

Mary and the Church

Mothers & Teachers

BY MARIA RIOUX

With gratitude to Jennifer Gregory Miller, Frances Butek, and Susie Roeder for their encouragement and suggestions

ADVENT IS A TIME OF WAITING AND PREPARATION, allowing Christ to grow within us just as he did within Mary: in the manner He chooses, and at His own pace.

While Christ remained hidden in Mary, His rest was a tremendous activity; He was making her into Himself, making Himself from her. From her eyes He would make the eyes that would weep over all Jerusalem, that would shine upon the wildflowers, that would close in death and open in the morning of the Resurrection. From her hands He was making the hands that would heal and raise the dead and be nailed to the cross. From her heart He was making the heart whose love would redeem the world.

The same thing happens when, allowing the Infant Christ to rest in us, we wait patiently on His own timing of His growth in us, and give Him just what He asks, the extremely simple things that are ourselves . . . our hands and feet, our eyes and ears, our words, our thoughts, our love. Not only does He grow in us, but we are formed into Him. (Houselander, *The Passion of the Infant Christ*, pp. 23–24)

This unit study has four parts, one for each week of Advent:

- ✦ St. Nicholas, and Living the Liturgical Year

- ✦ Mary, Mother of God, and Ark of the New Covenant
- ✦ Christ, the Coming Messiah, as Foretold in the Old Testament and Fulfilled in the New Testament
- ✦ The Church: Our Mother and Teacher



*Fra Angelico, Nativity (Cell 5) 1440-41
Fresco, 193 x 164 cm
Convento di San Marco, Florence*

There is a kind of ordering to these parts, but order can be maintained in various ways. It's a unity study, and therefore, flexible by nature. Use what suits you and your family—and leave the rest!

Part One

ST. NICHOLAS, AND LIVING
THE LITURGICAL YEAR

Waiting and preparing for the coming of Christ does not sound as though it would be a difficult thing to do, but it is. I know it is because I all too often sing, “Angels We Have Heard on High,” as if that is a normal occurrence. Birds chirp in trees and certain angels sing on high. Maybe I would notice if it happened to be an unusual grouping of angels: Thrones and Principalities rather than Seraphim and Cherubim, for example. God became man. That is so incredible, so unthinkable, indicative of such love and humility even Satan did not see it coming. Given that this is the Incarnation we’re talking about, I don’t really want to say familiarity breeds contempt, but it definitely does seem to foster complacency.

Not only is it difficult to fully appreciate what God has done in becoming man, it’s also hard to focus on Christ during this time of the year because of all the unavoidable distractions. No matter how non-existent Santa is in your home, he’s absolutely everywhere else. Lately they’ve even got him kneeling next to the manger. That’s a good thing, I know, but when you were trying to transport your mind and heart to the incredible night when Christ was born, seeing Santa there is jarring. The kings, the camels, the

cow, donkey and sheep all help. Santa does not. He distracts us. Knowing that the Santa Claus tradition is rooted in St. Nicholas does help, and, given that we’re all going to be seeing him and seeing him a lot, it’s useful to consider how this is one more thing that works for good.

Santa Claus is derived from Sinterklaas, which is a shortened form of St. Nicholas. Any real beauty in Santa is rooted, and far more evident, in St. Nicholas. While there is absolutely nothing wrong with Santa, and something very right about maintaining family traditions that may be associated with him, he might best be described as ‘St. Nicholas extra-lite.’ There is much to be gained from celebrating Santa as St. Nick. So this year, why not consider unveiling the real St. Nick on St. Nicholas’ Day?

First of all, St. Nicholas’ Day is December 6. That’s well before Christmas, but not so far in advance that connec-



*Russian Icon of St Nicholas
13th-14th century
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg*

tions to Christ and practical benefits are lost. And yet, it's far enough in advance that any focus on St. Nick in no way detracts from what rightly belongs to Christ on Christmas.

St. Nicholas gave away all he had, in secret. He gave gold and gifts, whatever was needed, and often more than was needed, via chimneys, windows, and doors. His gifts were salvific (in a practical sense, but with spiritual implications) and brought great joy. This is very much like the gift of grace that God always gives in at least sufficient quantities, but also lavishly, whenever it is needed, and in surprising ways.

We celebrate the lives of the saints and pray to them primarily for two reasons: to encourage ourselves in our attempts to imitate Christ (in the spirit of "if he can do it, I can do it!"), and to call upon the Church Triumphant for help. They are our best spiritual friends (excepting Mary and Christ, of course). We can appeal to them because they live in the presence of our Almighty God. Celebrating their lives and rejoicing in their blessedness is one more reminder that it isn't about this life but the next, and the next is within our grasp, given God's grace. Celebrating St. Nicholas' Day, then, is not a distraction from Christ but another way to draw closer to Him. It helps us live the liturgical year and imitate Christ in ways that especially appeal to and inspire children.

ACTIVITIES:

GIVE TO OTHERS IN SECRET AND

HIDDEN WAYS. You can do someone else's chore for him... and leave an S somewhere to let them know "Sint" was there. One can carry on the practice

after the feastday simply by putting a bit of straw into the manger every time one gave in secret and hidden ways.

SING CAROLS. It would be best to sing St. Nicholas songs, but I only know of Dutch and Belgian versions, which cannot be very helpful. Some are translated, and provide a musical score. This site provides songs from many lands: <http://www.stnicholascenter.org/Brix?pageID=132> Before the last song is sung, have someone bang on the windows and doors and throw candy into the kitchen. Be careful that whoever has that job doesn't get too carried away. We've had at least two windows broken as a result of our family caroling celebration.

MOCK BISHOP. The custom of choosing a boy from the cathedral choir, etc., on St. Nicholas Day as a mock bishop is very ancient. The boy possessed episcopal honor for three weeks, and the rest of the choir were his attendants. Probably the reference is to Jesus Christ sitting in the Temple among the doctors while He was a boy. The custom was abolished in the reign of Henry VIII. It might be something one could resurrect for the day in both fun and fruitful ways. One could certainly learn about episcopal honors, for example, as well as coming to a greater, more concrete appreciation for how astonishing and unsettling it must have been to have a twelve-year-old deserve them.

MAKE SPECULAAS COOKIES. St. Nicholas is the patron of bakers, among other things. The shapes most closely associated with St. Nicholas are a ship (he was known to save sailors from shipwreck); girls and boys (for the

dowries he provided and the three boys he brought back to life); and coins (for the money he lavishly spent to meet the needs of others).

BOOKS:

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The Saint Who Became Santa Claus by Evelyn Bence

St. Nicholas: The Real Story of the Christmas Legend by Julie Stiegemeyer

The Legend of St. Nicholas by Demi

The Saints Show Us Christ by Rawley Myers

Christmas with the Saints by Hertha Pauli, Vision Book

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Part Two

MARY, MOTHER OF GOD, AND
 ARK OF THE NEW COVENANT

While living the liturgical year through an intimacy with and imitation of the saints we celebrate each day is certainly a worthy goal and a real inspiration, the only saint we really can imitate is Mary. I know that that probably sounds ridiculous, but it does make sense. Every other saint had a very specific mission, as well as the specific gifts required to fulfill it. Mary certainly had that as well, but her mission is one we all share, though she certainly accomplished it in a unique and matchless way. Her job was to bear Christ into the world, and that is our job, too. We can't do it without God's help, but Christ must be born in every soul and formed in every life.

To even begin to imitate Mary, however, we must have at least a basic un-

derstanding of her circumstances and her response to God's call. We must come to know her before we can hope to imitate her. Caryll Houselander can help:

Christ has said, "I am the Way," and He has been there in every generation, blowing with the Divine breath of the Spirit on that little flame of life. He is the way but he is not limited as we are: He can manifest Himself in countless ways we do not dream of. He can will to live in lives of suffering and darkness we cannot conceive of; He can choose what seems to us the most unlikely material in the world to use for a positive material of His love....

The most striking example of the material God can and does use to manifest His glory is Lazarus. Lazarus was not even alive; he was dead and, according to his chief mourners, stinking; but Christ



*Giovanni Bellini, Madonna with the Child (Greek Madonna) 1460-64
 Tempera on wood, 82 x 62 cm
 Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan*

used him as the material for showing to show forth the glory of God in a way surpassed only by His own Resurrection.

That which seems to us a crumbling pointweakness, a lack, a thorn in the flesh, is destined for God's glory as surely as the rotting bones of Lazarus, as surely as the radiance of Mary of Nazareth.

Think again of the three symbols I have used as symbols of the virginal emptiness of Mary. These are each made from material which must undergo some experience type of transformation to be made ready for its purpose.

✦ The reed grows by streams. It is the simplest of things, but it must be cut by the sharp knife, hollowed out, and stops cut into it; it must be shaped and pierced before it can utter the shepherd's song. It is the narrowest emptiness in the world but the little reed utters infinite music.

✦ The chalice is made of gold: gold must be gathered from the water and the mud and hewn from the rock, it must be beaten by countless little blows that give the chalice of sacrifice its beauty.

✦ The twigs and fluff of the bird's nest are brought from all sorts of places, from wherever the brave, careful mother alights, with fluttering but daring heart, to fetch them from the distances and explorations that only the spread wings of love know. It is the shape of her breast that molds the nest to its inviting roundness.

Thus it is with us: We may be formed by the knife, pared down, cut to the very core of our own being; we may be marked indelibly by a succession of strokes, blows from the goldbeater's hammer, or we may be shaped for our destiny by the love and tender devotion of a devoted family. Each one can, when

he has cleared out the rubble even for a day, look honestly at the material from which he is made, and ask the Holy Spirit to let It show him the way Christ wills to show Himself in his life. (Caryll Houselander, *Reed of God*, pp. 7-8.)

There are not too many passages in Scripture that directly deal with Mary, but there are enough for us to get the message. I am going to consider Luke's account, but there are many other beautiful connections that can be made through a better understanding of other passages, and I encourage you to study them as well.

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called **Nazareth**, to a virgin **betrothed** to a man named **Joseph, of the house of David**, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, **full of grace! The Lord is with you.**" But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?"

And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your



Mariotto Albertinelli, Annunciation, 1503, Oil on wood, 23 x 50 cm

relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God.” Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, “Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled. And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call

me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. (Luke 1:26-57, RCL)

Let’s consider just a few words from this passage:

NAZARETH: Nazareth was a less-than-remarkable town. The ancient Jews, and people generally, might wonder if anything really great could come from there. This is one more instance of God using the lowly to display His strength.

BETROTHED: Marriage for the Jews was a two-step process: first there was

the betrothal. This represented a covenant relationship, but did not include living together as man and wife. The betrothed couple lived separately for a time before fully embracing married life.

JOSEPH/ THE HOUSE OF DAVID:

Jesus' Davidic ancestry is established through Joseph. Joseph is declared to be, "of the house of David," so in marrying Joseph, Mary marries into the royal house of David. Further, Mary, as cousin to Elizabeth, a daughter of Aaron, could be thought to be of the tribe of Judah. The Messiah was to be a priest, prophet, and king. Mary, as cousin to Elizabeth, is of a priestly family, and therefore, so is Christ. Kingship is justified through Joseph, Priest through Mary, and Prophet through John (the new Elijah), who hands on a double portion of the spirit at the baptism in the Jordan, fulfilling the last prophecy of Mallachi.

FULL OF GRACE: The word used to express "full of grace" is *kecharitomine*. It means, "you who have been and continue to be graced." This word is used again in Ephesians 1:6–7, and is indicative of the kind of grace that brings redemption and the forgiveness of sin.

Mary received God's grace in anticipation of the Incarnation and crucifixion. This was not to exalt Mary but to elevate Christ from His very conception. If the Ark of the Covenant, which housed manna, the law, and the staff of Aaron, was made out of gold, surely the new ark, which would house God Himself, the Living Bread, the New Law, and The High Priest, ought to be a pure vessel. The Immaculate Conception is a fitting means to show us who Jesus is:

God Himself.

THE LORD IS WITH YOU: Mary is greatly troubled not by the appearance of the angel, but by the manner of his greeting. That's because this phrase indicates that God has a special and daunting mission for her. This phrase is used throughout salvation history whenever God addresses someone who is set apart and raised up for a special mission. For example, Gideon was so called to defend the Israelites against the Philistines. Moses was also so called. I'd be more than a little worried, too. God often raises the lowly, using their weakness to reveal His strength. For each of us, who struggle with fallen nature, this is both hopeful and heartening.

LOWLINESS: This reflects not only Mary's spiritual humility, but also a condition of great suffering. In fact, the word used (*tapeinosin*) is commonly used in the Old Testament to depict the affliction of God's people when persecuted and oppressed but about to be rescued by God's saving hand. Look at Psalm 136: "He who remembered us in our low estate and rescued us from our foes." What is Mary's low estate?

We know of no personal or individual affliction. In context, especially given the parallel to Zechariah, Mary's affliction is that of all Israel awaiting God's saving intervention. It also prepares us for the second part of the canticle: what God has done for Mary He will do for all those of low estate in Israel: the proud, the mighty, and the rich will be cast down and those of low estate, the hungry, will be exalted and filled. God will do for Mary what He will also do for all of Israel. Mary announces a series of so-

cial reversals which reflect what has been done for Mary and then, more broadly, what will be done for Israel as a whole. Jesus' public ministry embodies these reversals. At the heart of His teaching, in the Sermon on the Mount, we find the Beatitudes. Mary's Magnificat finds fulfillment in Jesus' public ministry.

Mary's song also anticipates the song of the Church, which proclaims the greatness of the Lord. In the first half we join with Mary in praising God for raising her up mercifully out of her lowliness to serve as the mother of the Messiah. In the second half we consider the implication of this for the Church today. What God has done for Mary He will do for all of us through her Son. Mary was the first Christian disciple to receive the amazing mercy of God through Jesus. Just as He met her in her lowliness and suffering and did great things for her, so He will rescue us from our own lowliness, which is rooted in weakness. Our weakness will reveal His strength.

MARY AS THE NEW ARK OF THE

COVENANT: In the Old Testament, the Ark was made of gold and held three things: a jar of manna, the staff of Aaron, and the stone tablets of the law. The Ark was used for worship, to draw near to God who showed His presence in the glory cloud above the ark, and for victory in war. While the Jews wandered, the Ark was carried along with them, residing in a special tent. With the establishment of the Davidic kingdom, God wanted a temple built to house the Ark. [is this a quote from Scripture or a paraphrase? Either way, we need a chapter/verse reference] Accordingly, King David went in haste from Baalejudah to Jerusalem, cross-

ing the hill country of Judea, to escort the Ark to Jerusalem where it would reside in the temple. While journeying, the oxen stumbled and Uzzah put his hand out to catch the Ark and prevent it from falling. He was struck dead for daring to approach the Ark when he was not authorized to do so. Surely God can keep Himself from falling! Obedience and trust are prized by God, and Uzzah provides a valuable lesson. King David, perhaps not entirely comfortable with that lesson, began to be uneasy and afraid, saying "How can the Ark of the Lord come to me?" He placed the Ark in the care of Obededum. The ark resided with him for three months, during which time the Lord blessed Obededum and all his household. After the three months, King David brought the Ark to Jerusalem, leaping and dancing before it. He and all the house of Israel shout with joy.

By way of parallel, the angel tells Mary that the power of the Most High will overshadow her. The Greek verb used here is the same one used to describe God's presence in the glory cloud over the Ark of the Covenant.

Mary went in haste over the same hill country to the town of Judah. She resided in the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth for three months, and they were blessed by her presence. Elizabeth's greeting echoed King David's: "How can the mother of my Lord come to me?" and "How can the Ark of the Lord come to me?"

Elizabeth's child leaped within her with joy, and Elizabeth herself exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women." In Greek the word for "loud cry" is *anaphoneo*. It is found only once



Fra Angelico, Visitation 1433-34, Tempera on wood, Museo Diocesano, Cortona

in the New Testament and six times in the Old Testament. It is used to describe the levitical priests praising God in word and song before the Ark of the Covenant. It is no accident that Elizabeth is described as “a daughter of Aaron,” of the house of Levi.

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the babe in her womb leapt for joy and she herself was filled with the Holy Spirit. Both mother and son prophesied to the extent that each was able. At that point, all John could do was leap. (It is also no accident that the word used to describe King David leaping and dancing before the Ark of the Covenant is the same used to describe John’s less theatrical attempt.)

BLESSED AMONG WOMEN: Just two other women have been addressed this way: Judith and Jael. Both are warrior women who helped Israel defeat her pagan enemies. Jael crushed the head of a pagan general, and Judith severed the head of an Assyrian general. This

striking at the head recalls the prophecy of Genesis 3:15: The seed of the woman will strike at the head of the serpent. Mary is a warrior woman. She is the fulfillment of what Jael and Judith prefigure. In the battle for our souls, she will crush the head of the real enemy, Satan, through her Son. Her Son will save Israel from the real evil we all face: sin.

ACTIVITIES:

Make Mom queen for the day. This could take many forms, and is in some way limited by the abilities of children, but every child can pray for mom, and most recognize that mother already appeals to Mother Mary many times throughout the day. Some do not realize how often, nor how much, they rely on her, so making Mom queen for the day helps children better appreciate both their earthly and heavenly mother, both of whom work tirelessly for the good of their children. I know that is true of

Mary, and it's mostly true, on good days, of the rest of us.

Honor pregnant moms. Do something special for a pregnant mom, or help out in some way at a Crisis Pregnancy Center.

Celebrate Feast of the Immaculate Conception (December 8). Watch The Song of Bernadette. **Make a grotto.** You can do this using a shoebox, a holy card/image of Mary, and whatever decorations appeal to you or are readily available: gravel glued to the walls, candles for the brave of heart who do not worry about house fires, faux ivy for the garden happy who are frustrated by winter weather, and so on. For the faint of heart or artistically challenged, you can buy a kit, or at least get ideas here: <http://www.illuminatedink.com/>. You will not only find grotto kits, but also Marian banners, coloring cut-outs, and other fun and beautiful things.

Make a rosary or chaplet. A friend of mine made one for me incorporating the names of each of my children in every decade. It is, therefore, a nine decade rosary. I make it my habit to start at the one end first and then the other, which means our middle child is always prayed for. I hope that does not mean he needs it more than most, but if so, I'm working on it. The possibilities are endless, and of course a personalized rosary or chaplet would make a lovely Christmas gift for anyone. For concrete ideas see: <http://rosarieswithnames.com/>

Celebrate Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12). Use a rose-colored tablecloth, edge it with blue-green tissue paper, and decorate with roses and stars. You can make them



yourself, or buy faux roses in bunches and stickers and use those. “Guadalupe” was the name of Bishop Zumarraga’s monastery in Spain. The Aztec Indians could not pronounce this word, but its closest approximation is *te Coatloxopeuh*, which means “she who crushes the serpent.” The feathered serpent-god *Quetzalcoatl* was indeed “crushed” by her: Thousands of Aztecs converted to Christianity because of her, and Mexico remains devoted to the Lady of Guadalupe to this day.

The fact that she looked Aztec and was given or took a Spanish name suggested the possibility of peace between two peoples who, until her appearance, had been enemies. She stands upon a crescent moon and before the glittering sun, which places her “above” both the sun-god *Huitzilopochtli* and the moon-goddesses, *Coyalxauhqui* and *Tonantzin*. Her blue-green mantle is a sign of royalty, and the stars on its surface are apparently astronomically correct, corresponding to December 12, 1531, the day of her last appearance. The four-petal flower on her womb is said to symbolize life, move-

ment, and deity; and the rest of the designs on her dress form a contour map of Mexico that pinpoints the location of her apparition. The black belt about her waist indicates that she is with child, and her folded hands, downcast eyes, and the little black cross at her throat all indicate her obedience to and faith in the Christian God. Lastly, and more difficult to ascertain, reflections have been seen in her eyes, exactly as they would appear in a normal human eye. They are believed to be the reflections of the Bishop and his interpreters, who stood before her in the Bishop's house when Juan Diego let his tilma fall. A tilma is a rough-and-tumble covering, made from the maguey plant, and does not usually last for more than forty years. This tilma has survived, perfectly intact, for four hundred and seventy-seven years; the image is still clear, though how it came to be on the coarse fabric, as well as the paint or other substance of which it is composed, remains a mystery.

The roses that fell from Juan Diego's tilma were the same kind that grew near the Guadalupe Monastery in Spain. Because it is known as the Queen of Flowers, the rose stands primarily for Mary, but Mary points always to her Son, so the various parts of the rose signify Christ. The thorns of His crown cover the stem, the five largest petals point to His five great wounds, and the unfolding of the bud into the mature rose points to the fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New. It is also significant that rose-hips are edible, able to nourish the human body as Christ's Body and Blood nourish the children of God.

Roses, especially red ones, signify love because the heart that beats faster at the sight, or throbs at the absence, of

the beloved is red. The blood that courses through the body and keeps it alive is also red. Moreover, roses are perennials, making them a fitting sign for unending love; they bloom throughout the year. What makes the rose the most fitting symbol of love, however, is not its color or the fact that it blooms year-round but its thorns. Otherwise, the tulip could as easily be the symbol for love. Its colors are as vivid as the rose's and it is also a perennial, but one can crush its stem with a firm grip and bruise its petals with a careless touch. Roses, on the other hand, prick the hands that pluck them; roses draw blood, cause pain. Because of this, roses are a sign not only of the strength and endurance of love but also of the sacrifice that love entails. For Christians, the prime example of this is the love that Christ has for His Church. The Song of Songs describes the relationship between Christ and His Church using the metaphor of a bride and bridegroom. At one point, it speaks of the bridegroom as: "the rose of Sharon" (Song of Songs 2:1).

BOOKS:

Mary, My Mother by Sister Mary Jean Dorcy's

Leading Little Ones to Mary by Sister Mary Lelia, S.S.N.D.

Mary by Demi

The Life of Mary by Inos Biffi. I enjoy Biffi's books because the illustrations seem to meld East and West, having something of icons as well as something of stained glass. The narrative is not terribly in depth but never cursory, either, and always completely faithful and trustworthy.



*Romano Antoniazzi, (detail) Nativity with
Sts Lawrence and Andrew 1480-85
Tempera on panel, 142 x 176 cm
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome*

Mary, Mother of Jesus by Mary Joslin
Simply, but elegantly told through the eyes of Mary herself, now an old woman.

Came the Dawn: Mary of Nazareth, God's Mother and Ours (Encounter Books).

The Song of Bernadette by Louis de Wohl

The Story of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Empress of the Americas by C. Lourdes Walsh.

Queen Mother by Edward Sri

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Part Three:

THE COMING OF THE MESSIAH
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There are many ways to prepare for the coming of Christ, but the one that makes the most sense to me is the one that God used to prepare His people: prophets and prophecies. They say the devil is in the details, but they're dead wrong. God uses people, events, and even things to teach us and draw us closer to Himself, and Scripture makes that abundantly clear.

“In the days of King Herod...”
(Luke 1:5-7).

This verse not only provides us with a time period, but also a social context. Herod was a pagan from Edom. He ruled, not because he was in the line of David, but because the Romans had appointed him. When Jews heard “King Herod,” they were immediately reminded of their oppression. He levied heavy taxes, so heavy that many went into debt to pay them. Eventually they would lose the land that had been passed on from generation to generation, the land promised them, and even becomes slaves again, working for Herod. They were looking for a Savior, the Messiah. That is why the appearance of Gabriel to both Mary and Zechariah would have been so exciting.

Gabriel appears four times in the Scriptures, and each time he does so it is to help prepare God's people for the coming of the Messiah. That is why he is sometimes called the Angel of the Incarnation.

The first time Gabriel appears, he does so to the prophet Daniel. Daniel has been praying and doing a little math. Daniel, who is not only a prophet but also a holy, faithful Jew, is excited because he knows it's been seventy years since Jeremiah told the Israelites that the

Babylonians would reign for seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11; 29:10). Maybe now the kingdom of Israel will be restored! He gets a vision of a ram with two horns, which is overcome by a he-goat. Gabriel explains that the ram is the empire of the Medo-Persians, which will be destroyed by the he-goat, the king of the Greeks. It is not yet time for the kingdom to be restored.

The next time Gabriel appears it is also to Daniel who has been praying on behalf of all Israel, asking God to forgive their sinfulness and free them from their oppressors. Gabriel appears just as Daniel is offering incense in a holy place. He tells of the coming of the Messiah and the destruction of Jerusalem and its sanctuary in “seventy weeks of years” (Daniel 9: 21-27). The number seven is holy because on the seventh day God rested, so seventy weeks—seventy sevens—is especially holy. There are seven days in a week, so seventy weeks of years indicates four hundred ninety years. If you read a little history and do a little math, you will find that four hundred ninety years from the time of Daniel brings you to the birth of Christ. This is why the Messiah was expected. Sadly, He was not recognized, but that is because man imagined a very different kind of Savior, and Christ just did not fit the bill.

Gabriel’s next appearance is recorded in Luke 1:11–20. Zechariah is burning incense before God on behalf of all Israel, which is exactly what Daniel was doing. The name Zechariah means “Yahweh remembers.” Elizabeth means “God by whom we swear.” Those two names together tell us of a covenant that God remembers, through them. How? Through their son, John.

Who was Zechariah? From the text

we know he was a priest of the division of Abijah. Elizabeth was a daughter of Aaron, the first high priest, which would mean that Elizabeth has a priestly heritage and this family has a priestly inheritance. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth are said to be righteous before God, following the Commandments and blameless. These are model Jews. That is what makes verse 7 so strange, especially given the thinking of the day: They have no children. Elizabeth is barren.

Children were seen as a great blessing (as they are, and should be!). Lack of children was viewed as a sign of God’s displeasure, a kind of curse. Because of the care Luke takes to describe the virtue of both Zechariah and Elizabeth, there can be no question of their personal holiness. Their physical barrenness represents the spiritual barrenness of all of Israel. This becomes clearer as we read further.

Among the Levites, there were twenty-four divisions of priests. Every two years they’d serve for a month in the Temple. Because there were many priests and few functions, they’d cast lots to see who did what. This was not a kind of gamble; it was reserved for priestly duties, and it was a way to determine God’s will. This day Zechariah is chosen, by lot, to burn the incense. To fully appreciate the significance of that, one has to know something about Jewish liturgical custom and belief.

A priest could only burn incense in the Temple once in his lifetime. Ever after, that priest would never cast his lot for that function again. Because there were so many Levites, not every priest got the opportunity. It was a tremendous privilege. Why? The burning of the incense was done by one priest, in the Court of Priests, just outside the Holy of Holies,

and it represented the prayer of all of Israel. It was done morning and evening, and everyone joined in this prayer from the outer portions of the Temple.

This day, after Zechariah has burned the incense representing the prayer of all Israel, he sees an angel of the Lord: Gabriel. The angel tells him not to be afraid, his prayer is heard, and his wife will bear a son. Which prayer is heard? Surely Zechariah and his wife have been praying for a child for many years, but, given the circumstances, the prayer that is immediately being answered is the one that has just been offered. This child is an answer to the prayer of all Israel, suffering under the oppression of Rome and Herod. John will be a blessing to Elizabeth and Zechariah surely, but even more so to the people of Israel.

The angel tells us three things about John: He will be great before the Lord; he will not drink wine or strong drink; he will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb. This describes a Nazarite, one who was set apart and consecrated by a vow. He would not cut his hair nor would he drink wine or strong drink (Numbers 6:1–8). Samson was a Nazarite, as was Samuel. Both of these men were judges; in Jewish culture at this time judges were often military leaders—they protected the Israelites and defended them. They also prepared the way for a king of Judea. Just as Samuel anointed David, John will prepare the way for a new King, of the line of David, who will also be the Messiah. He does this at the baptism in the Jordan River. To be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be a prophet (1 Samuel 10:10). John is a prophet, and the only one to prophesy from the womb (Luke 1:41).

What will this child do? He will turn

the sons of Israel to God; He will have the spirit and power of Elijah; and He will turn the heart of children to their fathers. Gabriel is describing the prophet spoken of in the last prophecy sent to Israel:

Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and suddenly there will come to the temple the Lord whom you seek . . . Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and terrible day, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers (Malachi 1:3-4).

Based upon this prophecy, there was a hope that Elijah would somehow come back. The Jews were waiting for a new Elijah. Taking into account Christ's teaching on how to pray (the Our Father), it does not seem a stretch that John prepared the way for Christ, who turns our hearts to the Father.

When Zechariah questions the angel, he seems to respond strangely, "I am Gabriel . . ." That's odd only because we are not as familiar with Scripture as we ought to be. Daniel was aware of the prophecies of Jeremiah, which stated that the reign of the Babylonians would be seventy years. The clock is ticking, and it's time: seventy years have passed (Jeremiah 25:11; 29:10). Daniel prays and fasts and repents for the sin of all Israel. He prays on behalf of all Israel, a parallel to Zechariah. Gabriel appears to Daniel at the time of the incense offered on what is now a holy hill, which is as close to the Temple as Daniel can get given his options. That's why when Gabriel states who he is ought to be an answer if Zechariah, a faithful Jew, knew his history.

ACTIVITIES:

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Make an Angel Cake. Decorate it with lilies, the symbol of Gabriel.

Make shape cookies: lions for Daniel, angels for Gabriel, man for Christ Incarnate, woman for Mary, hearts for the hearts that are turned by Christ, and sheep, donkeys, cows, stars, etc.

Make a Jesse tree. Make them with Old Testament prophecies on one side of the ornament and their New Testament fulfillment on the other. (See listing below.)

BOOKS:

Christmas Night, Fair and Bright by Julie Stiegemeyer

The Wonder of Christmas by Dandi Daley Mackell.

The Animals Christmas by Eaton. This is a collection of delightful poems and stories. It was written at a time when authors were not sensitive to racism, however. Very occasionally there are descriptions or comments that might be considered inappropriate.

A Child in Winter by Caryll Houselander. This is an excellent book of meditations for the entire season of Christmas: Advent through Epiphany. It draws heavily from her other works, which is a plus because it provides a decent exposure to Houselander's reflections on a variety of topics. These selections are specifically related to properly preparing for Christmas, and each has additional commentary to facilitate just that.

Do Angels Watch Close By? by Mary Joslin. You cannot see angels, normally, but we each have one who guards and guides. Everyone, at some point, feels alone and is frightened to be so, which

makes this little book an ideal bedtime read. Some angels have extra-special jobs, like Gabriel, but every guardian angel has a special job: you!

Stories of Jesus for Boys and Girls by Catherine Beebe

Little Stories of Jesus by Daughters of St. Paul

A Life of Our Lord by Marigold Hunt

The Divine Story by Monsignor C.J. Holland

Autumn and Advent by Rosemary Haughton. A great series, done in 1960s, which in itself is a bit of a wonder.

Children's Advent and Christmas, Vita et Pax, by the Benedictine Nuns of Cockfosters. The text is excellent, but the pictures are rather modern.

For older high school or adult reading:

The Prince of Peace by Alban Goodier

The Life of Christ by Bishop Sheen

Reed of God by Houselander

Jesus of Nazareth by Mother Mary Loyola

Dawn of the Messiah by Edward Sri

Mystery of the Kingdom by Edward Sri

Mission of the Messiah by Tim Gray

Witnesses of the Messiah by Stephen Pimentel

A Beginner's Guide to the Books of the Bible by Jacobson and Kysar

HELPFUL RESOURCES

He Cometh by William McGarry

The Catholic Parent Book of Feasts by Martin, Puccio, and Romanowski

My Nameday, Come for Dessert by Helen McLoughlin

Around the Year with the Trapp Family by Maria von Trapp

Twelve Days of Christmas by Elsa Chaney

Jennifer Gregory Miller's blog: <http://familyfeastandferia.wordpress.com>

Celebrating Advent & Christmas: A Sourcebook for Families: <http://www.wf-f.org/Advent-Christmas-bookTOC.html>

Part Four:

THE CHURCH, MOTHER
AND TEACHER

Mother and Teacher of all nations—such is the Catholic Church in the mind of her Founder, Jesus Christ; to hold the world in an embrace of love, that men, in every age, should find in her their own completeness in a higher order of living, and their ultimate salvation. She is “the pillar and ground of the truth.” To her was entrusted by her holy Founder the twofold task of giving life to her children and of teaching them and guiding them—both as individuals and as nations—with maternal care. (Pope John XXII, *Mater et Magistra*, May 15, 1961)

Just as Mary gave life to Jesus, keeping him safe as He grew within her, nourishing him even while she was nourished by Him, so, too, the Church gives life to us, feeds us and helps us grow. She does so through Her sacraments, teachings,

liturgical seasons and symbols, taking every opportunity, speaking to us as God does: through people, events, stories, and even things themselves. One wonderful example of this is the various Christmas Day Masses.

My uninformed opinion was that midnight Mass was for the hard-core and impatient, those who would not wait one minute longer than they had to in order to celebrate the birth of Christ. Then Mass late in the day was for those who prized their sleep, or were old and infirm. I could not have been more wrong; it has nothing to do with practicality or personal inclinations!

On Christmas Day, however, several masses are said on account of Christ's threefold nativity. Of these the first is His eternal birth, which is hidden in our regard, and therefore one mass is sung in the night, in the “Introit” of which we say: “The Lord said unto Me: Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee.” The second is His nativity in time, and the spiritual birth, whereby Christ rises “as the day-star in our hearts” (2 Peter 1:19), and on this account the mass is sung at dawn, and in the “Introit” we say: “The light will shine on us today.” The third is Christ's temporal and bodily birth, according as He went forth from the virginal womb, becoming visible to us through being clothed with flesh: and on that account the third mass is sung in broad daylight, in the “Introit” of which we say: “A child is born to us.” Nevertheless, on the other hand, it can be said that His eternal generation, of itself, is in the full light, and on this account in the gospel of the third mass mention is made of His eternal birth. But regarding His birth in the body, He was literally born during the night, as a sign that He came to the



darknesses of our infirmity; hence also in the midnight mass we say the gospel of Christ's nativity in the flesh. (St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Q. 83, art 2)

Our God is an awesome God, and His Church is an incredible teacher!

The very structure of a church, especially that of a cathedral, provides opportunities to teach. The main body of the church is called the nave, for good reason. It stems from the Latin word *navis*, meaning "boat, or ship." Ships keep us safe, even on stormy seas, and they bring us where we want to go. The Apostles' experience reminds us that, with Jesus on board, no matter how scary life gets, all will be well.

The nave is traditionally facing the east, so that the faithful see the rising sun, a symbol of our focus upon the Light of the World who dispels all darkness. Light is a perfect metaphor for God: all embracing yet invisible. Nothing can hide from the light, and without it we stumble around, or worse, become completely lost. We need light. We don't always recognize that we do walk in darkness, but God's grace can overcome that. Unfortunately, we have to recognize our situation, see that we don't see, before we

can begin to correct that. Churches are constructed so as to remind us of this. Walk into a cathedral and you are immediately plunged into darkness. But enter the nave and you are flooded with light. "Just as Christ blinded Saul and then sent him help in the person of Ananias, so the cathedral casts us into shadows and then shows us the light" (Fr. Robert Barron, *Heaven in Stone and Glass*, p. 23).

It's not just light we see once inside the body of the church. That light streams through beautiful windows, each of which tells a story. The rose windows of the great cathedrals are especially illuminating. First of all, the rose stands for Mary, but Mary always points us to Christ. Christ is always at the center of every rose window, though He might be just a tiny Babe in Mary's lap. He is surrounded by a series of medallions, always somehow related to one another, but also always somehow ordered to Christ. The message is clear: Make Christ the center of your life, and order all things to Him.

The nave of the cathedral is intersected by the transept, and the two form a cross. We are redeemed by the Cross and called to take up our own. It is the foundation of the Christian life.

In the cathedral, the cross is, structurally, foundational. It's the floor that bears our weight. As we move along the walls saying the Stations of the Cross, we're actually walking a cross!

All cathedrals—whether situated upon a hill or not—have spires or towers that seem to stretch towards Heaven: a reminder of the very first “churches”: Mount Sinai, Mount Zion, and Golgotha. This theme of height is prevalent. Obviously the towers, spires, and domes of a church attest to it; but it is also evident in arches, vaults, and cupolas. All of these species of architecture indicate a straining after Heaven, a desire to reach our God.

There are many other fascinating aspects of cathedrals, too many to consider them all, but one of the most astonishing is what I call “holy math.” Numbers come up all the time in Scripture, and they are always indicative of something. The first chapter of John is a new creation, and the numbered days work out perfectly. Matthew's Gospel starts out with a little holy math, too. His genealogy is structured in three sets of fourteen generations. In Hebrew, every letter has a numerical value. If you do the math, the value for “David” is fourteen. Thus, Matthew's Gospel begins by proclaiming, “David! David! David!” If I want our children to get something, I usually have to say it more than once, too.

The same kind of holy math we find in Scripture can be seen in the windows of the great cathedrals. The north window of Chartres Cathedral is especially appropriate for Advent. Robert Barron describes this well:

There are five sets of twelve medallions surrounding the central circle; and twelve is the result of multiplying three

(the Divine Persons) and four (the earth, with its four corners, four winds, four seasons). Hence, the rose announces the central truth of Christianity, the mixing of heaven and earth in the Incarnate Christ, the reestablishing of the lost harmony of the world (Heaven in Stone and Glass. Crossroad Publishing, 2000, p. 106.).

It's Christmas! Because God is God—all good, all loving, and all powerful—all is right with His world. Remember, all things work for good.

ACTIVITIES:

Visit a cathedral, if you can, or various churches, and see what each teaches.

Watch *Cathedral* by David Macauley (PBS Home Video.)

Watch *Modern Marvels-Gothic Cathedrals* (History Channel A&E).

Make a model of a cathedral. You can use “A Model of Canterbury Cathedral: A Colourful Scale Model”, or “Make This Model: Cathedral” (Usborne).

BOOKS:

The Symbols of the Church by Maurice Dilasser

Heaven in Stone and Glass by Robert Barron

Cathedral by David Macauley

Prophecies Concerning the Coming of Jesus There are many scriptural references concerning the coming Messiah, more than enough for each day of Advent. John Salza's list easily lends itself to daily reflection, copywork, and memorization. It can be found at http://www.scripturecatholic.com/messianic_prophecies.html. ♡