

GOD WITH US

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask you for pardon of my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Mother Immaculate, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

Well, we begin our prayer today on this beautiful Solemnity of Mary, the Most Holy Mother of God, conscious that we're beginning a new calendar year as well. It's a very special day, and it's also the World Day of Prayer for Peace. So, what better day than the day of the motherhood of Mary, to pray for peace in communion with the whole Church. You, Mary, our mother, you are in fact the Queen of Peace. You bring to the world the Prince of Peace. So, we can begin our prayer in union with the Holy Father and his intentions today for peace in the world, for peace in hearts, peace in our own souls, in our own families, and we entrust this wonderful intention, powerful intention, to the intercession of- of Mary our mother.

And, perhaps we could begin our prayer by focusing on a scene, an event, an action, in- at the time of the birth of Our Lord which St. Luke recounts to us in his Gospel: "She gave birth to her first born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn." It seems like a banal action, that of wrapping up the child Jesus in swaddling cloths, and yet it's good for us to look at it as it were in slow motion with our contemplative eye. Look at the Mother of God, look at Mary wrapping the child Jesus in these cloths which she carefully brought with her from Nazareth to Bethlehem. She foresaw this moment. And, like so many things in the Gospel, externally it seems like a banal action. She's just wrapping up her baby. What difference does it make? What difference does this mother and child make in a cave in a lost village in the middle of nowhere? It seems like nothing is happening. And yet, it's all happening here because in that gesture of welcoming the child, of protecting the child, of bringing the child to herself, Our Lady is giving voice to the joy of the whole of creation, like all of us are longing for you, Lord. All of us need a Savior. And for centuries, the people of the Old Covenant were waiting for the Messiah, were waiting for the Savior. And even today, everyone is waiting for Christ as well. Even if they say- some might say they're not waiting for anybody. Some might say they don't feel the need to wait for anybody. But even to say that does not imply a need for a Savior.

So, what's happening here is something enormous. What seems banal and ordinary and of no importance is huge. In- Our Lady, in a sense, is the Church, the people of God. In her person, she

welcomes the Savior in our name and she welcomes him by wrapping him in swaddling cloths. Personally, too, Our Lady has really been longing for this moment. Isn't it true that so often we meet expectant mothers and they're- they're always so anxious. They're looking forward to seeing the face of their child, which is so natural and so beautiful. They want to see the person of that child whom they have generously carried within themselves and lovingly carried, you know, for the duration of the pregnancy, and they- they want to see the face of their child. And what could be more natural? And, I mean, Our Lady's the same. I'm sure she wants to see the face of Christ, and she sees now the face of- of the fruit of her womb of Our Lord. That longing of Our Lady is expressed also in this action of the wrapping of Christ in swaddling clothes.

Pope Benedict, in a homily at Christmastime said, "We can imagine the kind of interior preparation, the kind of love with which Mary approached that hour. The brief phrase *she wrapped him in swaddling cloths* allows us to glimpse something of the holy joy and the silent zeal of that preparation." The holy joy and the silent zeal of Our Lady's preparation for the coming of Our Lord. So no, there's nothing inconsequential about this action. It is- it's the welcoming of the Savior by humanity, by the Church, by the people of God, in the person of Mary. It is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and she shall call his name Emmanuel, which means *God is with us.*" So, as we begin the New Year, we begin it under the sign of the Emmanuel of the God who is with us because to begin the New Year celebrating the divine maternity of Our Lady implies that she is the mother of he who comes as God to save us.

So, perhaps in our prayer, well, we all have our own way of praying, and we should feel tremendously free about how we pray. But, in a certain sense, we could piggyback as it were on Our Lady's attitude, on Our Lady's love, on her longing for Christ, on her welcoming Christ. In the second Advent preface which we use prior to the Christmas celebration in the Advent season, the latter part of Advent, we- the Church prays for "all the articles of the prophets foretold him, the Virgin Mother longed for him with love beyond all telling." And that's where we're kind of starting our prayer, to enter into that love of the Virgin Mother who longed for him with love beyond all telling. It can't be put into words. It can't be told. But yes, it can be contemplated. It can be meditated upon like we're trying to do now as best we can. So, we can try to meditate on that love beyond all telling and try and associate ourselves with it, to make it our own, to- to welcome you, Lord, from the bottom of our hearts- in the bottom of our hearts. There's a nice formula in the Irish language of welcome- *cead mila fáilte* which means 100,000 welcomes. So, from the bottom of our hearts, with the love beyond all telling, with a welcome without any limit.

So, we begin a New Year, which is also the World Day of Peace. And we begin with something which is profoundly new, the birth of the Savior. In the Book of Revelation, God says that. We're told he who set upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." I make all things new. And this

newness of life, this- this whole- this novelty feel like in creation, this novelty in the history of the world happens in a supreme way through the motherhood of Our Lady. In other words, through the Incarnation. This is nothing other than the fullness of time. Just as St. Paul says in the second reading of today's Mass, in Galatians 4: "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons." So, our becoming beloved children of God is a fruit of the divine motherhood of Mary which we celebrate today. And it is the profound novelty of the gospel of the Christian message that we are enabled to become children of God. We know that St. Josemaria preached this all the time—our dignity, our joy, our peace, our serenity as children of God.

It's true that time is very important in the Christian economy. What we're celebrating today is the fullness of time. So, time isn't just a casual, chronological sequence, but it has a meaning and it has certain moments. There's- there's a beginning to time, there will be an end to time. There's also a fullness of time. And that's a way to mark particular feasts like today, or particular days— even like New Year's Day is important. It's not purely a convention. There's a grace with each day and there's probably a special grace for New Year's Day to begin again, because we know that you, Lord, you want to be born also in us, you want to make all things new in us. And this is the very drama, the very, I suppose, the essence of the Christian life, to become truly children of God and to live out that vocation to become another Christ, as St. Josemaria might say, *alter Christus, ipse Christus*, to become another Christ, Christ himself.

You, Lord, explain this yourself in a very memorable occasion towards the beginning of your public life, of your public ministry, and we can picture in our mind's eye now entering into John 3. In the Gospel of John 3 we see a man, a well-dressed man, who is one of the Pharisees, who makes his way through the cobbled streets of the holy city of Jerusalem when it's dark, when it's discreet. And he's making his way towards a rendezvous, a particular place where he is to meet this new rabbi who has attracted him by what he has heard about him. We can imagine that Nicodemus, that's his name, throws a hard furtive glance over his shoulder to make sure he's not being seen or not being followed because what he's doing is not at all politically correct. And yet, he cannot not do it. He wants to speak with Christ. He wants to listen to you, Lord. "This man, Nicodemus, came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you were a teacher come from God, for no one can do the signs that you do unless God is with him.'"

So, Nicodemus has heard about or seen particular signs or miracles— signs in the Gospel of John refers to miracles generally. So, he recognizes the presence of God somehow in Jesus. No one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him. And then the response of the Lord, "Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born anew he cannot see the Kingdom of God.'" And now Nicodemus is taken aback, really, to be born again, born anew. "Nicodemus said to him, 'How

can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.'

Not surprising that Nicodemus was puzzled. What is this about being born in you. And now you might say, with the grace of divine revelation and the teaching of the Church, you and I immediately recognize what Our Lord is speaking about here– baptism, born of the water and the Spirit, new life, anew birth. There's one thing– one thing is our physical birth, another thing is our spiritual birth from our mother the Church. So, there is in the Christian life this call to a profound newness, a Christification, you might say, of becoming Christ and letting Christ be born in us. Remember St. Paul speaking to the Galatians with the kind of maternal and paternal love. He says, "How I am in– in anguish until Christ be formed in you." And that's, I suppose, the story of every Christian life, that Christ would be formed in us.

So, today, when we celebrate in a particular way the Incarnation of God, the motherhood of Mary, we pray also about the fact that the Lord wants, in a certain sense, to become incarnate in us, not in the same sense of the Incarnation per se, but that the Lord wants to live in us and through us, that you and I are called to live out our vocation as beloved daughters and sons in Christ, in the Son, in that way to become identified with Christ. And that, I suppose, is the context, really, for– for New Year's resolutions. Again, it's very traditional, isn't it, to– to make some resolution or some resolutions on New Year's with a view to the year ahead, to take a step forward in our spiritual life or take a step forward in general. Well, for a Christian, a New Year's resolution is also and always an effort to– to become more Christ, to become more conformed to Christ.

One of those great German theologians, I can't remember if it's Michael Schmaus or Matthias Sheeben, they have a phrase where they say, "The Christian is Christ without ceasing to be him or herself." In a certain sense, when we think about the motherhood of Mary, the Mother of God, we see how Our Lady forms or lets Christ be formed in her womb. But, Our Lady also has a spiritual maternity in relation to us, and it's through her vocation and her fidelity, her mission, that Christ also is formed in us. If it weren't for her saying *yes* to God, if it weren't for her divine maternity, we wouldn't be children of God. That's the point in the second reading of today's Mass: "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son born of a woman so that we might receive adoption as sons." So, Our Lady is very linked with our vocation too, she's very linked with our own divine filiation, the fact that we can be and are called to be beloved daughters and sons of God.

So today, New Year's Day, is a great day for conversion, for beginning again– not relying on our own strength, but on the grace of the Holy Spirit and on the intercession of the Mother of God. And we

can ask the Holy Spirit now in our prayer for his light and his strength. Holy Spirit, breathe in me, work in me, sanctify me, form me just as you formed Christ in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. We're told- Our Lady is told at the Annunciation that she will be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. And we could ask the Holy Spirit to do the same with us, to extend his- his love over us and to form Christ in us. And maybe, take a leaf out of St. Josemaria's book, take on board one of his- his challenges that he puts to us in *The Way* in point 902. He says, "Why don't you give yourself to God once and for all... really..., now? Why don't you give yourself to God once and for all... really..., now?" And Lord, I would like to actually take that challenge to heart, really and now. And in my prayer, I would like to give myself and I do give myself to you completely, really, now. I think we have the grace and, I suppose, the inspiration on the Solemnity of Mary, the Most Holy Mother of God to- to give ourselves to God in a new way because that's what Our Lady does, she gives herself completely to God.

But at the same time, and this has to be said, we have to be prepared for obstacles, we have to expect resistance. One thing is to have the aspiration, the desire, to give ourselves completely to God, but we know that in practice it's actually not so easy. And that goes back, I suppose, ultimately, to Original Sin. Like what is it that holds us back, that holds me back, that holds you back from giving ourselves entirely to God? Very often, I guess, it's- we find it hard to fully trust you, Lord. It's so hard to fully trust the Lord. Vatican II talks about faith as being- by faith the person commits his entire self to God. It's not just an intellectual adherence to the articles of the creed. Faith is to give oneself completely over to God. But, Lord, we do find that hard, we do find that hard. When you think of the revelation made St. Faustina Kowalska and the whole devotion to the Divine Mercy, "Jesus, I trust in You," you can see that it's very, very relevant as- as Pope John Paul said when he- when he canonized St. Faustina in 2000, the first saint of the new millennium. He made the point, look, we really need to trust in God. We find it hard to trust in God.

And this goes right back- this goes right back to Genesis. Just using here some preaching from Pope Francis from one of his Angelus addresses, he says, "The book of Genesis- the book of Genesis shows us the first *no*, the original *no*, the human *no*, when man preferred to gaze upon himself rather than on his creator. He wanted to go his own way and chose to be self sufficient. However, in so doing, forsaking communion with God, he lost his own self and began to fear, to hide himself, and to accuse those who are close by." So, Original Sin, we often class as naturally enough as a sin of disobedience. But also, and maybe even more at the root, it's a sin of not trusting fully in God. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, they had every reason to trust in God. When one reads the description of- of the Garden of Eden, you say, well, how could they not trust God- such a beautiful garden; such, you know, immense love, generous love on the part of God, such care for them. And the one little thing that God asked them to do, not to eat of that tree, not to play God, in other words, to let themselves be loved, to let themselves be creatures. They don't have that trust. They don't manage to

trust fully in the Lord. And I guess that's the wound we have, or one of the wounds of Original Sin that affects all of us, that we- we find it hard to fully trust in God, find it hard to fully trust in God. So, there's that original human *no* of Genesis.

And the Holy Father, Pope Francis, contrasts this with the great human *yes* of Mary: "God comes to live among us, he becomes man like us. And this was made possible through a great *yes*. That if the sin was the *no*, this is the *yes*. It is a great *yes*, that of Mary at the moment of the Annunciation. Because of this *yes*, Jesus began his journey along the path of humanity. He began it in Mary, spending the first month of his life in his mother's womb. He did not appear as a man grown and strong but he followed the journey of a human being. He was made equal to us in every way except one thing, that *no*, except sin." So, that's Our Lady who, if you like, undoes the *no* of Adam and Eve, is turned into a *yes* by Our Lady. And that's why in the Church, traditionally, the Fathers of the Church, especially from earliest times, have referred to Our Lady as the New Eve, the New Eve, just as Christ is the New Adam. St. Paul talks about the New Adam in the Letter to the Romans.

So, this battle between *yes* and *no*, it can be going on inside us as well. And the Holy Father draws out, if you like, some spiritual conclusions from- from- from his meditation on Scripture when he says, "For each of us too, there is a history of salvation made up of *yeses* and *nos*. Sometimes though, we are experts in the half-hearted *yes*. We are good at pretending not to understand what God wants and what our conscience suggests. We're also crafty and so- so it's not to say a true *no* to God. We say, *sorry, I can't, not today, I think tomorrow- tomorrow I'll be better, tomorrow I will pray, I will do good tomorrow*. And this cunning leads us away from the *yes*. It distances us from God and leads us to *no*, to the sinful *no*, to the *no* of mediocrity. The famous *yes but, yes, Lord, but...* In this way we close the door to goodness and evil takes advantage of those omitted *yeses*. Each of us has a collection of them within. Think about it- we- we will find many omitted *yeses*. Instead, every complete *yes* to God gives rise to a new story. To say *yes* to God is truly original."

So, on New Year's Day, as we contemplate the great *yes* of Our Lady which makes her the Most Holy Mother of God, we can renew our desire to say *yes* to God, and we can do it right now. It's not something we have to plan for later in the day, but in this moment of grace of prayer, we can say look, Lord, I have only one thing to say to you today. *Yes, yes*. Why don't you give yourself to God once and for all... really..., now? Yes, I will... yes, Lord, I really do want to do this.

In all of this, we're not alone. Yes, it is a battle to give ourselves completely over to God. It's a struggle to formulate and then to keep- to put into practice our New Year resolutions, but we're not alone. We have the most powerful intercessor of all in Our Lady. Our Lady, our mother, is always by our side. Right now in our prayer Our Lady's by your side, she's by my side. We could think of those lovely words she said to St. Juan Diego during the- one of the operations at Guadalupe, when Juan

Diego was all worried and fussed about caring for his relative and he kind of forgot about Our Lady and wanted to avoid an encounter with her in that particular moment. And- and she says, "Am I not here, I who am your Mother?" Am I not here, I who am your mother? And that's surely something Our Lady whispers in- in our ear often during our life. Look, am I not here, I who am your mother? Today, on the feast of your divine maternity, mother, we want to grow in a deeper appreciation of your motherhood and of the unique relationship you have with each one of us. You love us all together but you all love each one of us individually, and you know us and understand us better than we know and understand ourselves. And you love us more than we love ourselves as well. Am I not here, I who am your mother?

And so often, as the history of the Church shows and probably the history of our own lives, and we think about it also shows, Our Lady has brought things forward much quicker than we thought. What seemed impossible, she makes happen. And there's a lovely point in *The Way* again by St. Josemaria which I imagine is autobiographical from his own experience where he simply says: "Before, by yourself, you couldn't. Now you've turned to Our Lady, and with her how easy it is." How true that is. It's not just a pious thought- "Before, by ourselves, we couldn't. But now we've turned to Our Lady and with her how easy it is." That's true, Mother, you do make things easier. And in fact, very often, you see our needs before we'd see them ourselves.

Think of Cana of Galilee, for example. It looked like a total disaster for that couple. I mean, and for the manager of the feast, the steward, and for the guests, and for everybody. It looked like a car crash as it were of a wedding banquet. But before anyone notices the impending disaster, Our Lady intervenes. And this often happens, you know, a loving mother who- who foresees the needs of her children. Pope Benedict, speaking about the person of Our Lady, makes a very good observation that can help us to pray about this. He says, "The closer a person is to God, the closer that person is to people. We see this in Mary. The fact that she is totally with God is the reason why she is so close to human beings. For this reason, she can be the mother of every consolation and every help, a mother whom anyone can dare to address in any kind of need, in weakness and in sin, for she has understanding for everything and is for everyone the open power of creative goodness." That's- that's who you are, Mother, you're the open power of creative goodness. Because you're so close to God, because you're his mother, unique, that's why you're so close to us. Our Lady's holiness, Our Lady's sublime dignity in no way distances her from us but rather brings her closer to us.

So, Blessed Mother, as we come to the end of this period of prayer on your most beautiful feast, the feast of your- your motherhood, we once more place ourselves in your hands with confidence, with trust, with- full of hope. We place also our resolutions, our New Year's resolutions if- if we've been led to make those, if that's what the Holy Spirit has wanted us to do, to make some resolutions, will be- we place those in your hands and- and we count on your- your- your most powerful intercession.

And of course, in union with the Pope and with all our brothers and sisters in the Church and all people of goodwill, we place in your hands the great intention of peace in the world on this World Day of Peace. So, we invoke the intercession also of St. Josemaria who, throughout his life, so often placed himself, his work, his concerns and his joys, and his everything in the hands of Our Lady. We also do that now.

I give you thanks, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations you have communicated to me in this time of prayer. I ask you for help to put them into effect. My Mother Immaculate, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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