



Advent-Christmas and Lent-Easter Reflections: Cultivating the Gift of Self

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Introductory Comments

The theme for the 2010 Catechetical Sunday materials is “Matrimony: Sacrament of Enduring Love.” In this light, our Advent and Lenten reflections center on cultivating the gift of self. These reflections are intended for couples of all ages, parents and families, widows, divorced persons, and singles, and they invite us to pray, reflect, discuss, and respond.

ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

First Week of Advent

Let us put ourselves in God’s presence.

Biblical or Ecclesial Reference

Pope Paul VI offers the life of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as a model to imitate when he says, “Nazareth is a kind of school where we may begin to discover what Christ’s life was like and even to understand his Gospel. Here we can observe and ponder the simple appeal of the way God’s Son came to be known, profound yet full of hidden meaning.”¹

Topic: Nazareth as a School of Learning

We begin our Advent reflections by looking to the Holy Family as our model for Christian families. In the address quoted above, Pope Paul VI offers three helpful ideas for today. First, we learn from the Holy Family’s silence. In silence, we get in

¹ Pope Paul VI, *Address for Feast of the Holy Family* (January 5, 1964), in *Liturgy of the Hours*, Vol. 1, Advent-Christmas Season (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1976), 426.

tune with God's wisdom. Amid today's cacophony of sounds and activities, the example of the Holy Family challenges us to find times and places to pray, worship, and be silent. In the quiet of our hearts, we learn the depth of the Father's love and our true gift of self. Second, the Holy Family teaches us what family life can be. Like them, we strive for holiness and health amid the broken relationships that often beset us. Third, Joseph, Jesus, and Mary teach us the value of work and the need to maintain a healthy family. We learn from the Pope's words that our true dignity is enhanced when we cooperate with God's grace, helping us to better appreciate ourselves, family, friends, and work.

Pause to reflect on the Holy Family as a school of learning for us.

Reflection Questions

The wisdom of the Holy Family urges us to ask the following questions:

1. How can we allow more silent time for daily prayer and reflection?
2. What can we do to make ourselves and our family more holy and healthy?

Let us pray, asking for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

Second Week of Advent

Let us put ourselves in God's presence.

Biblical or Ecclesial Reference

On the seventh day, God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gn 1:26). St. Peter Chrysologus comments, "The Creator still works to devise things that can add to your glory. He has made you in his image that you might in your person make the invisible Creator present on earth."²

Topic: Life as Gift, Image of God

Our life is a gift of God, and our intrinsic dignity is rooted in being created in God's image. Jesus is the perfect revelation of Trinitarian love and the perfect model for our imitation. In a unique way, he makes present this love in the sacramental love of marriage, an efficacious sign of Christ's love for the Church. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we appreciate that we are made in God's image and recognize our own identity. This can happen because of God's grace, which precedes, accompanies, and perfects our freedom and any work that we do. God's free gift of grace also helps us love as Jesus loved, a vocation inscribed into our very being as made in God's image. This divine love helps us to understand his gift of life and to see others in a new way. Made in God's image, we are called to use the gifts our Creator has given to us. Thus, we make visible the Creator on earth.

Pause to reflect on our life created in God's image.

² Sermon 148: PL 52, 596-598. Quoted for the Feast of St. Peter Chrysologus (July 30), in *Liturgy of the Hours*, Vol. 3, Ordinary Time, Weeks 1-17 (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1976), 1563.

Reflection Questions

The wisdom gleaned from seeing our deepest identity rooted in God urges us to ask the following questions:

1. If we believe we are made in the image of God, whether we are single or married, what difference can this make in our attitudes and lives?
2. If God made our parents, children, colleagues, enemies, and friends in his image, what difference should this make in how we treat them?

Let us pray the Our Father, asking God to help us see ourselves as made in his image.

Third Week of Advent

Let us put ourselves in God's presence.

Biblical or Ecclesial Reference

Matthew's Gospel says, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19).

Topic: Our Personal Gifts

We make disciples through preaching and teaching. They are not, however, the only ways to be disciples and share Jesus' Good News. We can be his disciples by using our personal gifts to glorify God and serve our brothers and sisters. Family life offers many opportunities to be Jesus' disciples, a domestic church. Discipleship happens when spouses sacrifice for each other and parents spend sleepless nights caring for a sick child, thus imitating Jesus' self-sacrificing love for others. Such love is found in the commitment of students, custodians, nurses, lawyers, and other workers to live as Jesus did. Advent is a special time to ask for the Holy Spirit's help to recognize and embrace our opportunities to share Jesus' Good News. In so doing, our efforts become prayers of praise to God and of service to our neighbor. This realization gives our actions special worth and helps us better appreciate our intrinsic dignity.

Pause to identify and reflect on your personal gifts.

Reflection Questions

The wisdom gleaned from seeing our talents as gifts from God urges us to ask the following questions:

1. If we believe we share Jesus' Good News by using the gifts that God gave us, what are the practical implications of such belief?
2. Whether single or married, how do we apply this belief to our family, neighbors, strangers, the destitute, and co-workers?
3. How might the elderly, the sick, and the homebound be able to be agents as well as beneficiaries of prayer, witness, support, and encouragement for married couples, parents, and families?

Let us pray in our own words, asking Jesus to help us appreciate our personal gifts as opportunities to serve him.

Fourth Week of Advent

Let us put ourselves in God's presence.

Biblical or Ecclesial Reference

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) says, "Only when Christ is formed in us will the mystery of Christmas be fulfilled in us" (2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 2000], no. 526).

Topic: Christ Formed in Us

Divine grace forms Jesus within us through the power of the Holy Spirit. We do not form him in ourselves. We need the help of the Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to be transformed into Jesus' image. When we cooperate with divine grace, we gradually become what we are called to be: other Christs. As this happens, we gain deeper insights into ourselves by coming to know God dwelling within us. In so doing, we cultivate his presence within us and our gift of self, as we understand better who we are and how to live out Jesus' life. Christmas brings God's self-disclosure to a deeper level and invites us to appreciate the long-awaited Messiah and the gradual unfolding of his divine presence within us. Christian families and the Church assist us greatly in discovering this deeper meaning of Christmas and the value of receiving the Eucharist as a family. In so doing, we are divinized and become Christ-bearers.

Pause to identify and reflect on your transformation in Christ.

Reflection Questions

The wisdom gleaned from seeing our transformation in Christ urges us to ask the following questions:

1. How does celebrating the Eucharist and receiving his Body and Blood in Communion help our transformation in Christ?
2. How does the good example of parents, brothers or sisters, priests, religious, or friends encourage us to be more open to transformation in Christ? Give examples.
3. How do the Advent and Christmas seasons help us appreciate God's desire that we share his love with others? Whether we are single or married, describe ways that we can apply this truth to our family, neighbors, friends, and colleagues.

Let us pray, asking the Holy Spirit to help us appreciate how God's grace transforms us.

Christmas

Let us put ourselves in God's presence.

Biblical or Ecclesial Reference

“God’s love for us is fundamental for our lives, and it raises important questions about who God is and who we are” (Pope Benedict XVI, *God Is Love [Deus Caritas Est]* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006], no. 2).

Topic: Success Is in God's Hands, Not Ours Alone

Christmas celebrates the fruit of Mary and Joseph’s trust in God. The long-awaited Messiah, sent to save us from our sins and win back the eternal blessedness lost by Adam’s sin, is born. The Son of God is like us in all things but sin. We learn from the Incarnation that our success is in God’s hands. Without the Father’s love we would be lost for all eternity. Mary and Joseph sacrificed greatly to make the arduous journey to Bethlehem, to obey God’s directive to flee into Egypt, and to go to Nazareth to raise Jesus. Ambiguity, uncertainty, and brokenness touched the Holy Family. Their lives teach us that we cannot understand God’s designs. This wonderful lesson urges parents to put their families in God’s hands and trust that their efforts will bear fruit. Faithful parents are examples for us, single or married. We, too, are to put ourselves in God’s hands. In so doing, God’s grace helps us realize better the depths of who we are and what we are called to become.

Pause to reflect on the importance of trusting God and putting our lives in his hands.

Reflection Questions

The wisdom of the Christmas story invites us to ask the following questions:

1. How can we imitate the Holy Family during difficult times, such as job loss, sickness, times of doubt, and death?
2. In what ways does Jesus’ coming at Christmas help us appreciate our need to put our lives in God’s hands?

Let us pray, asking the Holy Spirit to give us courage in difficult times to imitate the Holy Family.

LENT AND EASTER

First Week of Lent

Let us put ourselves in God's presence.

Biblical or Ecclesial Reference

“You should put away the old self of your former way of life . . . and put on the new self, created in God’s way in righteousness and holiness of truth” (Eph 4:22, 24).

Topic: Finding Our True Identity in Christ

We begin our Lenten reflections by considering our identity. Searching for our identity is part of life. We identify our “self” as a family member, spouse, sibling, carpenter, farmer, statistician, or clerk. We also identify ourselves as Catholic, or as members of a parish. Identity involves discovering who we are as persons and what our role is by answering these questions: who am I, and why am I here? Growth in the awareness of our Christian identity is a lifelong process that shifts as we change. It is rooted in Baptism, where we are transformed into our true identity as sons and daughters of the Father. St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, quoted above, challenges us to put away our former life and put on a new self. In other words, he tells us to turn from sinful ways and take on our new life in Christ. In so doing, we become one with Christ, where we find our true identity. We accept this challenge during Lent, as we journey with Christ through life’s difficulties to eternal life.

Pause to reflect on our true identity in Christ.

Reflection Questions

The wisdom gleaned from putting on our new identity in Christ that we received at Baptism invites us to ask the following questions:

1. Does my Baptism and ongoing transformation in Christ affect and enrich all my relationships as a spouse, parent, child, sibling, friend, classmate, or co-worker? How?
2. Why is Lent a fitting time to reject sinful ways and grow into our new selves, united with Christ? In the silence of our hearts, let us ask if there are sinful patterns to be eradicated from our lives.

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to teach us “to put on our true self.”

Second Week of Lent

Let us put ourselves in God’s presence.

Biblical or Ecclesial Reference

“Scripture and the Fathers insist above all on three forms [of interior penance], *fasting, prayer, and almsgiving*, which express conversion in relation to oneself, to God, and to others” (CCC, no. 1434).

Topic: Our True Self Related to God, Ourselves, and Others

The gospel readings of the First Sunday of Lent say that Jesus went into the desert, fasted, and was tempted by the Devil. As we enter Lent, a time of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, those who are preparing for the sacraments at Easter, as well as the rest

of the initiated faithful, are invited to consider their own temptations in light of Christ's and to reflect on how they have responded to them.

Remembering Jesus' fidelity to the Father, we ask for grace and the help of the Holy Spirit to reject sin and grow in virtue. Through Jesus' life, he showed the importance of *fasting*. He began his public life by fasting for forty days in the desert (see Lk 4:1-13). Often he went to the synagogue, the desert, or an out-of-the-way place to *pray* (see Lk 5:16). He told the rich young man that to be perfect he should *give away* his possessions and follow him (see Mt 19:16-30). Through fasting, we recognize our sinful ways; through prayer, we know God better; and through almsgiving, we respond to our brothers and sisters. Jesus' example teaches us that we need to deny ourselves, pray, and give alms. By God's grace, our entire Catholic community can deepen our conversion by putting away sinful ways and taking on our new selves. During Lent, we take up our cross and follow Jesus (see Mt 16:24). Just as we need to remove weeds to cultivate plants in our garden, with God's grace, we can grow into the image of Christ.

Pause to reflect on the importance of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving to grow in relation to God and our neighbor in Christ.

Reflection Questions

The wisdom gleaned from fasting, prayer, and almsgiving invites us to ask the following questions:

1. Why are these important in our busy, secular life?
2. Why is Lent a good time to practice acts of penance? What are ways to discipline ourselves, pray more, and attend Mass more frequently?
3. How does the Sacrament of Reconciliation help us discover our true identity in Christ?

Let us ask Jesus to help us fast, pray, and give alms during Lent.

Third Week of Lent

Let us put ourselves in God's presence.

Biblical or Ecclesial Reference

"The Spirit which the Lord pours forth gives a new heart, and renders man and woman capable of loving one another as Christ has loved us" (Pope John Paul II, *On the Family [Familiaris Consortio]* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 1982], no. 13).

Topic: Loving Others in Christ

When a man and woman marry, they promise lifelong fidelity to each other and become a communion of persons with the capacity for begetting new life. Through

the graces of the Sacrament of Matrimony, married couples continue to cultivate their individual identities while establishing their spousal identity in Christ. Spouses cultivate their personal and spousal selves by loving their spouses and any children that God gives them. Parents respond to their God-given vocation when they dedicate time, career, and even life itself to being good examples and providing for the ongoing Christian education of their children. Similarly, single people witness to Christ's self-giving love: for example, when taking care of sick parents. Such a witness is a lesson for single, divorced, or married Christians. Just as Jesus sacrificed for us, so we must do the same for others. When Jesus' love for the adulterous woman, the leper, and children becomes our own, we better understand our deepest identity. The middle of Lent is a wonderful time to ask the Holy Spirit to help us reflect Jesus' love. If it has weakened, we are invited to refocus our priorities.

Pause to reflect on loving others in Christ.

Reflection Questions

The wisdom learned from observing the selfless love of parents invites us to ask the following questions:

1. What married couple, widow, single person, or divorced person is an example of Jesus' selfless love for you? Please describe how.
2. What inspirational biblical stories serve as examples of selfless love? How do these stories help you cultivate your gift of self?

Let us pray to Mary, the Mother of God, asking her to ask Jesus, her Son, to help us imitate his selfless love.

Fourth Week of Lent

Let us put ourselves in God's presence.

Biblical or Ecclesial Reference

“The family has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love, and this is a living reflection of and a real sharing in God's love for humanity and the love of Christ the Lord for the Church His bride” (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 17).

Topic: Communication in Christ

God the Father shares his love for his children through the love of their parents. This points to parents' awesome responsibility to prioritize what is important. Their model is the Holy Family, where Mary and Joseph sacrificed for Jesus. After the Resurrection, Jesus commissioned his followers to communicate God's love to all people. Sharing God's love is a precious treasure given to every Christian at Baptism. It is not to be hidden; it is rather to be communicated in families, schools, parishes, workplaces, neighborhoods, and wherever people assemble. Every friendship or disagreement invites us to communicate with those involved in the Spirit of the Risen Lord and to pray, asking Jesus for the wisdom to act in his name.

Pause to reflect on our need to communicate in Christ.

Reflection Questions

Recognizing the need to communicate effectively, we ask the following questions:

1. How can communication in Christ help us better address the way we communicate in good times and in difficult times?
2. What are some of the virtues needed for this kind of communication?
3. Why is prayer important when trying to figure out a good way to communicate in difficult situations?

Let us ask the Holy Trinity to help us make every effort to address difficult situations in the spirit of Christ.

Fifth Week of Lent

Let us put ourselves in God's presence.

Biblical or Ecclesial Reference

“Whoever really loves his [marriage] partner loves not only for what he receives, but loves that partner for the partner's own sake, content to be able to enrich the other with the gift of himself” (Pope Paul VI, *On the Regulation of Birth [Humanae Vitae]*, no. 9, at www.vatican.va).

Topic: Facing Issues Honestly

When dealing with inevitable disagreements and differences, Christian married couples do well to consider the profound words quoted above. When they see that their marriage commitment centers in Christ, they can more easily address issues wisely and on a deeper level. This involves a mutual give and take and requires honest reflection and discussion. It is characterized by selflessness, kindness, and commitment to seek the good of the beloved before oneself. All Christians can do the same. When we see Jesus as the center of our lives and recognize all people as our neighbors, we look to him as the source of wisdom in addressing differences in business or among colleagues, family members, or friends. In so doing, we grow in an appreciation of our gifts and weaknesses.

Pause to reflect on our need to face issues honestly.

Reflection Questions

Considering the need to face issues with Jesus as our model, we ask the following questions:

1. How can seeing Christ as our guide, when dealing with disagreements, help us face them honestly?
2. What issues do we tend to sweep under the rug and not face honestly? In the silence of our hearts, let us consider if there are personal matters that we need to look at more honestly.

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to teach us to face issues honestly.

Holy Week

Let us put ourselves in God's presence.

Biblical or Ecclesial Reference

“The Christian meaning of death is revealed in the light of the *Paschal mystery* of the death and resurrection of Christ in whom resides our only hope” (CCC, no. 1681).

Topic: Enduring Hope

As Jesus traveled to Jerusalem for the last time, his time to fulfill the Father's plan for the salvation of humankind was drawing near. Jesus' actions in washing his disciples' feet, giving us his Body and Blood at the Last Supper, and accepting his agony and subsequent death on the Cross give us hope in difficult times and model faithful endurance when darkness envelops us. In times of suffering, failure, family breakups, loss of friends, or a loved one's death, Jesus' death gives us hope for a new tomorrow. Uniting our suffering with his helps us see that to know ourselves we

must turn our lives over to the Father. With hope, we trust that he will sustain us, thus preparing us for our eventual resurrection. Such enduring hope is the bottom line, if we are to recognize our true identity.

Pause to reflect on the importance of hope in difficult times.

Reflection Questions

Uniting our suffering with Jesus' suffering during Holy Week, we ask the following questions:

1. Why must we turn ourselves over to the Father, as Jesus did, to truly know ourselves?
2. What do you think Pope Benedict means when he makes the following statement: "The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of new life" (Pope Benedict XVI, *On Christian Hope [Spe Salvi]* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2007], no. 2).
3. How does uniting with Jesus' suffering and death help us maintain enduring hope during trials and tribulations?

Let us pray that the Holy Spirit gives us the grace of enduring hope.

Easter

Let us put ourselves in God's presence.

Biblical or Ecclesial Reference

"And indeed Christ, when he rose up from the earth, drew all to himself (cf. Jn 12:32), rising from the dead (cf. Rom 6:9). He instilled in the Apostles his animating Spirit, and through his Spirit built his Body which is the Church" (Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* [New York: Knopf, 1994],181).

Topic: Resurrection New Life

When we rejoice in Jesus' Resurrection, we also celebrate Christ's gift of himself, which transforms us and enables us to become a self-gift to others. When this happens, we are renewed by the blessings that Easter gives us. On this day, we rejoice in Jesus' conquest of sin and death and anticipate the Holy Spirit's coming on Pentecost. Jesus continues with us through his Church, the ongoing gift of his divine presence. We rejoice that our hard times and pain, like his, will be overcome, and that we will be rewarded some day. Each Easter, by the power of God's grace, given through the Holy Spirit, we renew our desire to cultivate our gift of self. We commit ourselves anew to our Risen Lord in his joys and suffering, so that one day we will rise and live forever in his Kingdom, where no more pain or sadness exist, only God's all-embracing love. Then will we see how firm faith, steadfast love, and enduring hope prepare us to celebrate eternal life forever.

Pause to reflect on Jesus' Resurrection and the difference it makes in our lives.

Reflection Questions

In the spirit of the Resurrection, we ask the following questions:

1. Why do we celebrate our transformation through Christ's gift of himself on Easter, the feast of the Resurrection? What does this feast tell us about ourselves and the purpose of our lives?
2. How does the gift of the Church help us to cultivate our gift of self, given to us at birth?

Let us pray to the risen Christ, thanking him for the gift of faith.

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