

INTRODUCTION

We can only say, “I love you” once. From wedding night to fiftieth anniversary, new meaning and richness make the words different every time. Unique. Prayers are the same. Every time we say one as we should, it is an unrepeatable act.

For seven hundred years, Christians have prayed the *Angelus* three times a day, focusing on 1. God’s *promise* to Mary (and us), 2. the human *response* that makes it come true, and 3. its *fulfillment* in the *Word made flesh*. The *Hail Mary* we say after each verse is never the same. There is new depth, new meaning, even a new mystical experience every time—if we really pray what we say.

These Advent reflections come from my experience of daily prayer. The *Angelus* launches me into a day filled with promise, direction, and hope. Now I begin my day in conscious relationship with Jesus Christ. Since I began interacting with him, my life has never been the same. I know what he promises. I know how to make it come true. And I can envision the change it will make in me and in the world.

Look forward this Advent to thinking deeply. We need “chicken soup for the soul.” But our soul also needs meat and potatoes—thoughts we have to chew on. Come to these reflections prepared to think.

And “give flesh” to your thoughts by putting them into action. We will give concrete suggestions. *Read, reflect, and respond*. Your life will never be the same.

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NOVEMBER 29 • FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 63:16B–17, 19B; 64:2–7; 1 Corinthians 1:3–9; Mark 13:33–37

“You will conceive...”

*The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary,
and she conceived by the Holy Spirit.*

The first Advent began when an angel told a teenage girl—probably about fourteen—that God had a great plan for her life. She would “conceive by the Holy Spirit.” What was her reaction? What would yours be?

The truth is, we have all “conceived by the Holy Spirit.” At baptism we gave our bodies to Jesus so that he might live in us. Jesus took flesh in us. We are his body on earth. Paul called his converts, “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19).

God has promised each of us that our life can count for something great on this earth. We wake up every morning to the promise of greatness. We need to think about this, dream the impossible dream. Human life, now that Jesus has entered the world, is full of promise. My life, now that Jesus lives in me, is full of promise. Advent invites me to focus on this.

A PRACTICAL SUGGESTION Wear something—a cross, a medal, a white shirt!—that reminds you you are Christ’s body. Do everything the way you think he would.

ADVENT PRAYER *“Lord, no ear has heard, no eye seen, what you do in your body on earth. I give you my body. Live in me.”*

God promises—divine life

“Hail, full of grace...”

The *Hail Mary* enriches our understanding of the promise. Mary was full of “grace”—not something poured into our souls, but the gift of sharing in God’s own divine life. I wake every morning to live a divine life. My words and actions will have divine value, produce divine results—if I speak and act in union with Jesus, as his body on earth.

This is what Jesus took flesh to give us: “I came that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

For God to use me for something great in this world, I have to focus more on living my divine life than my human life. More precisely, I have to live my human life divinely. I have to consciously think, speak, and act always on the level of God.

For this I have to keep praying that all my thoughts, desires, and actions will be “conceived by the Holy Spirit.” Advent is a time to remember that.

A PRACTICAL SUGGESTION Whatever you do, all day long, ask how you can do it divinely. For example, if Jesus were doing the work you do, how would he do it?

ADVENT PRAYER *Lord, you told fishermen, “I will make you fishers of men.” What do you say to me about the work I do?*

DECEMBER 1 • TUESDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK

Isaiah 11:1–10; Luke 10:21–24

God promises—presence

The Lord is with you.

God promises to be “with us.” What difference can that make in my day? What can I hope to do if God is “with” me?

As Creator, God is “with” everything he made, giving each the power to live and move and exercise its being (Acts 17:28). But God is not with us fully until he is living in us, sharing our human lives and sharing his own divine life with us. Christian life is letting Jesus act *with us*, *in us*, and *through us* whenever we live or move or exercise our being.

Paul said he was sent “to make known...the glory of this mystery, which is *Christ in you*, the hope of glory.” Three words sum up all his preaching: “Christ in you” (Colossians 1:26).

Mary was always aware God was with her, inspiring, guiding, strengthening her to keep giving flesh to Jesus in her words and actions. But we keep forgetting it. So we need to look for reminders to keep us focused on the promise that, by “grace,” Jesus is always with us.

A PRACTICAL SUGGESTION Whenever you see mutual support—two birds flying, a mother and child, two people working as a team—recall that Jesus is with you.

ADVENT PRAYER *Lord, you said, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Please keep me conscious of that, at least until the end of this day!*

God promises— personalized blessing

Blessed are you among women.

Mary was blessed personally, individually, by the way she was used by God. And each of us is blessed personally, individually, because God has also promised to use every one of us for something great and beautiful—even though we may never recognize what it is while we live.

Mary was blessed because she believed that “what was spoken to her would be fulfilled” (Luke 1:45). We need to believe every minute of our time on earth is precious, because Jesus, conceived in our bodies, wants to act *with us, in us, and through us* in everything we do—all day, every day—to continue his mission. We are “chosen to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light” (see 1 Peter 2:9). If we try to be a blessing to others we will be.

Advent is expectation. We should expect God to use us, and notice when he does.

A PRACTICAL SUGGESTION When you go anywhere—to work, back home, out to dinner—believe that what was spoken to you by the Lord will be fulfilled.

ADVENT PRAYER *Lord, I believe you promise to make me blessed and a blessing to others. Please help my unbelief. (See Mark 9:24.)*