

THE FORGE

in our daily life

PATRIS MEI
“THE LOVE OF GOD
HAS BEEN MADE FLESH”

2

CHRISTMAS

Patris Mei

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

THE NATURE OF THE STAGE

The experience of fire in the symbolism of the Forge refers to the experience of God's love, maternally mediated by the immaculate Heart of Mary, and by the action of the Holy Spirit pouring into us the gift of love.

The fire warms, cleanses, softens, glows. Our Fr. Founder often uses this symbol to speak of love and missionary zeal. The "men of God" have always their face glowing with fire, like Moses.

The *Patris Mei* stage expresses the relationship of Claret with God the Father. It condenses the experience of God's love that warms the cold iron and prepares it to receive a new shape. It is, in short, a call to be "in my Father's business" (cf. Lk 2:49).

- 1 The search for God
(Advent)
- 2 The incarnation of God
(Christmas)
- 3 The God of the Kingdom
(Ordinary Time I)
- 4 The fatherhood of God
(Lent)
- 5 The God of life
(Easter)
- 6 The Word of God as the source of life
(Ordinary Time II)
- 7 Faith as an answer to the love of God
(Ordinary Time III)
- 8 Prayer as our encounter with God
(Ordinary Time IV)
- 9 The Claretian experience of God
(Ordinary Time V)

To help individuals, communities, Provinces and Delegations to be consciously aware of their present reality, rekindling their experience of Fire and missionary zeal following the methodology of the Forge.

OBJECTIVES OF "PATRIS MEI" STAGE

- Moving from superficial attitudes to deeper attitudes.
- Growing up in the experience of the love of God as a foundation of our missionary lives.
- Studying the issue of the images of God that underpin our behaviour, and the experience of the God of Jesus as a profound experience of grace.
- Developing, theoretically and practically, the experience of prayer.
- Understanding more deeply the Claretian dimension of the experience of God as Father.


QUID PRODEST - 2011
PATRIS MEI - 2012
CARITAS CHRISTI - 2013
SPIRITUS DOMINI – 2014

1. Introduction

Hopes are fulfilled

The Christmas season puts you directly on the summit. Easter is only reached after long laborious preparation (along the long hard road of Lent and Holy Week); the Christmas season liturgically breaks forth much more suddenly, and we are directly confronted by the mystery. Even though Advent has been warming up the spirit, emphasising the hope that nestles at the bottom of your heart and the promises that God has been making throughout history, the fulfillment of the promises that fill those expectations is to experience an unexpected gift, the explosion of a surprise.





Though promises are fulfilled, the surprise also depends on the fact that they often do not take place as we imagined. The fulfillment of the long-awaited promise shatters our plans, our preconceived ideas, either because we believe that fulfillment is below our expectations, and produces a certain disappointment, or because, by contrast, fulfillment infinitely surpasses them. In the case of Christmas, you may have a bit of both:

- *A child is born.* What is extraordinary about this? How is this the fulfillment of David's promises, anticipated for centuries? Is this all there is to it?
- But this human, everyday proximity gives God an immediacy of presence that we would never have suspected, with a familiarity that goes beyond anything we could possibly imagine.

This year we celebrate Christmas from the perspective of *Patris Mei*, the fatherhood of God, the fountain of all of Jesus' life experiences (birth, ministry, death and resurrection) and therefore of our experience as disciples and followers. The Father's consubstantial Son born of the flesh, becomes Jesus of Nazareth, son of man, so that we can become children of God. The experience of this relationship is central to the identity of Jesus and the Christian experience, and also to our vocational experience and identity.

Even though Christmas time seems very short due to our pastoral ministry, liturgical feasts, a variety of celebrations, family visits and much-needed rest, you will find that these same activities will prove helpful on your personal journey. Remember that at Christmas last year, the *Quid Prodest* made you realise that all these things are not a distraction but an opportunity to acknowledge what is fundamental.

Enter, then, into this Christmas season, which is a time of joy and contemplation, with the openness needed to see how this explosion of God into our history, into our human condition, opens the door for a new and unprecedented relationship with God, with other human beings, with the natural and social environment, with yourself. Having experienced the emptiness of the false promises of salvation that the experience of *Quid Prodest* taught us, and having discovered the value that God has put on each one of us, now move towards the positive choice that brings you to devote yourself to the things of the Father, just as we are taught by Jesus who was born in Bethlehem.

2. Reflection

The Word made flesh

John announces the birth of Christ with an unusually strong expression: “The Word was made flesh” (*Jn* 1:14). For John the work of the Antichrist is to deny that Jesus is the Christ who has come in the flesh (cf. *1 Jn* 4:2-3). To become flesh is to become small, limited and weak. The faith of Israel awaited the appearance of the great king, the mighty and powerful God. Perhaps, for some, maybe even for you, it would have been easier to accept, as the Messiah and messenger of God, an angel or a superhuman being, free from the limitations of the flesh. But God’s definitive appearance follows a different course: as stated in the letter to the Philippians, he “emptied himself, taking on the nature of a servant” (*Phil* 2:7)

Thus, God becomes accessible and at the same time, vulnerable up to a point that makes you feel unsettled, it surprises you, and it causes you to revise and rethink your image of God, your faith in Him, the kind of relationship you have with Him. The God of Israel, whom nobody has ever seen (cf. *Jn* 1:18), who dwells in inaccessible light (cf. *1 Tim* 6:16), who prohibited His people from portraying Him with images (cf. *Ex* 20: 4), to jealously prevent any manipulation of His invisible mystery, now tells you that there is no other image of Himself other than His incarnate presence, weak, limited and vulnerable, but also real and close at hand.

This new image (visible) of the invisible God (cf. *Col* 1:15) speaks of his presence in everyday life, in its limitations, in “the flesh.” There are



those who demand perfection as a condition of absolute good in this world (as in the case of certain secular utopias) or in the next (in the case of religious moralisms). That was not the choice that God made in relation to the world; he has chosen to come to us in a “less than ideal” situation, and has not waited for the world to become good and well prepared, nor has he put down preconditions (such as the destruction of evil). The incarnation speaks of unconditional love which is already present, at work in our troubled history, in our imperfect world. He is not merely putting in an appearance, nor is he simply an exemplary model: he has truly “been made” man to dwell among us. The Incarnation of the Word of God challenges your ability to believe. It is not just an article of faith that you only have to accept mentally, but it does invite you to open yourself with confidence to the limited, vulnerable incarnate presence of God. Are you really able to discover the light of the Word of God in the obscurity of the flesh? (See text in **Appendix 4: The pornographic magazine.**)

Son of God and son of man

We live in a world that reveres equality. In fact, this very reasonable expectation has Christian roots: it is a biblical truth that we all enjoy the same dignity in the eyes of God; it is an equality which, incidentally, does not affect our “right

to difference.” But equality is not everything in the universe of human relationships. There is a special form of inequality that does not violate human dignity, but underpins it. Before becoming autonomous and equal individuals, we were children, dependent on our parents who were (or had to be) for us, “providential” benefactors. The child immediately and intuitively understands the superiority of his parents over him, and his own dependence on them, which engenders a relationship of reverence for them and the obligation of obedience. This experience (“*pietas erga parentes*”) is at the root of all religious relationship. Filial piety is developed from this nucleus as ancestral worship, from which emerges various forms of natural religion, which is spreading until it encompasses the whole of humanity, like a subject of Divine Providence by God the Father of all. This basic relationship makes equality, on the basis of personal autonomy, possible, and is one of the cornerstones of self-esteem, self-confidence and trust in others and, consequently, the capacity of self-giving. If the basic relationship fails or becomes weak, reaching emotional maturity becomes difficult, but so also does the vital understanding of the paternal-maternal face of God. To become one’s true self in the full sense of the word, one must also have been a true son.

In humbling himself through his incarnation, Jesus the Son of the Eternal Father, was also made Son of Man. Jesus was born in the flesh to “make



manifest" his choice by God the Father, his consubstantial relationship with him (the bond of love which is the Holy Spirit). But his choice is reaffirmed by coming as a man, with all the difficulty that it entails because of sin. Jesus takes on himself the sin of the world (cf. *Jn* 1:29, *Is* 53:5; *Mt* 8:17), making it possible for every man, through Him, to endorse that choice as their own. If the sin that separates us from God consists of hiding from him (cf. *Gen* 3:8), Christ sets me out in the open (cf. *Ps* 18:20), the open space of our encounter with God, the space of salvation. (See **Appendix 2: Son of God and Son of Man**, first point).

Here the fatherhood of God has a completely new and radical meaning. It is not a religious metaphor, that God is the "supreme Beginning" of everything, the prime Mover, the One from whom everything proceeds. The partial truth of these claims is fundamentally insufficient to express the fatherhood of God in the Christian perspective, which is:

- *Christological*: God is, above all, the Father of Jesus Christ. This is not a mere image, but a revelation: Jesus reveals to us who he is, revealing to us who God is for him: his Father, who can also be our Father if we accept him as the Messiah.

- *Trinitarian*: The monotheism of Israel takes on a new and unexpected meaning. God is not a monarch who lives in the solitude of his divinity, but is and has an inner life made up of relationships, dialogue, and a perfect unity that supports

and affirms the difference. We are talking about God as a community, family, open, communicative, whose substance is love.

- *Soteriological*: The revelation of God's fatherly face, through the person of Jesus as his Son, does not simply want to communicate a particular religious dogma, but is intended to include us in the family relationships of the divine life. The incarnation of the Son of God as the Son of Man specifically allows us to participate as human beings in the filial divinity of Jesus. In this inclusion lies the salvation of mankind itself.

Not every human being manages to become a parent, but we've all been children, sons and daughters. Many elements of your personality and your religious experience depend on your having been a child, your relationship with your parents, with your father and mother, with both of them, united in one flesh. They have played a decisive role in your life experience, which has been positive, but in some cases and in some respects, has also been negative. Relationships which have been cold or excessively protective and possessive, or very harsh or too lenient ... Sometimes there are negative developments which might have caused problems (in the case of separation or the early death of one of them.)

In the light of Jesus' filial experience you can re-assess your relationship with your father, your mother and with the two of them together, and

how this has influenced your religious experience and your image of God:

- *God - the moral law*, demanding and prohibitive, where fear or sense of guilt predominate;
- *God - shelter or nest*, which protects you, but also prevents you from facing up to your responsibility with maturity and independence;
- *God Abba (Father)* who accepts you unconditionally and generates confidence in you and, for that matter, calls you to surrender yourself without reservation as an expression of love and gratitude.

Regardless of their successes and mistakes, from which springs the *positive* (gratitude, trust, sincere affection and friendship) or the *negative* (resentment, blame, distance and coldness), it is important in human and religious terms to develop in yourself the feeling of unconditional gratitude to your parents and, if it is still possible, to express it to them directly. Our inevitable childish dependence on them will grow mature by doing this, in gratitude, forgiveness (if that is necessary), and in caring for them. It is difficult to convey the experience of the fatherhood of God (who is the heart of faith in Jesus Christ) if you do not know, or have not known, how to be a grateful son to your parents. Further on, in booklet 3, you will be offered additional tools to explore your image of God further and to purify it.

Exercise 1: Your filial experience

Although there is currently a lively theological debate about the anthropological roots (cultural, social, racial, sexual, etc..) affecting our understanding of God, at this moment we invite you to focus on your own family history insofar as it affects your experience of Abba.

1. Write in two columns the positive and negative aspects of your relationship with your father, your mother and the two of them together.
2. Beneath the columns, in the form of a bottom-line result, describe your dominant image of God.
3. Finally, write a letter to your parents (together or separately, as seems most appropriate) that expresses your feelings, both positive and negative, but in which your expression of gratitude to them becomes the key element.

The “Mater” in the *Patris Mei* experience

To become a man and the son of man, the only begotten Son of the Eternal Father needed human intervention, in the person of a mother. Paul puts it across strongly and clearly: “When the fullness of time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman” (*Gal 4:4*). Mary is united to the whole mystery of Christ, but especially during these days of Christmas, we can not contemplate Jesus, the Christ child, except in his mother’s arms.

Mary helps us to understand, on the one hand, what is God’s attitude towards human beings after committing sin or, in other words, looking at Mary, we can understand how God sees us. But it also teaches us how man can and should be positioned before the eyes of God. And we discover a close connection between the reality of Mary as a unique person and the logic of God’s salvation, manifested in the act of creation.

God created the world “from nothing”, so that in this world there was not the faintest shadow of evil: the world came from the hands of God, not just “good” but “very good” (cf. *Gen 1:31*), great, magnificent; we can say that the world came out of his hands “full of grace.”

On the other hand, sin, despite its radical nature, does not entirely destroy what is “very good” and therefore does not exclude the dignity of man as the image of God, although it distorts and obscures it. How does God react to man’s sin? Or, put another way, how does God see us? God does not act in history without the assistance of man. The history of salvation is the story of a dialogue. God continues to return to earth “in the cool of the day” (cf. *Gen 3:8*) and looks for the man who, because of sin, hides himself from the face of God and with great difficulty tries to look at the face of his fellow man.

One consequence of sin is precisely that we have our eyes opened wide to evil, especially to the evil of others, “Why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye and not see the plank in your own eye?” (*Mt 7:3*). So often, we pay great attention to the sin of others, to the negative in our neighbour, much more than we do to the inevitable good that is in them.

God, who clearly sees sin and evil, looks at us, however, in a different way, and is able to see what is “very good” in what he himself created: the heart untainted by sin, his own image present in his creation in the form man. That is how God looks, searching, with his eyes, for the real human being capable of conversing with him “in the cool of the day”, who will respect the tree of knowledge of good and evil. That is to say, God seeks what is good and kind in man: “what I am looking for is the one who is meek and contrite of heart, who trembles at my word” (*Is 66:2*). So God is watching us, looking for the good and the wholesome in this world, his own handiwork. God seeks, searches, finds ... Mary: “He has looked upon his servant in her lowliness” (*Lk 1:48*).

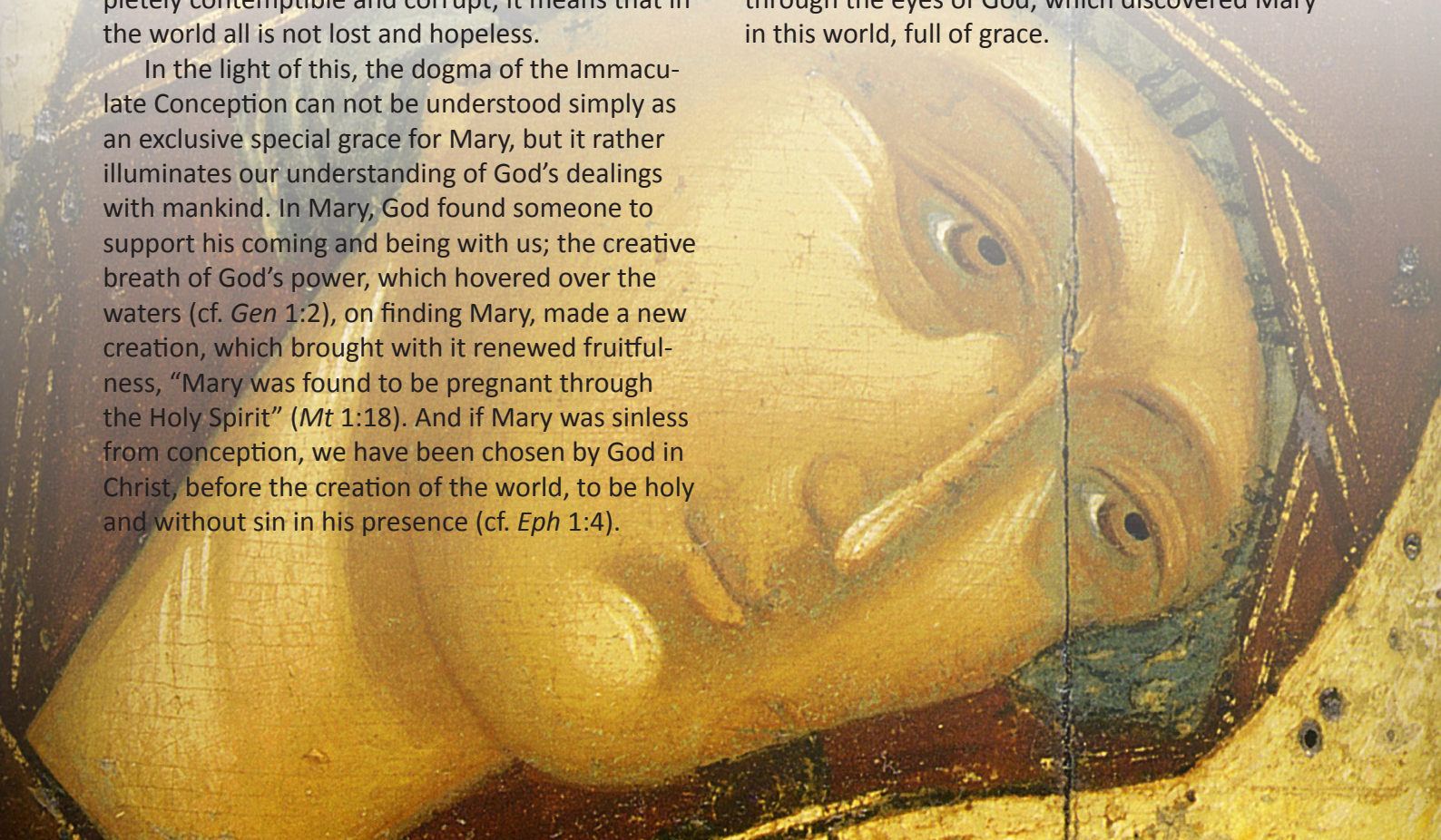
Mary represents the best of humanity, an example of God’s “good work”, just as it left his hands at the time of her creation: she is full of grace. And if in the history of mankind there has been a human being, a woman, like Mary, it means that our world is not even partly, and certainly not wholly, a mess (as we sometimes say, even using stronger language than this), nor completely contemptible and corrupt; it means that in the world all is not lost and hopeless.

In the light of this, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception can not be understood simply as an exclusive special grace for Mary, but it rather illuminates our understanding of God’s dealings with mankind. In Mary, God found someone to support his coming and being with us; the creative breath of God’s power, which hovered over the waters (*cf. Gen 1:2*), on finding Mary, made a new creation, which brought with it renewed fruitfulness, “Mary was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit” (*Mt 1:18*). And if Mary was sinless from conception, we have been chosen by God in Christ, before the creation of the world, to be holy and without sin in his presence (*cf. Eph 1:4*).

But to pitch his tent among us, God requires human cooperation. The new creation is not an “invasion” by God of man’s territory, it is not an imposition that forces our submission. You can say that God enters the world of mankind by seeking our permission. In Mary, humanity answers ‘yes’ to this request. Mary’s ‘yes’ is the yes of that humanity, in the image of God, which is able to respond to his call and welcome him in our home.

At the Annunciation, Mary represents all of humanity, the very best of it. In God she finally found someone to talk to “in the cool of the day” (*cf. Lk 1:26-38*). Mary, the servant of the Lord hears and receives the Word and fulfills it, unlike Eve, who claimed to be equal with God. And so when the time came, Mary “gave birth to a son, her firstborn” (*Lk 2:7*).

With Mary you can check your gaze, your way of seeing the world, society, the Church, your community, and your brothers. Do you have eyes especially for the needs of the poor? Are your words usually more of a curse than a blessing, more about bitter complaints than grateful praise? Do they reflect a dark sombre look, ready to highlight what is bad, and blind to what is good? Your look in relation to the rest of the world, is the same as the way you look at your immediate environment, and the society in which you live; and the Church itself may not escape criticism, not to mention your community and your brothers. But, although you should not close your eyes to evil, you are invited to learn to see through the eyes of God, which discovered Mary in this world, full of grace.



Exercise 2: Look for Mary

Popular piety is directed towards Mary through an almost infinite number of invocations. Although the most orthodox theologians grimace at it, there beats a genuinely deep-seated evangelical insight: Mary is not a celestial being, who is inaccessible, distant, but is living here amongst us, she is one of your people, she speaks your language.

1. Guided by this insight, try to discover Mary (her goodness, her beauty and sinlessness) in your town, in your environment, in your community, in your brothers, in the Church and in your country (ie. the country where you carry out your mission), and in the world where you live. Only by looking like this, critical but also hopeful and positive, will you present the Gospel where the mission has sent you to proclaim the Good News.
2. Write down what the Marian dimensions are (sinless, virginal, “very good”) of those environments: brothers, community, local church, country, world ...
3. How does popular religiosity affect your religious experience? What do you find valuable in it? Can you distinguish, in its ambiguity, the basic elements of the anecdotal and the superficial?

The child grew up and became strong

Christmas is only a starting point, because birth simply initiates a process of growth. If this process begins, as we have said, in situations of dependency, it will soon need to develop independently. Children define their personalities, young people begin to take their own steps, to seek their own way, to ask their own questions and test their own responses, to define their universe of values, their vocation.

The Christmas contemplation of the Child is the contemplation of the mystery of life, and the mystery of the Word (the fount of life) made flesh (mortal). But it is also the contemplation of a project of life, a life that is a project which not only “is” (*sum*), but “is for” (*adsum*). If in the *Quid Prodest* experience we got rid of a sense of false security, of complexes, of projects that do not lead to life, but lead to us being lost, this step must have a positive complement: to have a life plan is to receive the gift of life and make it grow; and that means devoting your life to something that transcends you. In the case of Jesus, this fidelity is his consecration to the Father and to the affairs of the Father.

The **Feast of the Holy Family** helps us meditate on this dimension. Joseph and Mary are the mediators in that growth. Parents bring us into the world, but they also, and above all, help us to grow. Here there is a psychological nuance that distinguishes the role of the father and mother: it is mostly the principle of procreation, the earth, which propagates and engenders trust; the fa-

ther is the beginning of this process of growth, the criterion that seeks and calls. In the case of Joseph, his role is of paramount importance in this second aspect: he represents the human face of fatherhood, which Jesus experiences as a mediator of his filial experience with respect to God the Father.

In the early days of the child’s life, in a situation of total dependence, Mary and Joseph carried out the ritual according to the law, which also has a prophetic meaning: the presentation-consecration of Jesus in the Temple, as we read in the Gospel of the Feast of the Holy Family in the B cycle (cf. *Lk* 2:22-40). Our charismatic journey, with a focus on the *Patris Mei* element, invites us this year to continue reading Luke’s text (cf. *Lk* 2:41-51), when Jesus, as a teenager, takes his first step towards independence, towards a freely and consciously chosen consecration. In Booklet 9, at the end of this stage, you will have the opportunity to reflect in depth on this passage which gives its name to the *Patris Mei* stage.

We observe this link, first of all, in a seemingly real act of rebellion: Jesus “gets lost” because now he can walk by himself and put his own decisions to the test. These lead him to getting lost in the temple. It is, indeed, significant how Jesus had his first experience of the temple in his early youth: it is not a refuge, a place of safety to escape the problems and questions of life. On the contrary, Jesus asks questions, he raises doubts, he seeks answers, listens and learns, but according to the Evangelist, he also proffers his own answers. Throughout this period, Jesus shows us that he is

living life as an open reality, in which there is no room for ready-made solutions that can be easily accepted. And we also see here that his vocation is beginning to take shape: his devotion to his Father's affairs, which are nothing other than the salvation of man. Thus, the Temple, in which he was consecrated as a child, which will be purified at the appropriate time, becomes the place where Jesus takes his first steps towards independence and towards his mission in life.

Besides, we find in Jesus a feature of paramount importance which helps him achieve true maturity: autonomy does not mean the independence of cutting himself off. After his teenage escape, Jesus "went down with them, returning to Nazareth, and he continued to be subject to them" (v. 51). We can easily understand that this submission now has a new character: it is not something forced on him because of the utter helplessness of being an infant, but the result of free choice. Just as he will freely submit to the will of his heavenly Father, so now he freely submits to his earthly parents so as to continue growing towards adulthood. And, in truth, man cannot grow or mature when he appears to be the centre of the world and proclaims an independence that is so absolute as to be impossible. When, however, he takes charge of his own life, and consecrates himself (freely submitting himself and not through obligation) to something which he discovers is much bigger than himself, but which liberates him and magnifies him. As E. Mounier once said, "a person reaches full maturity only when he has

chosen loyalties that are worth more than life itself." Our faith is the fruit of grace, but is also the free response to a calling. We will return to this theme in Booklet 7. The call of God and our free response to it have brought us to the Church. Maybe it's time to ask yourself the question, in the light of the young Jesus being "lost and found" in the temple, about the nature of your membership in the Church. In it you will find, above all, security, a set of answers to all the fundamental problems that will save you the bother of searching for them, asking questions and arguing about them. If that is the case, you might be closing yourself off to an existential truth that challenges you and makes you question yourself: you submit yourself, yes, but without freedom, in a servile manner, reducing the role of the Church to being "your party", to whom you give blind obedience. Or, conversely, you are in the Church, but your attitude is one of systematic and bitter criticism, suspicion, fundamental rejection of all forms of authority. In this case, you might be "marking out the territory" of your freedom, but you lack the basic confidence that will lead you to true evangelical obedience: you declare your freedom as pure independence, rebellion, individualism (often linked to a submission to more or less disguised idols). To grow, you have to be free, take on board a personalised faith, which implies some risk, some searching, and some journeying. But freedom matures when there is open trust that leads to obedience to human mediation (of the flesh) present in the Church, in the Congregation, in your community.



Exercise 3: Your state of mind when you are in church

1. How do you feel in church? How does it affect you? The church is almost an unavoidable place in your Christian life, as a Claretian religious and, depending on your circumstances, as a priest. But this “state of being” can have very different nuances. Here are some tips on how you can think about it from a personal point of view:

The church as a form of escape and refuge from the storms of the world.

The church as an environment of ideological security, which saves me from asking fundamental questions.

The church as a place for the realization of personal ambitions.

The church as a mere instrument of social transformation.

The church perceived only as a rigid and authoritarian “institution” that engenders certain suspicion and criticism.

2. Faced with all these insufficient modes of feeling towards the church, you can look on it with faith (the Church is the place for experiencing God revealed by Jesus Christ), which helps you understand it (empathise and concur with it) as a place of consecration to the Father (the wounded body of Christ crucified on the Cross), the congregation of those called by the Master, a community of love that lives out the living presence of Jesus, a presence that tries to communicate with everyone and reach the far boundaries of the world.

3. But now you have to ask yourself, not in theory, but in living terms, what is the image of the Church that predominates in your mind, and what can you do to improve it. You can make use of the reading in Appendix 4: Church, how much I love you.

Here I am. I will do your will, O God (Heb 10,7)

Tradition associates the feast of Christmas with that feeling of joy which is naturally bound to the start of a new life (cf. *Jn* 16:21). But the liturgy reminds us in a very expressive way of the meaning of this birth. **The feast of St. Stephen**, on the 26th, and **the Feast of the Holy Innocents** on the 28th, immediately give us the realism of improvisation versus an excess of poetry: “If anyone asks about the mystery, he will feel prompted to say rather that it was not his death which was a natural consequence of his birth, but that he was born to die” (*St Gregory of Nazianzus*). Jesus was born, the Word of God became flesh like us, the Kingdom of God has been placed within our reach. But this light shines in the darkness (cf. *Is* 9:1, *Mt* 4:16), the world in which Jesus was born is largely hostile to his coming: “he came to His own, and yet His own people did not receive him” (*Jn* 1:11); shadows and death threats rise up against the newborn infant: “they will soon be looking for the child in order to kill him” (cf. *Mt* 2:13).

The world in which Jesus is born is weighed down by threats of death which unleash their fury on the newborn infant, his followers, and against all the innocent victims, the anonymous disciples of the Good Shepherd, who is a gentle lamb. The readings these days clearly express the contrast of



two parallel stories: the one about new life, inaugurated by the birth of Christ in the flesh, which the Apostle John reveals to us in his first letter and is substantiated by the commandment of love; and the one about the old world that continues in violence, lies, hatred and the culture (or the cultivation) of death.

Jesus is the crossroad where these two stories meet: the lamb of God who takes upon himself the sin of the world. The complete surrender of his own life is the natural consequence of his devotion to the affairs of the Father.

The logic of the cross, by which “Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead” (Acts 17:3, cf. Lk 24:26) is present from the moment of the birth of Jesus. In a way, Jesus embodies in himself the figure of the prodigal son (cf. Lk 15:11-31, **see Appendix 5**): he went to a distant country, to a world which, imagined as a paradise, became hostile territory and in which he lost everything, in order to show us the path that leads back to the Father’s house.

Jesus, devoted entirely to his Father’s affairs, makes this consecration in the complete surrender of his own life. In fact, it is in Jesus that the sacrifice of Isaac takes on its full meaning, the

Exercise 4. Consecration or profession? Surrender of your life or just a “job”?

To test your own disposition, take time to re-read the stories about Jesus' infancy in St Matthew's version. Note especially the figure of Joseph, Mary's husband. Consider specifically these three features that stand out in them. Allow them to speak to you.

1. His silence. He lives through a dark night. He doesn't utter a single word. His attitude is to listen, accept and obey promptly when asked to take Mary to him (cf. Mt 1:19), to name him Jesus (cf. Mt 1:20), to protect and care for the new family (cf. Mt 2:13-14. 19-22).

2. His righteousness. Consider yourself standing before a serious marriage problem. Joseph is an “upright” man (cf. Mt 1:19) not like some of the Pharisees. He knew how to link the law with mercy, finding ways to save Mary through God's intervention.

3. His friendship with God. In his dreams, Joseph appears as God's friend, whom the angel inserts into the mysterious plans He has for His people. In the OT this action on the part of God was very common through dreams: “Within dreams, through night visions, God opens the ears of men, and instructs and corrects them “ (Job 4:13 and 36:10). (You may also find point 2 of Appendix Two useful: Son of God and Son of Man).

only son as guarantor of promises, or the death of the firstborn of Egypt. And it's on the cross of Jesus where we fully understand what it means to “be devoted to the affairs of the Father.” You are a consecrated person: to God, to Jesus Christ, to the Heart of Mary, to the service of the Word, to the Mission of the Church according to the charism of Claret. How do you understand, feel about and live this consecration? Do you see it as a professional duty? As a technical skill? Like time that you sacrifice for and then you feel justified in dedicating yourself to your own affairs? Or is it a total surrender of your own life? You may also challenge yourself by looking at the way you interact with the people you live with, the ones to whom you minister. Do you feel that they are a hindrance to you, that they constrict you, make you waste time, divert you from your true interests? Or do you perceive them as those whom you should be dedicated to, for whom you're willing to sacrifice your time, your sleep, your own personal plans?

The big question that arises when you discover the cross of Christ in the light of *Patris Mei* is, whether or not you are really ready for martyrdom, for the actual surrender of your own life:

The Magi and the star

Jesus is born in Bethlehem for all mankind: for his own people and outsiders, Jews and Gentiles, young and old, shepherds and kings. God is born and reveals himself: he is born to reveal himself, to communicate, to be accessible to all mankind. But how do we find him? How do we chance upon him? There are many cultures, peoples, and deep-seated attitudes that seem very distant from the religious world that surrounds the figure of Jesus. Not only were the Gentiles outsiders to the Jewish world (with its ideas and values, its beliefs and customs) where Christ himself belongs; even today it is still the same: there are not only cultures but also attitudes and ways of life completely foreign to the Christian faith. And this seems to undermine the universality which we attribute to Christ, to the very salvation that he brings to us.

There are two conflicting attitudes that may tempt us, but, each in its own way, betrays that universality. One is the assertion that the only way to get to Christ is through undisguised faith, totally unconnected with human attributes or vestiges of rationality. This exclusivity of faith (which is technically called *fideism*) is enshrouded in the

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There are not only cultures
but also attitudes and ways of life
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faith.”

practice of various forms of stark spiritualism, a particularly sectarian type of faith at the edges of the “current signs of the times”, with its back turned towards current trends, issues and values that actually govern the world. The other is to “rationalise” the faith: in searching for engagement with the world we live in, we try to “translate” the contents of faith, stripping them of their mystery, of their spontaneity (surprise), thus lowering its profile, so that anyone with common sense (the most elementary form of reason) just has to agree with it. Except that in this case, on the basis of seeking relevance, we have completely destroyed its identity, and we have reduced the tenets of our faith in Christ to the level of platitudes and truisms.

The Magi from the East can help in this dilemma. And, in truth, nature speaks of God, and when our sense of reason contemplates it, the mystery is solved: “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament proclaims the work of his hands: day talks it over with day, night hands on the knowledge to night. No speech, no words, no voice is heard, but the call goes on throughout





the universe, the message is felt to the ends of the earth" (*Ps* 18 A, cf. *Rom* 1:19-21); despite that, of course, you have to have a willing heart, "Love justice, you who rule over the world; think rightly of God, seek him with simplicity of heart, for he reveals himself to those who do not challenge him" (*Wis* 1:1-2). You can see that the Magi fitted the latter description.

The wise men from the east represent human wisdom. They were seekers of truth, astronomers, inquisitive about nature, philosophers. Knowledge at that time was not as specialised as it is today. These wise men who followed the star in search of the child so as to worship him, means that between faith and reason there is no contradiction, that science and revelation are not divergent but convergent, that truth is sought along different paths, that goodness and justice which, whether through natural experience or through revelation, have the same Author. Reason has its limitations and needs to be open to revelation. Thus, man can admire the grandeur and power of God when contemplating nature, but he can also get lost, but what is certain is that you can't appreciate what is revealed solely through reason, that says that God the creator whom we look for in the stars, has to be found among men.



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The story of the Magi invites us to enter into dialogue about the connection between revelation and science, between God and man, between faith and reason, so that the former does not become arrogant, and the latter does not become self absorbed.”

For that reason, the Magi following the star, get very close but can not reach their destination. They have to ask advice of the representatives of the priestly community, the custodians of revelation. They frown but they consult the repository entrusted to them and find the answer. It is a text from Micah (5:1) that clarifies the way to the newborn child. But it engenders a sense of wonderment and perplexity, while the wise men from the east appear to be so open (to reason and faith), these representatives are so closed to what even their own scriptures tell them. And we see that neither reason nor revelation, in themselves, are sufficient. We have already said that a certain personal disposition is also required. Without it, reason by itself can lead to arrogance and the denial of God (and of his image and likeness, the human being) and the religious attitude can turn into fanaticism and denial of man who, in the name of a misunderstood truth, is willing to kill.

The story of the Magi invites us to enter into

dialogue about the connection between revelation and science, between God and man, between faith and reason, so that the former does not become arrogant, and the latter does not become self-absorbed. We can not stop looking at the stars of our time, at the lights that guide us in the direction of the stable in Bethlehem, also those that enlighten us that seem “foreign”, but are also in search, perhaps more open-mindedly than us believers. But we can not stop listening to the revealed Word which finally tells us where to find the “King of the Jews”, and to communicate this knowledge faithfully and with conviction, and not “with a sense of regret,” as did Herod and his wise advisers.

Today, like yesterday, there are stars that glow in the dark and point the way to Christ. Today as yesterday, there are men of good will, guided by these stars, who are consciously or unconsciously seeking the Saviour. An essential element of our mission is to reconcile the stars (*natural reason*) with the Word (*revelation and faith*). And this must be done in a vital, personalised and specific way. Fr. Claret said that the two feet of the missionary are science and virtue. We can understand it in the context of the relationship between faith and reason, and in the dialogue between faith and culture.

Exercise 5: Follow the star, listen to the Word

The wise men from the east invite you to question yourself about the quality of your lifelong formation, your attitude of openness to the realities of the world, your ability to discover the stars, the very lights which, in the world and in the culture in which you live, will point out the direction to the Child, and about your ability to throw light on these realities from the experience of faith, from the Light of the Word. Ask yourself:

1. What role does formation and human information play in your life?
2. To what extent does listening to the Word, the experience of faith, illuminate and compliment that formation and information?

Point 3 of Appendix Two: Son of God and Son of Man may serve to enlighten this debate.

4. Suggestions for the community meeting

During the Christmas season it is rare for the Claretian community to have a formal meeting. But it is normal for all its members to gather around the table to share a Christmas or New Year's Eve meal, Christmas lunch or the meal at Epiphany. We offer two suggestions that might add a different flavour:

1. Community members could be invited, in advance, to **write a few letters on a card to each of his brothers in community**, which may include a small gift whether "real" or "virtual". The significance of this is to communicate God's wish (his love made "flesh") through a simple gesture.

2. **The cards are distributed after the initial blessing of the dinner or lunch**, according to the tradition of the community. This initial blessing may be introduced with these words, together with the action of lighting a candle:

Today, Christmas Eve (Christmas, or the Epiphany ...), in a very a special way and as the focal point of our community, we have God our Father with us who has given us the gift of Jesus Christ our Lord.

We light a candle in the middle of the table so that it will help us think of Jesus, and we thank God for sending us his Son, Jesus Christ.

Thank you Father, who loved us so much that you gave us your Son.

All: We give you thanks.

Thank you Jesus for having become a child in order to save us.

All: We give you thanks.

Thank you Jesus, for bringing the love of God to the world.

All: We give you thanks.

Lord Jesus, You came to tell us that God loves us and that we should love others.

All: We give you thanks.

Lord Jesus, You came to tell us that giving brings more joy than receiving.

All: We give you thanks.

Lord Jesus, You came to tell us what we do to others we do to you.

All: We give you thanks.

Thank you Mary, for agreeing to be the Mother of Jesus.

All: We give you thanks.

Thank you Joseph, for taking care of Jesus and Mary.

All: We give you thanks.

Thank you Father for this night (day) of Peace, night (day) of Love, that You have given us when you gave us your Son, we ask you to bless us, to bless (+) this food given to us through your kindness, and bless the hands that prepared it, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

3. **Song** (a carol)



4. Suggestions for the “lectio divina”

At this time of Christmas, when we see Jesus, above all, as an obedient Son of the Father, we must adopt an attitude of obedient contemplation of the Word, as we are taught by Mary, who “pondered all these things her heart” (*Lk* 2:19. 51.) Maybe St. Augustine was thinking about her when he wrote, with his customary insight: “The best of your servants is not the one so concerned just to hear what he wants to hear, but he is the one who wants to want what he actually hears from you”.

Sunday December 25th 2011. Solemnity of the Birth of the Lord

- Is 52:7-10
- Ps 97:1-4
- Hb 19:1-6
- Jn 1:1-18

The enormity of the mystery of the liturgy makes us want to present it in its full extent, from different angles. On Christmas Eve (Mt 1, 1-25) we learn of the historical roots of the man Jesus; on Christmas night (Lk 2, 1-14) the liturgy puts us in the context of world history in which we are introduced to the birth in all its simplicity; at the dawn Mass, we accompany the shepherds, establishing the fact that this child is everyone's inheritance, especially of the most humble; finally, with the sunrise, we understand that this child, the son of Mary, who has been present in the realisation of our history in order to be with us, is the same eternal Son of the eternal Father, the Word through whom all things were made, who has come just as the sun rises up from on high to light our night.

Monday December 26th 2011. Feast of St. Stephen, protomartyr

- Acts 6:8-10; 7, 54-60.
- Ps 30:3cd-4. 6. 16bc-17
- Mt 10:17-22.

Jesus is a sign of contradiction: you must take a stand before him, either for or against him, and whatever stand you take will influence the rest of your life. Choosing Christ, as he has chosen the Father, is not a private matter: it means a way of life and the fulfillment of a mission. Being witnesses of the Word made flesh, is to receive the gift of the word that many want to silence by whatever means. But he who has received this gift cannot be silent even at the risk of his own life. Am I willing to talk about taking a risk, like Stephen?

Tuesday December 27th 2011. Feast of St John, apostle and evangelist

- 1Jn 1:1-4.
- Ps 96:1-2. 5-6. 11-12
- Jn 20:2-8.

Love can not remain silent, nor can it stand still. Love makes us talk and run. And it also gives us the ability to see things which a gaze devoid of love is blind to: a few signs, ostensibly of death, are enough to make us understand and believe: death cannot kill the fountain of Life, which existed from the beginning and became visible. Lord, let me touch you, touch me and heal me, I am dumb, crippled and blind.



Wednesday December 28th 2011. Feast of the Holy Innocents, martyrs

- 1Jn 1:5-2, 2.
- Ps 123:2-3. 4-5. 7b-8
- Mt 2:13-18.

Jesus is born into a hostile world. Dark forces seek to kill him. The powers of this world are afraid, and assert their power in their capacity for destruction. When this happens not only do the “innocents pay for the guilty”, but so do the innocents pay for the Innocent One, which saves them from death, because they are vindicated. Owing to the birth of Christ, it is no longer possible to say that “in this world there is no justice”. Innocent victims will find the answer to their cries for justice in Christ Jesus himself. God has not abandoned them. Am I capable of transmitting this light in the darkness that surrounds us?

Thursday December 29th 2011

- 1Jn 2:3-11.
- Ps 95:1-2a.2b-3.5b-6
- Lk 2:22-35.

The presentation of Jesus in the temple, as prescribed by the Law, makes us understand that the Law is referred to Christ: He is the eldest son who should be consecrated to the Father, and that consecration, performed today in a ritual manner, will have its consummation on the cross, in which the body of Christ is the temple, victim and altar. Eyes and prophetic voices, like those of Simeon, discovered the fullness of time in the humility of the flesh, so also the fulfillment of promises. “I find in the smallest of signs that the Kingdom of God is at hand?”

Friday December 30th 2011. Feast of the Holy Family

- Sir 3:2-6. 12-14.
- Ps 127:1-2. 3. 4-5
- Col 3:12-21.
- Lk 2:22-40.

Man’s salvation is the salvation of the world of human beings and their relationships. The family also has to be saved: blood ties do not guarantee peace: “A family that is only bound by blood ties can easily become a nest of vipers” (E. Mounier), “most men forget the death of a father more easily than the loss of their inheritance” (Machiavelli). Jesus also dwells within the family; he wants to be a guest in our families, in all families in fact. The family is the natural environment in which humans can achieve independence and become their true selves, since family relationships are not relationships based on ownership. “Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you yet they belong not to you.” (Khalil Gibran). But this natural environment has to be made whole by the presence of Christ, which is opened to the great family of the children of God.

Saturday December 31st 2011

- 1Jn 2:18-21.
- Ps 95:1-2. 11-12. 13-14
- Jn 1:1-18

The last day of the year reminds us, also through the Word of God, of the transience of time, and of the consistency of our salvation in God: “In the Beginning” opens the Gospel (which the liturgy goes back to again and again without getting tired of reading it) “is the final moment”, recalls John in his letter. In the transience of time, God has been present in the flesh, and our task is to take sides, make an urgent decision, because time is passing and if we are not careful, it may slip through your fingers.

Sunday January 1st 2012. Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God (World Day of Peace)

- Num 6:22-27
- Ps 66:2-3. 5-6
- Gal 4:4-7
- Lk 2:16-21

Mary, blessed among women, is the best gateway for entering the new year, so that we also can become a repository of the beautiful blessing of the book of Numbers. That blessing is poured out on us by him who was born of a woman, this woman, whose name means “God saves”. Indeed, to wish each other a happy new year should not mean more to us than to wish that this be a year of salvation, in which we experience the blessing of God every day.

Monday January 2nd 2012. St Basil and St Gregory Nazianzen, Bishops and Doctors of the Church.

- 1Jn 2:22-28
- Ps 97:1-4
- Jn 1:19-28

The way of the Lord has many obstacles: in truth the kingdom of lies stands in opposition. Christ is the Truth, so whoever spreads the lie is the anti-Christ. We need courageous witnesses of the truth, who break with norms and conventions, who do not espouse anyone and do not aspire to glory. Christ needs the testimony of the Baptist. Also today there is a need for this kind of prophet, without ties. Am I a prophet, who is trying to stay with the truth, even though I were to burn, or just a public face of a dry orthodoxy?

Tuesday January 3rd 2012

- 1Jn 2:29-3, 6
- Ps 97:1-5
- Jn 1:29-34

John’s testimony inevitably leads to reconciliation, to baptism, to the life of the Spirit who makes us children of God. The revelation that takes place in Jesus Christ is celebrated in the sacramental signs of the community of those who already know they are children in the Son, and they set off towards a kind of fulfillment that can scarcely be imagined. The joy of this dignity has to be for me a sacramental sign of what I still do not know, but that is the object of hope.

Wednesday January 4th 2012

- 1Jn 3:7-10
- Ps 97:1. 7-10
- Jn 1:35-42

The initial encounters with Jesus, thanks to the witness of John, generate a string of new evidence and meetings. This is how Christian life must be: testimony received and our personal experience of an encounter with Christ makes us witnesses in word and deed. Then to participate in the dignity of divine filiation cannot but be reflected in the works of justice, the justice of the Kingdom, which is made up of love. Am I a true witness, an agent of justice, a reflection of Love?

Thursday January 5th 2012

- 1Jn 3:11-21
- Ps 99:1-5
- Jn 1:43-51

John’s letter raises an alternative that seems too radical: either love your brothers, or be their murderer; he who lives in the dynamics of love, although he may not be perfect, even when he falls down, lives in the dynamics of reconciliation, and trusts in God; he who does not live in that dynamic, even though he does not kill, has excluded others from his heart and from his life. Perfection is not a human conquest, but a

hidden goodness within us, which God reveals through his gaze, like Jesus to Phillip. Am I open to the transforming gaze of Jesus? Am I willing to look at my brothers as he looked at me?

Friday January 6th 2012. Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord

- Is 60:1-6
- Ps 71:1-2. 7-8. 10-13
- Eph 3:2-3a. 5-6
- Mt 2:1-12

There are people who seek Jesus, even without realising it. Their search is guided by stars, distant flickering lights that lead them, but cannot take them to their destination. There is also a need for witnesses, those who have been custodians of the promises that should not be kept to themselves, because they have received them in order to share out with others. The Word is a clear and definite light for those willing to listen to it. We, the believers in Jesus, are custodians of fulfilled promises, of real working realities. Do we know how to offer them to the “outsiders”, to the seekers who are aware or unaware of the Messiah who was born in Bethlehem?

Saturday January 7th 2012

- 1Jn 3:22 - 4,6
- Ps 2:7b.8. 10-11
- Mt 4:12-17.23-25

Believing and loving is the core of the lives of the children of God; and as the Son is the Word, those who have received the gift of filiation cannot avoid being the word that challenges and provokes acceptance or rejection, but it cannot be indifferent. It is a word, a reflection of the Word that enlightens us, calls to us, comforts and heals us. The Antichrist will also speak: he will spread darkness, division, sadness and pain. What is my “word” like? What are its fruits?

Sunday January 8th 2012, Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

- Is 42:1-4. 6-7
- Ps 28:1-4. 9-10
- Acts 10:34-38
- Mk 1:7-11

The Epiphany is completed by the Baptism of the Lord, where the fundamental theophany, that gives meaning to the life of Jesus, takes place: that which proclaims him the beloved Son. Jesus undergoes the rite of purification because, although he is without sin, he will take upon himself the sin of the world. This taking upon himself and being proclaimed as the beloved Son are united by a strong inner bond that will manifest itself fully only in the Paschal mystery. I can not reduce my life as a Christian and Claretian to the moralism of trying not to sin. If I really feel that I am participating in the divine filiation of Christ, I have to take on board the weaknesses and sins of others, giving up my life for them.

5. Texts for further study

Appendix 1: “On the Morning Of Christ’s Nativity” (John Milton)

I

On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity
This is the month, and this the happy morn
Wherein the Son of Heav’n’s eternal King,
Of wedded Maid, and Virgin Mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring;
For so the holy sages once did sing,
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

II

That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable,
And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty,
Wherewith he wont at Heav’n’s high council-table,
To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,
He laid aside, and here with us to be,
Forsook the courts of everlasting day,
And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.

III

Say Heav’nly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein
Afford a present to the Infant God?
Hast thou no verse, no hymn, or solemn strain,
To welcome him to this his new abode,
Now while the heav’n, by the Sun’s team untrod,
Hath took no print of the approaching light,
And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright?

IV

See how from far upon the eastern road
The star-led wizards haste with odours sweet:
O run, prevent them with thy humble ode,
And lay it lowly at his blessed feet;
Have thou the honour first thy Lord to greet,
And join thy voice unto the angel quire,
From out his secret altar touched with hallowed fire.

Appendix 2: Son of God and son of man (Benedict XVI)

1. “You are my son, this day I have begotten you” – with this passage from Psalm 2 the Church begins the liturgy of this holy night. She knows that this passage originally formed part of the coronation rite of the kings of Israel. The king, who in himself is a man like others, becomes the “Son of God” through being called and installed in his office. It is a kind of adoption by God, a decisive act by which he grants a new existence to this man, drawing him into his own being. The reading from the prophet Isaiah that we have just heard presents the same process even more clearly in a situation of hardship and danger for Israel: “To us a child is born, to us a son is given. The government will be upon his shoulder” (Is 9:6). Installation in the office of king is like a second birth. As one newly born through God’s personal choice, as a child born of God, the king embodies hope. On his shoulders the future rests. He is the bearer of the promise of peace. On that night in Bethlehem this prophetic saying came true in a way that would still have been unimaginable at the time of Isaiah. Yes indeed, now it really is a child on whose shoulders government is laid. In him the new kingship appears that God establishes in the world. This child is truly born of God. It is God’s eternal Word that unites humanity with divinity. To this child belong those titles of honour which Isaiah’s coronation song attributes to him: Wonderful



Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Is 9:6). Yes, this king does not need counsellors drawn from the wise of this world. He bears in himself God's wisdom and God's counsel. In the weakness of infancy, he is the mighty God and he shows us God's own might in contrast to the self-asserting powers of this world.

2. Truly, the words of Israel's coronation rite were only ever rites of hope which looked ahead to a distant future that God would bestow. None of the kings who were greeted in this way lived up to the sublime content of these words. In all of them, those words about divine sonship, about installation into the heritage of the peoples, about making the ends of the earth their possession (Ps 2:8) were only pointers towards what was to come – as it were signposts of hope indicating a future that at that moment was still beyond comprehension. Thus the fulfilment of the prophecy, which began that night in Bethlehem, is both infinitely greater and in worldly terms smaller than the prophecy itself might lead one to imagine. It is greater in the sense that this child is truly the Son of God, truly "God from God, light from light, begotten not made, of one being with the Father". The infinite distance between God and man is overcome. God has not only bent down, as we read in the Psalms; he has truly "come down", he has come into the world, he has become one of us, in order to draw all of us to himself. This child is truly Emmanuel – God-with-us. His kingdom truly stretches to the ends of the earth. He has truly built islands of peace in the world-encompassing breadth of the holy Eucharist. Wherever it is celebrated, an island of peace arises, of God's own peace. This child has ignited the light of goodness in men and has given them strength to overcome the tyranny of might. This child builds his kingdom in every generation from within, from the heart. But at the same time it is true that the "rod of his oppressor" is not yet broken, the boots of warriors continue to tramp and the "garment rolled in blood" (Is 9:4f) still remains. So part of this night is simply joy at God's closeness. We are grateful that God gives himself into our hands as a child, begging as it were for our love, implanting his peace in our hearts. But this joy is also a prayer: Lord, make your promise come fully true. Break the rods of the oppressors. Burn the tramping boots. Let the time of the garments rolled in blood come to an end. Fulfil the prophecy that "of peace there will be no end" (Is 9:7). We thank you for your goodness, but we also ask you to show forth your power. Establish the dominion of your truth and your love in the world – the "kingdom of righteousness, love and peace".

3. "Mary gave birth to her first-born son" (Lk 2:7). In this sentence Saint Luke recounts quite soberly the great event to which the prophecies from Israel's history had pointed. Luke calls the child the "first-born". In the language which developed within the sacred Scripture of the Old Covenant, "first-born" does not mean the first of a series of children. The word "first-born" is a title of honour, quite independently of whether other brothers and sisters follow or not. So Israel is designated by God in the Book of Exodus (4:22) as "my first-born Son", and this expresses Israel's election, its singular dignity, the particular love of God the Father. The early Church knew that in Jesus this saying had acquired a new depth, that the promises made to Israel were summed up in him. Thus the Letter to the Hebrews calls Jesus "the first-born", simply in order to designate him as the Son sent into the world by God (cf. 1:5-7) after the ground had been prepared by Old Testament prophecy. The first-born belongs to God in a special way – and therefore he had to be handed

over to God in a special way – as in many religions – and he had to be ransomed through a vicarious sacrifice, as Saint Luke recounts in the episode of the Presentation in the Temple. The first-born belongs to God in a special way, and is as it were destined for sacrifice. In Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross this destiny of the first-born is fulfilled in a unique way. In his person he brings humanity before God and unites man with God in such a way that God becomes all in all. Saint Paul amplified and deepened the idea of Jesus as first-born in the Letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians: Jesus, we read in these letters, is the first-born of all creation – the true prototype of man, according to which God formed the human creature. Man can be the image of God because Jesus is both God and man, the true image of God and of man. Furthermore, as these letters tell us, he is the first-born from the dead. In the resurrection he has broken down the wall of death for all of us. He has opened up to man the dimension of eternal life in fellowship with God. Finally, it is said to us that he is the first-born of many brothers. Yes indeed, now he really is the first of a series of brothers and sisters: the first, that is, who opens up for us the possibility of communing with God. He creates true brotherhood – not the kind defiled by sin as in the case of Cain and Abel, or Romulus and Remus, but the new brotherhood in which we are God's own family. This new family of God begins at the moment when Mary wraps her first-born in swaddling clothes and lays him in a manger. Let us pray to him: Lord Jesus, who wanted to be born as the first of many brothers and sisters, grant us the grace of true brotherhood. Help us to become like you. Help us to recognize your face in others who need our assistance, in those who are suffering or forsaken, in all people, and help us to live together with you as brothers and sisters, so as to become one family, your family.

4. At the end of the Christmas Gospel, we are told that a great heavenly host of angels praised God and said: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!" (Lk 2:14). The Church has extended this song of praise, which the angels sang in response to the event of the holy night, into a hymn of joy at God's glory – "we praise you for your glory". We praise you for the beauty, for the greatness, for the goodness of God, which becomes visible to us this night. The appearing of beauty, of the beautiful, makes us happy without our having to ask what use it can serve. God's glory, from which all beauty derives, causes us to break out in astonishment and joy. Anyone who catches a glimpse of God experiences joy, and on this night we see something of his light. But the angels' message on that holy night also spoke of men: "Peace among men with whom he is pleased". The Latin translation of the angels' song that we use in the liturgy, taken from Saint Jerome, is slightly different: "peace to men of good will". The expression "men of good will" has become an important part of the Church's vocabulary in recent decades. But which is the correct translation? We must read both texts together; only in this way do we truly understand the angels' song. It would be a false interpretation to see this exclusively as the action of God, as if he had not called man to a free response of love. But it would be equally mistaken to adopt a moralizing interpretation as if man were so to speak able to redeem himself by his good will. Both elements belong together: grace and freedom, God's prior love for us, without which we could not love him, and the response that he awaits from us, the response that he asks for so palpably through the birth of his son. We cannot divide up into independent

entities the interplay of grace and freedom, or the interplay of call and response. The two are inseparably woven together. So this part of the angels' message is both promise and call at the same time. God has anticipated us with the gift of his Son. God anticipates us again and again in unexpected ways. He does not cease to search for us, to raise us up as often as we might need. He does not abandon the lost sheep in the wilderness into which it had strayed. God does not allow himself to be confounded by our sin. Again and again he begins afresh with us. But he is still waiting for us to join him in love. He loves us, so that we too may become people who love, so that there may be peace on earth.

Saint Luke does not say that the angels sang. He states quite soberly: the heavenly host praised God and said: "Glory to God in the highest" (Lk 2:13f.). But men have always known that the speech of angels is different from human speech, and that above all on this night of joyful

proclamation it was in song that they extolled God's heavenly glory. So this angelic song has been recognized from the earliest days as music proceeding from God, indeed, as an invitation to join in the singing with hearts filled with joy at the fact that we are loved by God. *Cantare amantis est*, says Saint Augustine: singing belongs to one who loves. Thus, down the centuries, the angels' song has again and again become a song of love and joy, a song of those who love. At this hour, full of thankfulness, we join in the singing of all the centuries, singing that unites heaven and earth, angels and men. Yes, indeed, we praise you for your glory. We praise you for your love. Grant that we may join with you in love more and more and thus become people of peace. Amen.

Appendix 3: On Seeking God (St. Bernard of Clairvaux)

Nightlong in my little bed I sought him whom my soul loves. It is a great good to seek God; in my opinion the soul knows no greater blessing. It is the first of its gifts and the final stage in its progress. It is inferior to none, and it yields place to none. What could be superior to it, when nothing has a higher place? What could claim a higher place, when it is the consummation of all things? What virtue can be attributed to anyone who does not seek God? What boundary can be set for anyone who does seek him? The psalmist says: "Seek his face always." Nor, I think, will a soul cease to seek him even when it has found him. It is not with steps of the feet that God is sought but with tilt, heart's desire; and when the soul happily finds him its desire is not quenched but kindled. Does the consummation of joy bring about the consuming of desire? Rather it is oil pour upon the flames. So it is. Joy will be fulfilled, but there will be no end to desire, and therefore no end to the search. Think, if you can, of this eagerness to see God as not caused by his absence, for he is always present; and think of the desire for God as without fear of failure, for grace is abundantly present.

Surely so that every soul among you who is seeking God may know that she has been forestalled, and that she was found before she was sought. This will avoid distorting her greatest good into a great evil; for this is what we do when we receive favors from God and treat his gifts as though they were ours by right, and do not give glory to God. Thus those who appear great because of the favors they have received are accounted as little before God because they have not given him thanks. But I am understating the case. The words I have used, "great" and "little," are inadequate to express my meaning, and confuse the issue. I will make myself clear. I should have said "good" and "evil." For if a man who is very good takes the credit for his goodness he becomes correspondingly evil. For this is a very evil thing. If anyone says "Far be it from me! I know that it is by the grace of God I am what I am" and then is careful to take a little of the glory for the favor he has received, is he not a thief and a robber? Such a man will hear these words: "Out of your own mouth I judge you, wicked servant." What is more wicked than for a servant to usurp the glory due his master?

In my little bed nightlong I sought him whom my soul loves. The soul seeks the Word, but has been first sought by the Word. Otherwise when she had gone away from the Word, or been cast out; she would not turn back to look

upon the good she had left unless she were sought by the Word. For if a soul is left to herself she is like a wandering spirit which does not return. Listen to someone who was a fugitive and a wanderer: "I have one astray as a sheep that was lost. O seek your servant." O man, do you want to return? But if it is a matter of will, why do you ask for help? Why do you beg elsewhere for what you have within yourself in abundance? Clearly because one wills it, but cannot do it, and this is a spirit which wanders and does not return.

He who has not the will is yet further away; if a soul desires to return and asks to be sought, I would not say that it was entirely dishonored and abandoned. Whence does it obtain this desire? If I am not mistaken, it is the result of the soul being already sought and visited, and that seeking has not been fruitless, because it has activated the will, without which there could be no return. But the soul is so feeble, and the return so difficult, that it is not enough to be sought only once. The soul may have the will, but the will cannot act unless it has some supporting power. Paul says, "The will is in me, but I have no power to perform it. We quoted the psalmist; what does he go on to ask? Simply to be sought. He would not ask this if he had not already been sought. He also prays, "O seek your servant"; that is asking that the God who had given him the will might also give him the power to perform it, at his good will. I sought him whom my soul loves—this is what you are urged to do by the goodness of him who anticipates you, who sought him, and loved you before you loved him.' You would not seek him or love him unless you had first been sought and loved. Not only in one blessing have you been forestalled but in two, being loved as well as being sought.

For the love is the reason for the search, and the search is the fruit of the love, and its certain proof. You are loved so that you may not suppose you are sought to be punished. You are sought so that you may not complain you are loved in vain. Both these loving and manifest favors give you courage, and drive away your diffidence, persuading you to return, and stirring your affections. From this comes the zeal and ardor to seek him whom your soul loves,' because you cannot seek unless you are sought, and when you are sought you cannot but seek.

Appendix 4: *The pornographic magazine (Michel Quoist)*

Lord, I am ashamed of this magazine.
You must be profoundly hurt in your infinity purity.
The office employees all contributed to buy it.
The boy ran to fetch it,
And pored over it on the way back.
Here it is.
On its shining pages, naked bodies are exposed;
Going from office to office, from hand to hand –
Such foolish giggles, such lustful glances ...
Empty bodies, soulless bodies.
Adult toys for the hardened and the soiled.
And yet, Lord, man's body is beautiful.
From the beginning you, the supreme artist,
held the model
Before you, knowing that one day would dwell
in a human body when taking on the nature of man.
Slowly you shaped it with your powerful hands;
and into its inert matter you breathed a living soul.
From then on, Lord, you asked us to respect the body,
for the whole body is a conveyor of the spirit,
And we need this sensitive instrument
that our spirits may commune
with those of our brothers.
Words, in long processions, lead us toward other souls.
A smile on our lips, the expression in our eyes,
reveals the soul.
The clasp of a hand carries our soul to a friend,
A kiss yields it to the loved one,
The embrace of the couple unites two souls
in quest of a new child of God.
But it was not enough for you, Lord,
to make of our flesh the visible sign of the spirit.
Through your grace the Christian's body became sacred,
the temple of the Trinity.

A member of the Lord, and a bearer of his God,
Supreme dignity of this splendid body!
Here, Lord, before you, tonight,
are the bodies of sleeping men:

The pure body of the tiny child,
The soiled body of the prostitute,
The vigorous body of the athlete,
The exhausted body of the factory worker,
The soft body of the playboy,
The surfeited body of the rich man,
The battered body of the poor man,
The beaten body of the slum child,
The feverish body of the sick man,
The painful body of the injured man,
The paralyzed body of the cripple ...

Appendix 5: *Church, how I love you (Carlo Carretto)*

How baffling you are, oh Church, and yet how I love you! How you have made me suffer, and yet how much I owe you! I would like to see you destroyed, and yet I need your presence. You have given me so much scandal and yet you have made me understand what sanctity is. I have seen nothing in the world more devoted to obscurity, more compromised, more false, and yet I have touched nothing more pure, more generous, more beautiful. How often I have wanted to shut the doors of my soul in your face, and how often I have prayed to die in the safety of your arms.

No, I cannot free myself from you, because I am you, though not completely. And besides, where would I go? Would I establish another? I would not be able to establish it without the same faults, for they are the same faults I carry in me. And if I did establish another, it would be my Church, not the Church of Christ. I am old enough to know that I am no better than anyone else. ...)

The Church has the power to make me holy but it is made up, from the first to the last, only of sinners. And what sinners! It has the omnipotent and invincible power to renew the Miracle of the Eucharist, but is made up of men who are stumbling in the dark, who fight every day against

the temptation of losing their faith. It brings a message of pure transparency but it is incarnated in slime, such is the substance of the world. No, I won't leave this church founded on brittle rock, because I would found another on myself, a rock that is even more brittle.



I am touching here the mystery that Jesus himself became the prodigal son for our sake. He left the house of his heavenly Father, came to a foreign country, gave away all that he had, and returned through his cross to his Father's home. All of this he did, not as a rebellious son, but as the obedient son, sent out to bring home all the lost children of God. Jesus, who told the story to those who criticized him for associating with sinners, himself, lived the long and painful journey that he describes.

When I began to reflect on the parable and Rembrandt's portrayal of it, I never thought of the exhausted young man with the face of a newborn baby as Jesus. But now, after so many hours of intimate contemplation, I feel blessed by this vision. Isn't the broken young man kneeling before his father the "lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world"? Isn't he the innocent one who became sin for us? Isn't he the one who didn't "cling to his equality with God," but "became as human beings are"? Isn't he the sinless Son of God who cried out on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus is the prodigal son of the prodigal Father who gave away everything the Father had entrusted to him so that I could become like him and return with him to his Father's home.

Seeing Jesus himself as, the prodigal son goes far beyond the traditional interpretation of the parable. Nonetheless, this vision holds a great secret. I am gradually discovering what it means to say that my sonship and the sonship of Jesus are one, that my return and the return of Jesus are one, that my home and the home of Jesus are one. There is no journey to God outside of the journey that Jesus made. The one who told the story of the prodigal son is the Word of God, "through whom all things came into being." He "became flesh, lived among us," and made us part of his fullness.

Once I look at the story of the prodigal son with the eyes of faith, the "return" of the prodigal becomes the return of the Son of God who has drawn all people into himself and brings them home to his heavenly Father. As Paul says: "God wanted all fullness to be found in him and through him to reconcile all things to him, everything in heaven and everything on earth."

Frere Pierre Marie, the founder of the Fraternity of Jerusalem, a community of monks living in the city, reflects on Jesus as the prodigal son in a very poetic and biblical way. He writes:

He, who is born not from human stock, or human desire or human will, but from God himself, one day took to himself everything that was under his footstool and he left with his inheritance, his title of Son, and the whole ransom price. He left for a far country ... the faraway land ... where he became as human beings are and emptied himself. His own people did not accept him and his first bed was a bed of straw! Like a root in arid ground, he grew up before us, he was despised, the lowest of men, before whom one covers his face. Very soon, he came to know exile, hostility, loneliness ... After having given away everything in a life of bounty, his worth, his peace, his light, his truth, his life ... all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom and the hidden mystery kept secret for endless ages; after having lost himself among the lost children of the house of Israel, spending his time with the sick (and not with the well-to-do), with the sinners (and not with the just), and even with the prostitutes

to whom he promised entrance into the Kingdom of his Father; after having been treated as a glutton and a drunkard, as a friend of tax collectors and sinners, as a Samaritan, a possessed, a blasphemer; after having offered everything, even his body and his blood; after having felt deeply in himself sadness, anguish, and a troubled soul; after having gone to the bottom of despair, with which he voluntarily dressed himself as being abandoned by his Father far away from the source of living water, he cried out from the cross on which he was nailed: "I am thirsty." He was laid to rest in the dust and the shadow of death. And there, on the third day, he rose up from the depths of hell to where he had descended; burdened with the crimes of us all, he bore our sins, our sorrows he carried. Standing straight, he cried out: "Yes, I am ascending to my Father, and your Father, to my God, and your God." And he re-ascended to heaven. Then in the silence, looking at his Son and all his children, since his Son had become all in all, the Father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet; let us eat and celebrate! Because my children who, as you know, were dead have returned to life; they were lost and have been found again! My prodigal Son has brought them all back." They all began to have a feast dressed in their long robes, washed white in the blood of the Lamb.

Looking again at Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*, I see him now in a new way. I see him as Jesus returning to his Father and my Father, his God and my God. It is unlikely that Rembrandt himself ever thought of the prodigal son in this way. This understanding was not a customary part of the preaching and writing of his time. Nevertheless, to see in this tired, broken young man the person of Jesus himself brings much comfort and consolation. The young man being embraced by the Father is no longer just one repentant sinner, but the whole of humanity returning to God. The broken body of the prodigal becomes the broken body of humanity, and the baby-like face of the returning child becomes the face of all suffering people longing to reenter the lost paradise. Thus Rembrandt's painting becomes more than the mere portrayal of a moving parable. It becomes the summary of the history of our salvation. The light surrounding both Father and Son now speaks of the glory that awaits the children of God. It calls to mind the majestic words of John: "...we are already God's children, but what we shall be in the future has not yet been revealed. We are well aware that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is."

But neither Rembrandt's painting nor the parable it depicts leaves us in a state of ecstasy. When I saw the central scene of the father embracing his returning son on the poster in Simone's office, I was not yet aware of the four bystanders watching the scene. But now I know the faces of those surrounding the "return." They are enigmatic to say the least, especially that of the tall man standing at the right side of the painting. Yes, there is beauty, glory, salvation ... but there are also the critical eyes of uncommitted onlookers. They add a restraining note to the painting and prevent any notions of a quick, romantic solution to the question of spiritual reconciliation. The journey of the younger son cannot be separated from that of his elder brother. And so it is to him that I now —with some temerity— turn my attention.

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The Forge in Our Daily Life

PATRIS MEI - 2012

“

I always remembered that Jesus had become poor Himself; he chose to be born, to live and to die in the utmost poverty” (Claret)