This Gospel episode reveals the most authentic and profound vocation of the family: that is, to accompany each of its members on the path of the discovery of God and of the plan that he has prepared for him or her.

Mary and Joseph taught Jesus primarily by their example: in his parents, he came to know the full beauty of faith, of love for God and for his Law, as well as the demands of justice, which is totally fulfilled in love (cf. Rom 13:10).

From them, he learned that it is necessary first of all to do God's will, and that the spiritual bond is worth more than the bond of kinship.

The Holy Family of Nazareth is truly the "prototype" of every Christian family which, united in the Sacrament of Marriage and nourished by the Word and the Eucharist, is called to carry out the wonderful vocation and mission of being the living cell not only of society but also of the Church, a sign and instrument of unity for the entire human race.

Let us now invoke the protection of Mary Most Holy and of St Joseph for every family, especially families in difficulty. May they sustain such families so that they can resist the disintegrating forces of a certain contemporary culture that undermines the very foundations of the family institution.

May they help Christian families be living images of God's love in every part of the world.

Monday

## THE PRAYER AND THE HOLY FAMILY OF NAZARETH

### From the General Audience Message of Pope Benedict XVI, 31 December 2006 (Part 1)

I would like to invite you to reflect on the way that prayer was part of the life of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Indeed, the house of Nazareth is a school of prayer where one learns to listen, meditate on, and penetrate the profound meaning of the manifestation of the Son of God, following the example of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

The Discourse of the Servant of God Paul VI during his Visit to Nazareth is memorable. The Pope said that at the school of the Holy Family, we “understand why we must maintain a spiritual discipline if we wish to follow the teaching of the Gospel and become disciples of Christ”. He added: “In the first place it teaches us silence. Oh! If only esteem for silence, a wonderful and indispensable spiritual atmosphere, could be reborn within us! Whereas we are deafened by the din, the noise, and discordant voices in the frenetic, turbulent life of our time. O silence of Nazareth! Teach us to be steadfast in good thoughts, attentive to our inner life, ready to hear God’s hidden inspiration clearly and the exhortations of true teachers” (Discourse in Nazareth, 5 January 1964).

We can draw various ideas for prayer and for the relationship with God and with the Holy Family from the Gospel narratives of the infancy of Jesus. We can begin with the episode of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. St Luke tells how “when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses”, Mary and Joseph “brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord” (2:22). Like every Jewish family that observed the law, Jesus’ parents went to the Temple to consecrate their first-born son to God and to make the sacrificial offering. Motivated by their fidelity to the precepts of the Law, they set out from Bethlehem and went to Jerusalem with Jesus who was only 40 days old. Instead of a year-old lamb, they presented the offering of simple families, namely, two turtle doves. The Holy Family’s pilgrimage was one of faith, of the offering of gifts — a symbol of prayer — and of the encounter with the Lord whom Mary and Joseph already perceived in their Son Jesus.

Mary was a peerless model of contemplation of Christ. The face of the Son specially belonged to her because he had been knit together in her womb and had taken a human likeness from her. No one has contemplated Jesus as diligently as Mary. The gaze of her heart was already focused on him at the moment of the Annunciation, when she conceived him through the action of the Holy Spirit; in the following months she gradually became aware of his presence, until, on the day of his birth, her eyes could look with motherly tenderness upon the face of her son as she wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in the manger.

Memories of Jesus, imprinted on her mind and on her heart, marked every instant of Mary’s existence. She lived with her eyes fixed on Christ and cherished his every word. St Luke says: “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (2:19) and thus describes Mary’s approach to the Mystery of the Incarnation which was to extend throughout her life: keeping these things, pondering on them in her heart. Luke is the Evangelist who acquaints us with Mary’s heart, with her faith (cf. 1:45), her hope and her obedience (cf. 1:38) and, especially, with her interiority and prayer (cf. 1:46-56), her free adherence to Christ (cf. 1:55).

And all this proceeded from the gift of the Holy Spirit who overshadowed her (cf. 1:35), as he was to come down on the Apostles following Christ’s promise (cf. Acts 1:8). This image of Mary which St Luke gives us presents Our Lady as a model for every believer who cherishes and compares Jesus’ words with his actions, a comparison which is always progress in the knowledge of Jesus. After Bl. Pope John Paul II’s example (cf. Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*) we can say that the prayer of the Rosary is modeled precisely on Mary, because it consists of contemplating the mysteries of Christ in spiritual union with the Mother of the Lord.

*Tuesday*

## **THE PRAYER AND THE HOLY FAMILY OF NAZARETH**

**From the General Audience Message of Pope Benedict XVI, 31 December 2006 (Part 2)**

Mary's ability to live by God's gaze is so contagious. The first to experience this was St Joseph. His humble and sincere love for his betrothed and his decision to join his life to Mary's attracted and introduced him, "a just man", (Mt 1:19), to a special intimacy with God. Indeed, with Mary and later, especially, with Jesus, he began a new way of relating to God, accepting him in his life, entering his project of salvation, and doing his will. After trustfully complying with the Angel's instructions "Do not fear to take Mary your wife" (Mt 1:20) — he took Mary to him and shared his life with her; he truly gave the whole of himself to Mary and to Jesus and this led him to perfect his response to the vocation he had received.

The Gospel has not recorded any of Joseph's words: his is a silent and faithful, patient and hard-working presence. We may imagine that he too, like his wife and in close harmony with her, lived the years of Jesus' childhood and adolescence savoring his presence in their family.

Joseph fulfilled every aspect of his paternal role. He must certainly have taught Jesus to pray, together with Mary. He must have taken Jesus to the Synagogue for the rites of the Sabbath, as well as to Jerusalem for the great feasts of the people of Israel. In accordance with the Jewish tradition, he would have led the prayers at home both — in the morning, in the evening, at meals — and on the principal religious feasts. In the rhythm of the days he spent at Nazareth, in the simple home and in Joseph's workshop, Jesus learned to alternate prayer and work, as well as to offer God his labor in earning the bread the family needed.

And lastly, another episode sees the Holy Family of Nazareth gathered together in an event of prayer. When Jesus was 12 years old, he went with his parents to the Temple of Jerusalem. This episode fits into the context of pilgrimage, an expression of religious devotion that is nourished by and at the same time nourishes prayer. Here, it is the Passover pilgrimage, the family of Jesus made this pilgrimage every year to take part in the rites in the Holy City. Jewish families, like Christian families, pray in the intimacy of the home but they also pray together with the community, recognizing that they belong to the People of God, journeying on; and the pilgrimage expresses exactly this state of the People of God on the move. Easter is the center and culmination of all this and involves both the family dimension and that of liturgical and public worship.

It is important at this point, when Jesus was still fully integrated into the life of the Family of Nazareth, to note the resonance that hearing this word "Father" on Jesus' lips must have had in the hearts of Mary and Joseph. It is also important to reveal, to emphasize, who the Father is, and, with his awareness, to hear this word on the lips of the Only-Begotten Son who, for this very reason, chose to stay on for three days in the Temple, which is the "Father's house".

We may imagine that from this time the life of the Holy Family must have been even fuller of prayer since from the heart of Jesus the boy — then an adolescent and a young man — this deep meaning of the relationship with God the Father would not cease to spread and to be echoed in the hearts of Mary and Joseph. So it was that the Family of Nazareth became the first model of the Church in which, around the presence of Jesus and through his mediation, everyone experiences the filial relationship with God the Father which also transforms interpersonal, human relationships.

The Holy Family is the icon of the domestic Church, called to pray together. The family is the domestic Church and must be the first school of prayer where children, from the tenderest age, can learn to perceive the meaning of God. If one does not learn how to pray in the family it will later be difficult to bridge this gap. I therefore invite you to pray together as a family at the school of the Holy Family of Nazareth and thereby really to become of one heart and soul, a true family.

Wednesday

## **MARY SHOWS US JESUS AND JESUS SHOWS US GOD**

### **A Reflection by Leon Joseph Cardinal Suenens**

Our world is God's gift to us of unparalleled adventure. Think of space exploration and what it symbolizes for us: 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 of 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 will be the way, the truth, and the life for all ages. 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 open 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 the mother of our life in God, a life we live for one another and for the whole world of those wandering in darkness.

*Thursday*

## **The Adventure of Living a Spiritual Life**

### **A Reflection from 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 about 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 a 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 in-dwelling Spirit carry out that transformation. This is the adventure that is living a “spiritual life”.

Friday

## CHRISTMAS WITH ST FRANCIS DE SALES

From the General Audience Message of Pope Francis, 28 December 2022

Saint Francis de Sales, in one of his many letters to Saint Jeanne Frances de Chantal, writes: "I imagine I see Solomon on his ivory throne, all beautifully gilded and carved, which had no equal in all the kingdoms of the earth (1 Kings 10:18-20) neither was there any king that could be compared, for glory and magnificence, with the king that sat upon it (1 Kings 10:23). And yet, I would a hundred times rather see the dear Jesus in his Crib, than all the kings of the world on their thrones." Jesus, the King of the universe, never sat on a throne: He was born in a stable wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger; and finally, He died on a cross and, wrapped in a sheet, was laid in the tomb. The evangelist Luke, in recounting the birth of Jesus, insists a great deal on the detail of the manger, in order to understand *what kind of Messiah* He is who was born in Bethlehem; and what kind of King He is. Seeing the manger, gazing upon the cross, looking at His life, a life of simplicity, we can understand who Jesus is. Jesus is the Son of God Who saves us by becoming man, like us; stripping Himself of His glory and humbling Himself (cf. Phil 2:7-8). We see this mystery concretely in the Child lying in a manger. This is "the sign" that God gives us at Christmas: it was at the time for the shepherds in Bethlehem (cf. Lk 2:12), it is today, and it will always be so. When the angels announce the birth of Jesus, "Go and you will find Him"; and the sign is: You will find a child in a manger.

This sign shows us the "style" of God which is closeness, compassion, and tenderness. With this style, God draws us to Himself. He does not take us by force, He does not impose His truth and justice on us. He wants to draw us with love, with tenderness, with compassion. In another letter, St Francis de Sales writes: "The magnet attracts iron, amber attracts straws. Whether, then, we are iron in our hardness, or straws in our lightness and worthlessness, we must unite ourselves to this little Infant." Our strengths, our weaknesses, only resolve themselves before the crib, before Jesus, or before the Cross. Jesus stripped, Jesus poor. God has found the means to attract us however we are: with love. Not a possessive and selfish love. His love is pure gift, pure grace, it is all and only for us, for our good. And so He draws us in, with this unarmed and even disarming love. Because when we see this simplicity of Jesus, we too cast aside the weapons of pride and go, humbly, to ask for salvation, to ask for forgiveness, to ask for light for our lives. Do not forget the throne of Jesus. The manger and the Cross: this is the throne of Jesus.

Another aspect that stands out in the crib is poverty – the renunciation of all worldly vanity. St Francis de Sales writes: "How many holy affections does this birth make rise within our hearts, above all of the perfect renunciation of the goods, the pomps ... of this world. I do not know whether I find any mystery which so sweetly mingles tenderness with austereness, love with rigor, sweetness with severity." We see all this in the Nativity scene. God's love is not sugar-sweet; Jesus' manger shows us that. It is not a hypocritical goodness that hides the pursuit of pleasures and comforts. Our elders, who knew war and also hunger, knew this well: Christmas is joy and celebration, certainly, but in simplicity and austerity.

And let us conclude with a thought of St Francis de Sales that he dictated it to the Visitandine Sisters - two days before his death: "Do you see the baby Jesus in the crib? He accepts all the discomforts of that season, the bitter cold and everything that the Father lets happen to him. He does not refuse the small consolations that his Mother gives him as everything is left to her care and concern. So too, we ourselves should neither desire nor refuse anything, but accept all that God sends us, the bitter cold and the discomforts of the season," everything. And here great teaching, which comes to us from the Child Jesus through the wisdom of St Francis de Sales: to desire nothing and reject nothing, to accept everything that God sends us. But be careful! Always and only out of love, because God loves us and only ever wants our good.

*Saturday*

## **MAKING THE MOST OF OUR OPPORTUNITIES TO LOVE**

### **A Reflection on St. Elizabeth Ann Seton illustrated with a Homily of 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 about these all the time, act on them, and 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, you 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 many short quotations, St. Elizabeth Seton made 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 others. If one looks around one will see how many needs there are and how many people who can't help themselves but need others' support. She saw clearly that what she had and what had come to her from others; they had shaped her and enabled her to become a very competent and loving woman, wife, mother, religious founder, and charity worker. She was convinced that everything she was and had could be used to love and care for others. She calls us to do likewise because we see what was true for her is true for us.