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“GOD SENT HIS SON

THAT WE MIGHT BE ADOPTED AS GOD’S CHILDREN”

First Meditation for Advent 2021

Last Lent I tried to shed some light on the danger of living “etsi Christus non daretur,” that is, “as if Christ had never existed.” Continuing this line of thought, in this year’s Advent meditations I would like to call attention to another analogous danger: that of living “as if the Church were nothing more than” scandals, controversies, personality clashes, gossip, or at best, at least socially useful. In short, just human, like everything else in the course of history.

I would like to shed light on the inner splendor of the Church and the Christian life. We must not close our eyes to factual reality nor evade our responsibilities; at the same time, we need to face them from a correct perspective and not allow ourselves to be crushed by them. We cannot expect journalists and the media to take into account how the Church views itself, but the worst possible outcome would be if we, Church people and ministers of the Gospel, were likewise to end up losing sight of the mystery that dwells within the Church and resign ourselves to playing on someone else’s turf and always on the defensive.

Speaking about the proclamation of the Gospel, the Apostle wrote: “We carry this treasure in fragile clay jars” (2 Cor 4:7). It would be foolish to spend all of our time and energy focusing on the “fragile clay jars” while forgetting about “the treasure”. The Apostle gives us a reason to assert the positive that exists even in a situation like ours. He says that this is “so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Cor 4:7).

The Church is like the stained glass windows of a cathedral. (I experienced this while visiting Chartres Cathedral.) If you look at the windows from the outside, from the street, all you see are pieces of dark glass held together by dark strips of lead. But if you go inside and look at those same windows with the light pouring in, what a splendid array of colors, stories, and meanings unfolds before your eyes! I am suggesting that we look at the Church from the inside, in the deepest meaning of the word, to see it in light of the mystery that it bears.

During Lent, the Chalcedonian Definition that Christ is truly human and truly divine in a single person guided our meditations. This season we will take our lead from one of the more typical Advent liturgical texts, Galatians 4:4-7, which reads:

When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. The proof that you are children is that God has sent into your hearts his Son’s Spirit which cries out: “Abba! Father!” Therefore you are no longer a slave but a child; and if a child, then also an heir, by God’s grace.

In its brevity, this passage is a synthesis of the entire Christian mystery. It encompasses the Trinity: God the Father, his Son, and the Holy Spirit; the incarnation: “God *sent* his Son;” and all of this, not as some abstract, out-of-time experience, but within the context of salvation history: “in the fullness of time.” Discretely, but no less essential, is the presence of Mary: “born of a woman.” And, finally, the upshot of all this: women and men are made children of God and temples of the Holy Spirit.

*Children of God!*

In this initial meditation, I would like to reflect on the first part of the text: “God sent his Son so that we might receive adoption as God’s children.” The fatherhood of God is at the heart of Jesus’ preaching. Even in the Hebrew Scriptures, God is seen as a father. The novelty here is that now God is seen not so much as the “father of his people Israel” in a collective sense, so to speak, but as the father of each human being in an individual and personal sense, of both the righteous and the sinner. God cares about each one as if that person were the only one; God knows the needs, the thoughts and counts the number of hairs on the head of each one.

The mistake of Liberal Theology, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (especially in its most renowned representative, Adolf von Harnack), was to view the fatherhood of God as the essence of the Gospel, leaving aside Christ’s divinity and the Paschal Mystery. Another error (which began with the heresy of Marcion in the 2nd century and was never completely eradicated) was to view the God of the Hebrew Scriptures as a just, holy, powerful, and thundering God, and the God of Jesus Christ as a tender, affable and merciful “daddy-figure” God.

The novelty brought by Christ does not consist in this. Rather, it consists in the fact that God, who remains as he was described in the Hebrew Testament, namely, thrice holy, just, and all-powerful, is now given to us as our papa! This is the image set in place by Jesus in the opening words of the *Our Father* and which expresses, in a nutshell, all that follows: “Our Father who art in heaven.” You are in heaven, that is, you are the Most High, the transcendent One, as high above us as the heavens are above the earth, but still, “our father” – or as the original puts it: “Abba!” – somewhat akin to saying our papa, my dad.

This is also the image of God that the Church places at the head of its Creed. “I believe in one God, the Father almighty”: father, but still almighty: almighty, but still father, This is, after all, what every child needs – a parent who bends down to them, who is tender, with whom they can play, but who, at the same time, is strong and can be relied on for protection, who instills in them courage and freedom.

In Jesus’ preaching, we get a glimpse of the real novelty that changes everything. God is not just a father in a metaphorical and moral sense in so far as he created and cares for his people. God is – first of all – a real father of a real son begotten “before the dawn,” meaning before time began, and it will be thanks to this only Son that people will also be able to become God’s children in a real sense and not just metaphorically. This novelty shines in the way Jesus addresses himself to the Father calling him *Abbà*, and also through his words: “No one knows the Father but the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Mt 11:27).

It must be noted, however, that in the preaching of the earthly Jesus the radical novelty that he brought about is not yet apparent. The scope of the title “father” lingers in a moral sense, that is, it describes how God acts towards humanity and the feeling that humans should nurture regarding God. The relationship is still of an existential type, not yet ontological and essential. For this to happen, the Paschal Mystery of his death and resurrection was needed.

Paul is a reflection of this post-Easter stage of faith. Thanks to the redemption brought about by Christ and imparted to us in Baptism, we are no longer God’s children in a moral sense alone, but also in a real, ontological sense. We have become “sons in the Son,” and Christ has become the “firstborn of many brothers and sisters” (Rom 8:29).

To express all this the Apostle uses the notion of adoption: “…that we might receive adoption as children” “God destined us for adoption as his children” (Eph 1:5). It is only an analogy, and as with any analogy, it cannot express the fullness of the mystery. In itself, human adoption is a legal fact. Adopted children may assume the surname, citizenship, and residence of the adoptive parent, but they do not share their blood or DNA. Conception, birthing pangs, and delivery were not involved. This is not the case with us. God not only imparts to us being called his children, but he also imparts to us his intimate life, his Spirit which is, so to speak, his DNA. By Baptism, the very life of God flows within us.

On this point, John is more daring than Paul. He does not speak in terms of adoption, but of real birthing, God giving us birth. Those who believed in Christ “were begotten by God” (Jn 1:13); in Baptism, we are “born of the Spirit;” one is “born again from above” (see Jn 3:5-6).

*From faith to amazement*

Thus far we have touched on the truths of our faith. It is not, however, on these that I would like to focus. These are things that we already know and that we can read about in any manual of biblical theology, in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and books on spirituality. What, then, is the “different” aspect that we want to focus on in this reflection?

My starting point for discovering it is a sentence used by our Holy Father in his catechesis on the Letter to the Galatians at the General Audience of last September 8. After quoting our text on the adoption as children, he added: “We Christians often take for granted this reality of being children of God. We might live the great gift we have received with more awareness,—and it would be good for us—, if we were always to keep in mind the moment of our Baptism when we became one.”

We all face a mortal danger, namely taking for granted the most sublime truths of our faith, including that of being children of God, the Creator of the universe, the Almighty One, the Eternal One, the giver of life. St. John Paul II, in his letter on the Eucharist, written shortly before his death, spoke about the “Eucharistic amazement” that Christians ought to rediscover.[[1]](#footnote-1) The same should be said about our being children of the divine: we must pass from faith to amazement. I would go so far as to say from faith to unbelief! I speak of a very special type of unbelief: that of those who believe without being able to grasp what they believe because it is so immense and unthinkable.

Indeed, we hesitate to put into words the consequence of being children of God because it simply boggles the mind. Being such, the ontological gap that separates God from humans is smaller than the ontological gap that separates us from the rest of creation, because by grace we “share in the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4).

An example might serve better than a host of arguments to understand what it means not to take for granted being children of God. Following her conversion, St. Margaret of Cortona went through a period of terrible anguish. God seemed to be angry with her and at times made her recall, one by one, all the sins she had committed down to the smallest detail, making her want to vanish from the face of the earth. One day, after communion, quite unexpectedly a voice within her said: “My daughter!” She had resisted a review of all her faults, but she could not resist the tenderness of this voice. She fell into an ecstasy and, during the ecstasy, witnesses present heard her franticly repeat in amazement:

I am his daughter; he said so. O infinite tenderness of my God! The word I craved! So insistently sought! Word whose sweetness surpasses all sweetness! What an ocean of joy! My daughter! My God said it! My daughter![[2]](#footnote-2)

Well before St. Margaret, the Apostle John came to that same shocking realization. He wrote: “Witness the depth of love God has for us that we should be called God’s children. And that is what we truly are!” (1 Jn 3:1). This sentence is clearly intended to be read with an exclamation point.

*Unleashing one’s Baptism*

Why is it so important to move beyond faith to amazement, from beliefs (*fides quae*) to believing (*fides qua*)? Isn’t it enough just to believe? No, and for a very simple reason: because this – and only this – really changes your life!

Let take a look at the path that leads to this new level of faith. As we heard, the Holy Father invited us to return to our Baptism. To understand how a sacrament received many years ago –often at the beginning of our lives – can suddenly come back to life and release new spiritual energy, we need to keep in mind certain facets of sacramental theology.

Catholic theology acknowledges the idea of a sacrament that is both valid and licit, but “tethered” or “frozen”. Baptism is often a “tethered” sacrament. A sacrament is said to be “tethered” if its effects remain inhibited and hindered due to the lack of certain conditions that impede its effectiveness. An extreme example would be the sacrament of Matrimony or Holy Orders received in a state of mortal sin. In those circumstances, such sacraments cannot confer any grace on the individuals. However, once the obstacle of sin is removed through a good confession, it is said that the sacrament revives (*reviviscit*) without needing to repeat the sacramental rite, thanks to the fidelity and irrevocability of God’s gift.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As I mentioned, Matrimony and Holy Orders are extreme examples, but there could be other cases in which a sacrament, although not completely tethered, is also not completely unleashed, that is, free to work its effects. In the case of Baptism, what is it that could cause the effects of the sacrament to remain frozen? Sacraments are not magical rites that work mechanically without our knowing it or without some cooperation on our part. Their effectiveness is the result of synergy or collaboration between divine omnipotence (specifically, the grace of Christ of the Holy Spirit) and human freedom.

In the sacrament, everything that depends on the grace or will of Christ is referred to as “the work accomplished” (*opus operatum*); that is, the finished work, the objective and inevitable effects of the sacrament when validly administered. On the other hand, everything that depends on the recipient’s freedom and disposition is called “the work yet to be accomplished” (*opus operantis*), that is, what remains to be carried out, the human contribution.

What we receive from God – the so-called “grace of Baptism” – is multifaceted and very rich. It includes our becoming children of God, the remission of sins, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the planting of the seeds of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity into our souls. The human contribution consists essentially of faith! “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mk 16:16). When grace and freedom touch in perfect synchronism, like two poles, one positive and one negative, light and power are unleashed.

In the case of infant Baptism (and also in adult Baptism when deep conviction and participation are lacking), that synchronism is missing. I’m not suggesting that we abandon the practice of infant Baptism. The Church has always rightly practiced it and defended it on the basis that Baptism is a gift of God even prior to being the result of a human choice. Rather, we need to acknowledge what this practice involves, given the new historical situation in which we live.

In times past, when the entire environment was Christian and impregnated with faith, this faith could blossom, albeit gradually. The free and personal act of faith was “supplied by the Church” and expressed, as it were, through a third party, namely the parents and godparents. This is no longer the case. The environment in which a child grows up today is less conducive to helping faith blossom in the child. Often neither is the family, and even less so the school system, and least of all our society and culture.

This is why I spoke about Baptism as a “tethered” sacrament. It is like a very precious gift package that remains unopened, like a Christmas gift, misplaced somewhere and forgotten about, even before it was opened. Whoever has it has everything they need to carry out all the acts required in the life of a Christian, and also experiences some of its effects at least partially, but does not enjoy the fullness of the reality. In the language of St. Augustine, they experience the sacrament (*sacramentum*), but not – at least not fully – the reality of the sacrament (the *res sacramenti*).

The fact that we are here meditating on this already means that we have believed, that faith has been joined to the sacrament in us. What, then, are we still lacking? We lack faith-as-amazement, the wide-eyed *Wow*! of wonder and excitement as that you get when you open a gift and which is, to the gift-giver, the best reward of all. The Greek Fathers referred to Baptism as “enlightenment” (*photismos*). Has that type of enlightenment ever occurred in us?

We ask ourselves: is it possible, and is it even right, for us to aspire to this different level of faith in which we not only believe a truth but also experience and taste the truth that we believe? Christian spirituality has often been accompanied by reluctance and even (as in the case of the Reformers) by a negation of the experiential and mystical dimension of the Christian life as if it were somehow inferior and contrary to pure faith. But despite the abuses that have also occurred, the Christian tradition has never downplayed the wisdom tradition which holds that the apex of faith is in “savoring” the truth of what we believe and in “tasting” the truth, including the bitter taste of the truth of the cross.

In biblical language, *to know* does not mean having an idea of something that remains distinct and apart from me. It means entering into a relationship and experiencing it. (The term is used even about knowing your wife and knowing the loss of children!). The evangelist John exclaims: “We have *known and believed* the love God has towards us” (1 Jn 4:16), and again: “We have *believed and known* that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:69). Why say “known and believed?” What does “known” add to “believed”? It adds a certain inner conviction that occurs when truth confronts the spirit and one is compelled to exclaim from deep within: “Yes, it’s true, there is no doubt, that’s it!” The truth that is *believed* becomes a reality that is *lived*. St. Thomas Aquinas put it this way: “Fides non terminatur ad enuntiabile sed ad rem,” that is, “Faith does not end in an utterance, but with reality.”[[4]](#footnote-4) We never cease discovering the practical consequences of this principle.

*The role of God’s word*

How can we make this qualitative leap from faith to the amazement of knowing we are God’s children? The first answer is the word of God! (There is an equally essential means, namely the Holy Spirit, but we will leave that for our next meditation). St. Gregory the Great compared the Word of God to flint, that is, to the stone once used to produce a spark that ignited a fire. He said it is necessary to do with the Word of God what is done with the flint: to strike it repeatedly until it produces a spark.[[5]](#footnote-5) Ponder it, repeat it, even out loud.

During your prayer time or adoration, with your whole heart, and without becoming bored, repeat within yourself: “A child of God! I am a son of God; I am a daughter of God. God is my father!” Or simply repeat for some time: “Our Father who art in heaven” without continuing the rest of the prayer. As you do so, it is more necessary than ever to remember the words of Jesus: “Knock and it will be opened to you” (Mt 7:7). Sooner or later, and perhaps when you least expect it, it will happen – the reality of those words, if only for a moment, will explode within you and will be enough for the rest of your life. And even if nothing sensational should happen, be assured that you have achieved what is essential. The rest will be given to you in heaven: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn 3:2)

*We are All Brothers and Sisters!*

One of the immediate effects of all this is that you will become aware of your dignity. On Christmas Eve, St. Leo the Great will exhort us: “Recognize, O Christian, your dignity. Once you have shared in the divine nature would you really want to return to the wretchedness of your past?”[[6]](#footnote-6) What dignity could be greater than being a child of God? The story is told of an arrogant mean daughter of the king of France who constantly scolded one of her maids. One day she shouted in her face, “Don’t you know that I’m the daughter of your king?” To which the maid replied, “And don’t you know that I am the daughter of your God?”

Another even more important by-product is that you become more aware of the dignity of other people who are also sons and daughters of God. For us Christians, human solidarity as brothers and sisters is ultimately rooted in the fact that God is the father of us all, and since we are all sons and daughters of God, we are all brothers and sisters to each other. There is no bond stronger than this, and for us Christians, there is no more urgent reason for promoting universal brother-/sisterhood. St. Cyprian wrote: “You cannot claim God as your father without owning the Church as your mother.”[[7]](#footnote-7) We should add: “You cannot claim God as your father without owning your neighbor as your brother or sister.”

There is one thing we should stop doing. Let us not say to God the Father, not even by implication: “Choose between me and my adversary; decide whose side you are on!” No parent should be put in the untenable position of having to choose between their children simply because the children can’t get along with each other. So let us not ask God to take our side against someone else.

When we have a conflict with someone else – our brother or sister –, even before we meet with them to discuss our point of view (which is not only right but also sometimes necessary), let us say to God: “Father, save that brother or sister of mine; save us both. I am not looking for me to be right and him or her to be wrong. I want that person to stand in the truth, or at least in good faith.” This mercy of one individual towards another is indispensable for living the life of the Spirit and community life in all of its forms. It is indispensable for the family and every human and religious community, including the Roman Curia. As St. Augustine said, we are all fragile clay jars: It doesn’t take much to hurt ourselves.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Earlier, we called to mind the excitement of St. Margaret of Cortona when she felt God interiorly calling her “my daughter”. “I am his daughter; he said so…What an ocean of joy! My daughter! My God said it! My daughter!” We could experience something very similar if we would listen to that same voice of God, not echoing in our minds (which can be fooled!), but appearing in black and white, written on the page of the Bible under our consideration: “You are no longer a slave, but a child. And if you are a child, you are an heir as well!”

As we’ll see the next time, God willing, the Holy Spirit is ready to help us in this undertaking.

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“GOD SENT INTO OUR HEARTS THE SPIRIT OF HIS SON”

Second Meditation for Advent 2021

In [1882](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/1882), the archaeologist [William M. Ramsay](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_M._Ramsay) discovered an ancient Greek inscription at Hieropolis in Phrygia. The artifact was donated by Sultan Abdul Hamid to Pope Leo XIII in 1892, on the occasion of his jubilee. From the Lateran Museum, it later passed to the Pius-Christian Museum.

The epitaph – described by historians as “the queen of Christian inscriptions” – contains the spiritual testament of a bishop named Abercius. In it, the author summarizes his entire experience of the Christian faith. He does so in the language imposed at that time by the “discipline of the arcane”, that is, using metaphors and expressions, of which only Christians could understand the meaning, without exposing themselves and others to derision and persecution. The most interesting part of it for our purposes is the following:

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| I, Albercius by name, a disciple of the holy shepherd who feeds flocks of sheep both on the mountains and in the plains, [the shepherd] who has large eyes that see everywhere... He taught me that the book is worthy of belief. He sent me to Rome to contemplate majesty, and to see a queen robed in gold, wearing golden sandals. There I saw people bearing a glowing mark. I also visited the land of Syria and all its cities, and beyond the Euphrates, Nisibis. Everywhere I found brothers…, Paul was with me, and Faith led me forward and, as my food, provided a very large fish that a chaste Virgin had conceived and which she (Faith) gives to her faithful friends every day to eat, providing excellent wine together with the bread.[[9]](#footnote-9) |

The large-eyed shepherd is Jesus; the book is the Bible; the queen in golden robes (an allusion to Psalm 45:9) is the Church; the glowing mark is Baptism; Paul is a clear reference to the apostle; the fish, as in many ancient mosaics, indicates Christ; the chaste Virgin is Mary; the bread and wine is the Eucharist. In Abercius’ eyes, Rome is not so much the capital of the empire (which at that time was at the height of its power), but the “palace” of another kingdom, the spiritual center of the Church.

What is so striking in this account is the freshness, enthusiasm, and amazement with which Abercius looks at the new world that faith has opened up before him. For him, this is not something to be taken for granted! For the world and history, it is something entirely novel, which is precisely why I wanted to mention it. That is the feeling that we contemporary Christians most need to rediscover. Once again, it is a question of looking at the stained glass windows of the cathedral from the inside, rather than from the streetside.

After more than 40 years of traveling around the world preaching, I can very much relate to the account given by Abercius, without needing to resort to veiled language. Everywhere, I, too, in my own small way, have encountered this new people described in Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium* as the messianic people who “have as their head Christ, who possess the dignity and the freedom of the children of God, whose law is the new commandment to love and whose end is the kingdom of God” (see LG, 9).

The same Council reminds us that the Church is made up of saints and sinners; indeed, she herself – as a concrete, historical reality – is holy and sinful, a “chaste harlot” as some Fathers called her,[[10]](#footnote-10) and those two aspects – sin and sanctity – are present in every single member, not just between one category of Christians and the other. It is right, then, that we are saddened by and weep over the sins of the Church, but it is also right and necessary to rejoice in her holiness and beauty. Once more we must choose this second aspect which, in our day and age, is perhaps more difficult and often forgotten.

*The proof that we are God’s children*

Let us return to our commentary on the text from Galatians:

When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. The proof that you are children is that God has sent into your hearts his Son’s Spirit which cries out: “Abba! Father!” Therefore you are no longer a slave but a child; and if a child, then also an heir, by God’s grace.

During our last meditation, we reflected on the first part of the text, our being children of God. Now let us reflect on the second part, namely, the role that the Holy Spirit plays in all this. We need to call to mind the almost twin passage from Romans 8:15-16:

You did not receive a spirit of bondage to fear; no, you received a Spirit that makes you adopted children, that empowers you to cry out, “Abba! Father!” The same Spirit, united with our spirit, bears witness that we are children of God.

Last time I spoke of the important role that God’s Word plays in savoring the delight of knowing that we are children of God and in experiencing God as a good father. Now Saint Paul tells us that there is yet another way, without which even the Word of God is insufficient, – the Holy Spirit!

St. Bonaventure ends his treatise, Journey of the Mind to God, with an allusive and mysterious phrase. He wrote: “No one knows this very secret mystical wisdom except the person who receives it; no one receives it except the one who desires it; no one desires it except the one who is inwardly set on fire by the Holy Spirit whom Christ sent to earth.”[[11]](#footnote-11) In other words, we might want to have a living knowledge of being God’s children and to experience it, but actually having all this is solely the work of the Holy Spirit.

What does it mean when we say that the Spirit “bears witness” to the fact that we are children of God? Clearly, it is not like an external, legal document that proves human adoption or a baptismal certificate. If the Spirit is “the proof” that we are children of God, if he “bears witness” to our spirit, it cannot be something that takes place “somewhere” without our being aware of it or without some confirmation.

Unfortunately, that is how we have come to think of it. It is true that in Baptism we became children of God, members of Christ and God’s love was poured into our hearts…, we believe this by faith, even if nothing moves within us. Believed in the mind, but not lived in the heart. How can we change this situation? The Apostle gave us the answer: the Holy Spirit! Not just the Holy Spirit we once received in Baptism, but the Holy Spirit that we must ask for and receive over and over again. The Spirit “bears witness” that we are children of God, meaning he bears witness right here and now, not once and for all at the moment of Baptism.

Let us attempt to understand how the Holy Spirit works this miracle of opening our eyes to the reality we bear within. I discovered the best description of how the Holy Spirit brings this about in the believer in a discourse on Pentecost by Luther. (Let us follow, with him, the Pauline criterion for “examining everything, retaining what is good.”) (1 Thess 5,21).

As long as people live under the regime of sin, under the law, God seems to be a severe supervisor who opposes all their earthly desires with divine peremptory ones: “You must...; you must not….” You must not desire another’s possessions or woman… This being the case, people accumulate in the depths of their hearts a muted animosity towards God who seems to be opposed to their every happiness, to the point that, if it were up to them, they would be just as happy if God did not exist.[[12]](#footnote-12)

If this all seems like an exaggeration, perhaps in reference only to “great” sinners which does not touch us personally, let us look inside ourselves and see what rises out of the dark depths of our hearts as we stand before God’s will and a difficult obedience courses through our plans. During the retreats I preach, I usually propose to the participants that they take a psychological test on their own to discover what idea is their prevailing image of God. I invite each person to ask: “During the recitation of the *Our Father*, what ideas, what feelings spontaneously, without reflecting on it come to mind when I get to the words, ‘Your will be done’”?

It is not farfetched to understand how, unconsciously, we connect the will of God with everything unpleasant, painful, everything that outs us to the test, that requires renunciation and sacrifice, in short, everything that can be seen as curbing our personal freedom and development. We essentially perceive God as being opposed to all festivity, delight, and enjoyment. If at that moment, we could look at ourselves as if in a mirror, we would see ourselves as people with heads bowed in resignation, muttering through clenched teeth: “If there’s nothing else I can do about it…ok, your will be done.”

Let’s take a look at what the Holy Spirit does to heal us of this terrible distortion that we inherited from Adam. When the Spirit comes to us, – in Baptism and then in all the other means of sanctification, – he begins by showing us a different face of God, the face revealed to us by Jesus in the Gospel. He has us discover God as an ally of our joy, as the one who, for our sake “did not spare his own Son” (Rom 8:32).

Little by little, the feeling a child experiences blossoms in us which spontaneously translates into the cry: *Abbà*, Father! With Job at the end of his story we are ready to exclaim, “By hearsay I had heard of you, but now my eye has seen you.” (Jb 42,5). A child has replaced the slave, love has replaced fear. The person ceases to be antagonistic toward God and becomes God’s ally. The covenant with God is no longer just a religious system into which one is born, but a discovery, a choice, a source of unshakable security. “If God is with us, on our side, who can be against us” (see Rom 8:31)?

*The prayer of children*

Prayer is the privileged place where the Holy Spirit works always anew the miracle of making us feel like God’s children. The Spirit does not give prayer as a *law*, but as a *grace*. Prayer does not come to us primarily through external, analytical learning; it comes to us by infusion, as a gift. What comes to us is the very source of prayer, namely that “God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of his Son who cries out: Abbà, Father!” (Gal 4:6).

The cry of the believer, *Abbà!,* in itself shows that the one who is praying in us, through the Spirit, is Jesus, the only-begotten Son of God. Since the Holy Spirit is not begotten of God but rather proceeds from the Father, the Spirit could not turn to God and cry out *Abba*, Father. But as the Spirit of the only-begotten Son, the Spirit can prolong the prayer of the head in the members.

Therefore, it is the Holy Spirit who imbues our hearts with the feeling of divine adoption as children, the one who makes us *experience* (and not only *know*!) that we are children of God. At times, this radical activity of the Spirit takes place suddenly and intensely in a person’s life, and then it can be contemplated in all its splendor. It might occur during a retreat, or when a person is well-disposed to receive a sacrament, or while listening to the Word of God with an open heart, or while praying for the outpouring of the Spirit (the so-called “baptism in the Spirit”). The soul is inundated with a new light in which God is revealed to the person in a new way, as Father. The person experiences what it really means to say God is Father; their heart becomes tender and the person has the sensation of being born again by this experience. He or she experiences deep inner confidence and a never-before-felt sense of God’s condescension.

At other times, however, this revelation of the Father is accompanied by such a sense of God’s majesty and transcendence that the person feels overwhelmed and is silent. (I am not describing my own experiences, but those of the saints!). One begins to understand why some saints could start to pray the *Our Father*, and even after hours had passed, were still glued to those opening words. The confessor and biographer of St. Catherine of Siena, Blessed Raymond of Capua, wrote that “it was difficult to finish an “Our Father” without her already being in ecstasy.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

This dramatic way of knowing the Father usually does not last long, not even in the saints. The time soon returns when the believer says *Abbà!* without *feeling* anything and continues to repeat it simply on the word of Jesus. That is when it is important to remember that the less that utterance delights the person who prays it, the more it delights the Father who hears it because it is then that is it comes out of pure faith and abandonment.

It is then that we are like that famous musician (I’m speaking of Beethoven) who, having lost his hearing, continued to compose and perform splendid symphonies to the delight of his audiences without being able to savor a single note himself. At one point, after listening to one of his works (the celebrated *Ninth Symphony*), the audience exploded into applause and someone had to tug on the hem of Beethoven’s robe to get him to notice and thank them. His loss of hearing, rather than muting his music, made it all the purer. The same is true for dryness in our prayer if we persevere in it.

When we talk about the exclamation, “*Abbà,* Father!”, we usually think in terms of self-reference, that is, what it means to us who pronounce it. We hardly ever think about what it means to the One who hears it, to what it produces in God. No one reflects on the joy it brings God to be called “Dad”. But anyone who is a father knows how it feels to hear himself being called in that unmistakable tone of voice of his own boy or girl. It’s like becoming a father again each time because every time that exclamation is pronounced, it reminds you and makes you realize who you are. It calls forth into existence what lies at the core of your being.

Jesus knew this and so he often called God *Abbà!* and taught us to do likewise. We give God a simple and unique joy by calling him “Dad”: the joy of paternity. At the sound of these words, God’s heart “is touched” and his compassion grows “warm and tender” (see Hos 11:8). And we can do all this even when we do not “feel” anything.

It is precisely at this time of seeming distance from God and dryness that we discover the great importance of the Holy Spirit for our life of prayer. Unseen and unheard by us, the Spirit “comes to our rescue in our weakness,” filling our words and sighs with desire for God, humility, and love, “and the One who searches hearts knows what the Spirit desires” (see Rom 8:26-27). The Spirit, then, becomes the power behind our “weak” prayer, light for our “dimmed” prayer; in a word, the very soul of our prayer. In the words of the Pentecost Sequence, the Spirit “irrigates what is parched.”

All this happens by faith. It suffices for me to say or think: “Father, you have given me the Spirit of Jesus your Son. Thereby making me “one spirit with him” (1 Cor 6:17) I am praying this psalm or celebrating this holy Mass, or simply standing in silence here in your presence. I want to give you that glory, that joy, that Jesus would give you if he were praying to you again here on earth.”

*What the Spirit is saying to the Church*

Before concluding, I would like to mention a pastoral application of this reflection on the role of the Holy Spirit. On other occasions, I quoted something that the Orthodox Metropolitan, Ignatius IV of Latakia, said at the solemn ecumenical gathering in 1968. It bears repeating here:

“***Without the Holy Spirit:***

God is far away,

Christ stays in the past,

the Gospel is a dead letter,

the Church is simply an organization,

Authority is a matter of domination,

Mission a matter of propaganda,

Liturgy is no more than an evocation,

Christian living a slave morality.

***But with the Holy Spirit:***

The cosmos is resurrected and groans with the birth-pangs of the Kingdom,

humans struggle against the flesh,

the risen Christ is there,

the Gospel is the power of life,

the Church shows forth the life of the Trinity,

Authority is a liberating service,

Mission is a Pentecost,

The liturgy is both memorial and anticipation,

Human action is deified.” [[14]](#footnote-14)

We must base everything on the Holy Spirit. It is not enough to recite one *Our Father*, one *Hail Mary,* and one *Glory Be* at the start of our pastoral meetings and then move quickly on to the agenda. When circumstances allow, we need to spend some time disclosing ourselves to the Holy Spirit, to give the Spirit time to manifest himself, to synchronize ourselves with him.

Without this prep work, all of our resolutions and documents remain just an accumulation of words. Think of the sacrifice of Elijah on Carmel. Elijah gathered wood and soaked it several times. He did everything he could. Then he prayed to the Lord to send down fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice. Without that fire from on high, everything else would have remained just dampened wood (see 1 Kg 18:20ff).

These are things that are beginning to take place in the Church without a lot of commotion. This year I received a letter from a pastor in a French archdiocese. He wrote: “Almost three years ago, our archbishop launched all of us into a missionary adventure and established a fraternity of diocesan missionaries. We decided to start a course in preparation for baptism in the Spirit. It was a beautiful experience with 300 Christians from all over the archdiocese, together with the archbishop. A short time later, all 28 Poor Clares of a nearby convent asked to have the same experience.”

Immediate and spectacular results are not to be expected. It’s not a fire dance like that of the priests of Baal on Carmel. The “when” and “how” are known only to God. Let us remember what Christ told his apostles: “It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:7-8). The important thing is that we ask for and receive strength from on high; the rest is up to God.

This is especially true as the Church embarks on the synodal adventure. It suffices to re-read and reflect on the words already spoken by the Holy Father in his homily opening the Synodal Path last October 10th. He urged us to take “time to devote to prayer and to adoration, and to hearing what the Spirit wants to say to the Church.”

I wonder if it would be possible, at least during the plenary gatherings of each local or universal circumscription, to designate a spiritual animator who would organize times of prayer and listening to the Word. As it says in the Book of Revelation: “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rv 19:10). The spirit of prophecy preferably is manifested in the context of community prayer.

We have a wonderful example of this occurring during the first crisis that the Church had to face in its mission of proclaiming the Gospel. Peter and John had been arrested and put in prison for having “proclaimed in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.” They were freed by the Sanhedrin with the warning “in no way are you to speak about or teach in the name of Jesus.” The apostles find themselves facing a situation that has been repeated many times in the course of history: either to remain silent and thus disregard the command of Jesus or to speak out at the risk of a brutal reaction on the part of the authorities which could spell the end of everything.

What did the apostles do? They gathered the community together. It prayed. Someone shared a verse from the Psalm: “earthly rulers take counsel together against the Lord and his Anointed One” (Ps 2:2). Someone else made the connection with the agreement between Herod and Pontius Pilate regarding Jesus. Then we read: “When they had finished the prayer, the place where they were gathered shook and all were filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaimed the word of God with boldness (*parresia* )” (see Acts 4:1-31). Paul reminds us that this was not an isolated practice in the Church. He wrote to the Corinthians: “When you gather together, one of you has a psalm, another a word of instruction: one has a revelation, one has the gift of tongues, another the gift of interpreting the tongues” (1 Cor 14:26).

The ideal with every synodal resolution would be to be able to repeat to today’s Church – at least ideally – the same words used at the Church’s first council: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us…” (Acts 15:28). The Holy Spirit is the only one who opens new paths, without ever denying the former ones. Rather than doing new things, the Spirit renews things! That is, the Spirit does not create new doctrines and new institutions, but renews and breathes new life into those instituted by Jesus. Without the Spirit, we would always lag behind history. As the Holy Father said in that same homily, “It means discovering with amazement that the Holy Spirit always surprises us, to suggest fresh paths and new ways of speaking.” I would add, he is a master of the updating *aggiornamento* that St. John XXIII set as the goal of the Council. The Council had to bring about a new Pentecost, now the new Pentecost must translate the Council into reality!

The Latin Church possesses a treasure for this purpose: the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*. Ever since its composition in the ninth century, this has resonated unceasingly in Christianity, like a prolonged epiclesis over all creation and the Church. Beginning with the early years of the second millennium, every new year, every century, every conclave, every ecumenical council, every synod, every priestly or episcopal ordination, every important meeting in the life of the Church opened with the chanting of this hymn. It took on all the faith, devotion, and ardent desire of the Spirit of the generations who sang it before us. And now, when it is sung, even by the most modest choir of the faithful, God hears it as the immense “orchestration” which is the communion of saints.

Venerable Fathers, brothers, and sisters, I ask you kindly to stand and sing it with me, asking for a new outpouring of the Spirit on us and the entire Church…

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“BORN OF A WOMAN”

Third Meditation for Advent 2021

“When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman.” In this final meditation, I would like to focus on the meaning and the importance of this last phrase “born of a woman”, especially because of its relevance to the solemnity of Christmas which we are preparing to celebrate.

In the Bible, the expression “born of a woman” underscores that the individual belongs to the human condition which comprises both weakness and mortality.[[15]](#footnote-15) To appreciate the significance of those words, we have only to remove them from the text. Without them, what would Christ be – a heavenly, disembodied illusion. The angel Gabriel “was sent” by God but returned to heaven in the same form that he had when he came down from heaven. It is the woman, Mary, who “anchored” the Son of God forever to humanity and history.

That is how the Fathers of the Church understood Paul’s words in arguing against the Gnostic-Docetist heresy. They correctly emphasized the parallelism that exists between the expression “born of a woman” and the expression Paul uses in Roman 1:3: “from the seed of David, according to the flesh.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Ignatius of Antioch uses a startling expression when he says that Jesus “was [born] of Mary and of God,”[[17]](#footnote-17) almost as we might say that someone is the child of so-and-so and so-and-so. The fact is that, in the entire universe, Mary is the only person who can address Jesus in the same way that the heavenly Father does: “You are my son, I have begotten you.”

Tertullian points out that the Apostle does not say “factum *per* mulierem,” but “factum *ex* muliere,” that is, born *of* a woman, not *through* a woman. His use of the word stemmed from the fact that the Docetist heresy gradually evolved and took on a less radical form. It claimed that Jesus’ flesh was of heavenly, not earthly origin, only passing through Mary as if through a channel, being a guest rather than a child of Mary.[[18]](#footnote-18) Saint Leo the Great placed the Pauline expression “born of woman” at the heart of the Christological dogma, writing in his *Tome to Flavian* that Christ is man because he was “born of a woman and born under the Law’… Birth in the flesh is clear proof of his human nature.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Concerning the Pauline expression “born of a woman”, also at work is the great exegetical principle formulated by St. Gregory the Great, namely that “Scripture grows with the persons reading.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Already Saint Irenaeus read Galatians 4:2, “born of a woman” in light of Genesis 3:15, “I will place enmity between you and the woman.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Mary appears as the woman who is the aggregate of Eve, mother of all the living! We are not talking about a minor representation that appears in a single scene and then vanishes into thin air. It is the product of a Biblical tradition that spans the entire Bible from one end to the other. It begins with the woman called the “daughter of Zion” who personifies the entire People of Israel and ends with the woman “clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet” representing the Church in the Book of Revelation (Rv 12:1).

“Woman” is the term Jesus used to address his mother both at Cana and as she stood beneath the cross. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to fail to see the link in John’s way of thinking between the two women: the symbolic woman who is the Church and the actual woman who is Mary. This link was not only acknowledged in *Lumen gentium* of Vatican II but also explains why Mary is dealt with within the Constitution on the Church.

*Christ must be born of the Church*

For some time there has been a lot of discussion regarding the dignity of women. Saint John Paul II wrote an Apostolic Letter on that theme, *Mulieris dignitatem*. However much dignity we human creatures can attribute to women, it would still be infinitesimal compared with what God did in choosing a woman to be the mother of his Son who became human. “Even if we possessed as many tongues as there are blades of grass.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Much has been done in recent times to increase the presence of women in the decision-making process of the Church, and more, perhaps, needs to be done. We need not delve into that here. Instead, we have to turn our attention to another area where the distinction between men and women is immaterial because the woman we are talking about represents the entire Church, that is, men and women alike.

In short, this is the heart of the matter: Jesus who was once physically and corporally born of Mary must now be born spiritually of the Church and of each believer. There is an exegetical tradition whose initial nucleus dates back to Origen which is crystallized in this adage: “Mary, or the Church, or the soul.” Let us listen to how one medieval author, Isaac of Stella, describes this teaching:

In the inspired Scriptures, what is said in a universal sense of the virgin mother, the Church, is understood in an individual sense of the Virgin Mary, and what is said in a particular sense of the virgin mother Mary is rightly understood in a general sense of the virgin mother, the Church... In a way, every Christian is also believed to be a bride of God’s Word, a mother of Christ, his daughter, and sister, at once virginal and fruitful. These words are used in a universal sense of the Church, in a special sense of Mary, in a particular sense of the individual Christian.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Let us begin with the ecclesial application. If in “the fullest sense” (the so-called *sensus plenior*), the woman in Scripture suggests the Church, then the affirmation that Jesus was born of a woman implies that today, he must be born of the Church!

Among Orthodox Christians, there is a very common icon called the *Panhagia*, that is, the Most Holy. It depicts Mary standing at full stature. On her breast, as if bursting from within, is a medallion showing the child Jesus who bears all the majesty of an adult. The devotee’s gaze is drawn to the child, even before the mother. With her arms outstretched, she even seems to be inviting us to look at him and make room for him. That is how the Church should be. Whoever sees her ought not to stop there, but should look to Jesus. This is the struggle against the Church becoming self-referential, a theme often underscored by the last two Supreme Pontiffs, Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis.

The author Franz Kafka tells a story that has powerful religious symbolism in this regard. It is entitled, “An Imperial Message.” It speaks about a king who, on his deathbed, calls a subject to his side and whispers a message into the subject’s ear. That message is so important that the king makes him repeat it into his ear. Then he nods to the messenger who sets out on a journey. Let us listen to the rest of the story directly from the author, written in a dreamlike, almost nightmarish style, typical of this writer:

The messenger set out at once; a strong, an indefatigable man; thrusting forward now this arm, now the other, he cleared a path through the crowd; every time he meets resistance he points to his breast, which bears the sign of the sun; and he moves forward easily, like no other. But the crowds are so vast; their dwellings know no bounds. If open country stretched before him, how he would fly, and indeed you might soon hear the magnificent knocking of his fists on your door. But instead, how uselessly he toils; he is still forcing his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he overcome them; and were he to succeed at this, nothing would be gained: he would have to fight his way down the steps; and were he to succeed at this, nothing would be gained: he would have to cross the courtyard and, after the courtyard, the second enclosing outer palace, and again stairways and courtyards, and again a palace, and so on through thousands of years; and if he were to burst out at last through the outermost gate—but it can never, never happen—before him still lies the royal capital, the middle of the world, piled high in its sediment. Nobody reaches through here, least of all with a message from one who is dead. You, however, sit at your window and dream of the message when evening comes.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Reading this account, you cannot help but think of Christ who, before departing this world, entrusted to the Church the message: “Go throughout the world; proclaim the good news to every creature” (Mk 16:15). And you also cannot help but think of the countless people who stand at the window and dream, without knowing it, of a message such as hers.

We must do everything possible to make sure that the Church never becomes as complicated and cluttered as the castle described by Kafka so that the message can be spread as freely and joyfully as when the journey first began. We know what the “walls of division” are that can restrain the messenger. First of all, they include the walls that keep the various Christian churches separated from each other; then there is the excess bureaucracy, the remnants of meaningless ceremonials, including vestments, former laws, and disputes that by now have become nothing more than debris.

Something similar happens with older buildings. Over centuries, to adapt to emerging needs, people install partitions, stairways, rooms, cubicles, and storage space under the stairs. The time comes when you realize that all these adaptations no longer correspond to the current needs, and have, on the contrary, become obstacles. That is when you need the courage to tear them down and restore the building to its original simplicity and design, in keeping with its renewed purpose.

I shared that story and its application to the Church in the homily I gave in St. Peter’s on Good Friday of 2013, during the first year of the pontificate of the current Supreme Pontiff. If I have allowed myself to repeat these thoughts it is only to thank God for the steps forward that the Church, in the meantime, has made in that direction, to “to reach out to the existential peripheries of the world”, bringing them the message of Christ.

*Christ must be born of the individual*

It remains for us now to reflect on something that concerns all of us without distinction, something that touches each of us very personally: Christ being born of the believer. Saint Maximus the Confessor wrote: “Christ is always mystically born in the individual, taking flesh from those who are saved, making the person who generates him a virgin mother.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

In the Gospel Jesus explains to us how to become a mother of Christ, He says that it happens by listening to the Word and putting it into practice (see Lk 8:21). It is important to note that two things need to take place. Even Mary became the mother of Christ through these two processes: first, by conceiving him, and then by giving birth to him.

There are two types of pregnancy loss or termination. The first, age-old and well-known, is abortion. It happens when someone conceives a life but does not give birth because the fetus died either due to a natural cause or human sin. Until more recently this was the only known condition leading to pregnancy loss. Nowadays we know of a second, almost reverse, process whereby someone gives birth to a child while by-passing conception. This occurs when a child is conceived in a test tube and then introduced into a woman’s womb, or also when a surrogate uterus is loaned, perhaps for a fee, to play host to a human life conceived elsewhere. In this case, what the woman gives birth to does not come from her; it is not conceived “first in the heart and then in the body,” as Augustine said of Mary.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Unfortunately, these two sorry possibilities also exist on the spiritual level. The person who conceives Jesus without giving birth to him is the person who welcomes the Word without putting it into practice. Repeatedly making resolutions to change and then systematically forgetting them or abandoning them halfway is a type of ongoing spiritual abortion. Saint James says that they are like people who fleetingly glance at themselves in a mirror and then walk away forgetting what they looked like (see Jas 1:23-24).

On the contrary, people who give birth to Christ without having conceived him are those who do many things – even good things –, but their deeds are not done out of the kindness of their heart or for the love for God or with the right intention. Rather, they act out of habit or hypocrisy, seeking their own glory or self-interest, or simply for the satisfaction of having done something. Our deeds are “good” only if they come from the heart if they are conceived for the love of God and in faith. In other words, if the intention that guides us is right, or if we at least try to make it right.

Saint Francis of Assisi said something that sums up well what I am trying to highlight. He said:

We are mothers of Christ when, through divine love and pure and sincere conscience, we bear him in our heart and in our body; we give birth to him by means of holy deeds that need to shine before others as an example.[[27]](#footnote-27)

This means that we conceive Christ when we love him with heartfelt sincerity and a right conscience; we give birth to him when we do good deeds that reveal Christ to the world and give glory to the Father in heaven (see Mt 5:16). Saint Bonaventure developed this thought of the Seraphic Father in a work entitled, “The five feasts of the child Jesus.”[[28]](#footnote-28) These are the feasts according to Bonaventure: the conception, the birth, the circumcision, the Epiphany, and the Presentation in the Temple. The saint explains how to celebrate each of these feasts spiritually in your own life. I will limit myself to what he says about the first two feasts: the conception and the birth.

When a person feels dissatisfied with the life they are leading and, moved by holy inspiration and on fire with holy determination, they finally make a resolute break from their old habits and flaws, in that person, according to Saint Bonaventure, Jesus is conceived. Having been fertilized with the grace of the Holy Spirit, conception takes place when they resolve to lead a new life.

Once conceived, the blessed Son of God is born in that person’s heart if after a sound discernment, asking for spiritual advice and for God’s help, the resolution that had been churning inside the person for some time but had always been put off for fear of not succeeding, is resolutely put into practice.

We must insist on one thing, however: the determination or resolution to lead a new life must be translated without delay into concrete action, into a change in the way we live and in our habits, possibly even in external and visible ways. If our resolution is not acted upon, Jesus is conceived, but not brought to birth. It will be one of many spiritual abortions. The “second feast” of the child Jesus, namely Christmas, will never be celebrated! It will be but one more of the many postponements that have perhaps peppered our life.

A small change to start with could be to make a little silence around us and within us. “How good it would be” - said the Holy Father in the last General Audience - if each one of us, following the example of Saint Joseph, were able to recover this contemplative dimension of life, opened wide in silence”. An ancient antiphon of Christmas time said that the Word of God descended from heaven “*dum medium silentium tenerent omnia*”: "while all around was silence".

First of all, let's try to silence the noise that is within us, the processes that are always going on in our minds, about people and facts, from which we always emerge as winners. Let us transform ourselves sometimes from accusers into defenders of the brothers, thinking about how many things others could blame us. In canonical trials - at least in the past - after the accusation, the judge pronounced the formula: "*Audiatur et altera pars*": Now let us listen to the opposite part. When we catch ourselves judging someone, let us peremptorily repeat that formula to ourselves: *Audiatur et altera pars*! Try putting yourself in the brother's shoes!

Let us return with our thoughts to Mary. Tolstoy makes an observation on the pregnant woman that can help us understand and imitate the Virgin in these last days of Advent. The look of the expectant woman, he says, has a strange sweetness and is turned more inside than outside of herself, because inside is the most beautiful reality in the world for her. So it was Mary's gaze that bore the creator of the universe in her womb. Let us imitate her by carving out for ourselves moments of true recollection to make Jesus be born in our hearts. The best response to secularized culture's attempt to erase Christmas from society is to interiorize it and bring it back to its essence.

The year celebrating the seventh centenary of Dante Alighieri’s death is coming to a close. Let us end by making our own the wonderful prayer to the Virgin from the last canto of his *Paradiso*. He, too, like Paul and John, simply refer to Mary as the Lady, that is the Woman:

O Virgin Mother, Daughter of your Son,  
humbler and loftier than any creature,  
eternal counsel’s predetermined goal

thou are the one that such nobility  
didst lend to human nature, that its Maker

scorned not to make Himself what He had made.

Within thy womb rekindled was the Love,  
through whose warm influence in the eternal Peace  
this Flower hath blossomed this. Here unto us

thou are a noonday torch of Charity;  
and down below ’mong mortal men,

thou art a living fount of Hope. Lady, so great

thou are, and hast such worth, that one who longs

for Grace, and unto thee hath not recourse,  
wingless would wish to have his longing fly.

Not only doth thy Kindliness give help  
to him that asketh it, but many times  
it freely runs ahead of his request.  
  
In thee is Mercy, Pity is in thee,  
in thee Magnificence, and all there is  
of Goodness in a creature meets in thee.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Holy Father, Venerable Fathers, brothers and sisters, Merry Christmas!

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Translated by Br. Patrick McSherry, ofmcap

1. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Giunta Bevegnati, *Vita e miracoli della Beata Margherita da Cortona,* II, 6 (Italian version, Vicenza 1978, p. 19f). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See A. Michel, *Reviviscence des sacrements*, in DTC, XIII,2, Paris 1937, coll. 2618-2628. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Summa theologiæ*, II-II, 1, 2, ad 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gregory the Great, *Homilies on Ezechiel*, I,2,1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Leo the Great, *Discourse 1 on Christmas*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cyprian, *De unitate Ecclesiæ*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Augustine, *Discourses*, 69 (PL 38, 440) (*lutea vasa sibi invicem angustias facientes*). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In *Enchiridion Fontium Historiæ Ecclesiasticæ Antiquæ*, Herder 1965, pp. 92-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See H.U. von Balthasar, “Casta meretrix”, in *Sponsa Christi*, Morcelliana, Brescia, 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bonaventure, *Journey of the Mind to God* 7,4. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Luther, *Sermon on Pentecost* (WA, 12, p. 568f). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Raymond of Capua, *Legenda maior,* 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Metropolitan Ignatius of Latakia, in *The Uppsala Report,* Geneva 1969, p. 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Job 14:1; 15:14; 25:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ignatius of Antioch, *Tralliani* 9,1; *Smirnesi* 1, Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer*. III, 16,3. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ephesians*, 7,1 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Tertullian, *De carne Christi*, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Leo the Great, *Letter 28 to Flavian*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Gregory the Great, *Moral Commentary on Job*, XX, 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer*. IV,40,3. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Luther, *The Magnificat* (ed. Weimar 7, p. 572 f.). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Isaac of Stella, *Discourses* 51 (PL, 194, 1863f) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. F. Kafka, *An Imperial Message*. English translation found at https://apps.exe-coll.ac.uk/Media/PDF/FlyingStart/EnglishLiteratureShortStories. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. St. Maximus the Confessor, *Commentary on the Our Father* (PG 90, 889). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. St. Augustine, *Discourses* 215,4 (PL 38, 1074) [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. St. Francis of Assisi, *Letter to all the Faithful*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. St. Bonaventure, *De quinque festivitatibus Pueri Jesu* (ed. Quaracchi 1949, pp. 207ff). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. A Translation in English Blank Verse by Courtney Langdon, Vol. 3 *Paradiso* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 19211). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)