



Advent 2009

To Be
Made Holy

Prayer and reflection
programme by the
Diocese of
Arundel and Brighton

Introduction

Welcome to this programme of reflections for Advent. They are based on the readings which will be proclaimed at Sunday Mass this Advent. Each week begins with an invitation to pray the Psalm and then reflect on and discuss the Second Reading and the Gospel. This year's Advent Reflections have a special focus on the vocation to holiness of all the baptised. The title "To Be Made Holy" is taken from the Second Reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

'(God's) will was for us to be made holy by the offering of his body once and for all by Jesus Christ'.

(Hebrews 10:10)

Each week contains an excerpt from **Christifideles Laici** (Lay members of Christ's Faithful People), a 1988 document from Pope John Paul II which was the fruit of a worldwide synod of bishops on the topic of the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World.

There is also a suggested Saint of the Week, with a short introduction. If you would like to know more about that Saint a useful resource is www.catholic.org/saints

It is recommended that the programme be used ahead of the given Sunday of Advent. In that case groups need to begin meeting during the week after the feast of Christ the King – which will be celebrated on 22nd November - but it would equally be possible to use the booklet to "follow up" on the Sunday celebrations.

The booklet is written primarily for group use, each week having enough material for a meeting up to 90 minutes long. (See Guidelines for Leaders on next page). However, many people find the material also well-suited for private reflection.

Above all, adapt it to your needs and tastes.

For further advice, contact David Wills (See final page for details)

Guidelines for leaders

Thank you for agreeing to facilitate a group. You may be very experienced in hosting and leading small groups, or this may be a new experience, but we hope that you, with all the members of your group, will find this a stimulating and refreshing experience. Here are a few hints and tips for making the most of the sessions:

- Ensure that members of the group know each other's names.
- Invite everyone to say why they have come and what they hope to gain from the group.
- Agree on starting and finishing times for the group and whether to begin or end with a cup of tea/coffee, etc.
- Remind the group to bring a Bible or Sunday Missal.
- An Advent wreath, an empty crib or simply a candle can be put at the centre of the group as a focus point.

Remember that the purpose of this sharing is not to debate or to correct others' views but to be enriched by the different insights into God's Word and its meaning for us today. The format followed each week is:

- **Welcome and Opening Prayer** (Praying Sunday's Psalm.)
- **Second Reading** (To be read aloud once or twice, followed by commentary and suggested discussion questions.)
- **Christifideles Laici** (A short excerpt for reflection)
- **Gospel** (To be read aloud once or twice, followed by commentary and suggested discussion questions.)
- **Concluding prayer** (To draw together the meeting)
- **Saint of the Week** (A model of holiness for inspiration between sessions)

Week One – May the Lord Increase Our Love:

*Based on the Readings of the First Sunday of Advent Year(C)
Jer 33:14-16; Ps. 24; 1 Thess 3:12-4:2; Lk 21:25-28, 34-36)*

A. Welcome and Opening Prayer:

Make sure that all the group know each other's names. Discuss a little why people have come and what they hope to gain from the group. Agree on starting and finishing times for the group and whether to begin or end with a cup of tea/coffee, etc. Perhaps an Advent wreath, an empty crib or simply a candle can be put at the centre of the group as a focus.

All pray the Psalm for the First Sunday of Advent

Response: *To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.*

Lord, make me know your ways.
Lord, teach me your paths.
Make me walk in your truth, and teach me:
for you are God my saviour.

The Lord is good and upright.
He shows the path to those who stray,
he guides the humble in the right path;
he teaches his way to the poor.

His ways are faithfulness and love
for those who keep his covenant and will.
The Lord's friendship is for those who revere him;
to them he reveals his covenant.

B. Second Reading (1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2):

Ask a group member to read the passage aloud and then take 2-3 minutes to reflect in silence on what you have heard. If you wish, share a phrase which has struck you or a thought which has occurred to you, but this is a time for prayerful contemplation, not discussion. If not everyone has a copy of the text available it may be useful to read the passage through once more, aloud.

Commentary

In this letter to the Thessalonians, which is probably the oldest writing in the New Testament, Paul writes with great fondness. His appeal for them to grow in holiness is based on the foundation of their wonderful faith and love about which he has heard from Timothy (v.6).

This passage could be said to be in two parts, which at first may appear to be contradictory. In the first paragraph Paul suggests that it is by God’s initiative that we become holy, whereas in the second paragraph the emphasis is on our responsibility to take steps to grow in holiness. Of course both are true but it is helpful to hold these two understandings in tension. Our holiness is the work of God yet we are free to accept or reject this gift.

Why should we want to be holy? Paul’s answer here is so that we may be blameless at the coming of Jesus Christ. And how do we know how to live holy lives? Paul refers the Thessalonians back to his own example and his teaching, teaching which we receive now as Scripture and through the Tradition of the Church. He doesn’t say that it will be easy. So as we begin our Advent journey, let us pray to the Lord that He might increase our love, so that we too may be made holy.

For Discussion:

- “It is all too easy to say ‘Lord by your cross and resurrection you have set us free’ and then live as if we have become free by our will power alone.” (Fr Ian Petit)

How do we understand by what means we are made holy?
Our own efforts or God’s?

- What does living a holy life mean to you?

Christifideles Laici 16

The call to holiness is *rooted in Baptism* and proposed anew in the other Sacraments, principally in the *Eucharist*. Since Christians are re clothed in Christ Jesus and refreshed by his Spirit, they are "holy". They therefore have the ability to manifest this holiness and the responsibility to bear witness to it in all that they do. The apostle Paul never tires of admonishing all Christians to live "as is fitting among saints" (*Eph 5:3*).

Life according to the Spirit, whose fruit is holiness (cf. *Rom 6:22; Gal 5:22*), stirs up every baptized person and requires each to *follow and imitate Jesus Christ*, in embracing the Beatitudes, in listening and meditating on the Word of God, in conscious and active participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, in personal prayer, in family or in community, in the hunger and thirst for justice, in the practice of the commandment of love in all circumstances of life and service to the brethren, especially the least, the poor and the suffering.

C. Gospel (Luke 21:25-28, 34-6):

Ask a group member to read the passage aloud and then take 2-3 minutes to reflect in silence on what you have heard. If you wish, share a phrase which has struck you or a thought which has occurred to you, but this is a time for prayerful contemplation, not discussion. If not everyone has a copy of the text available it may be useful to read the passage through once more, aloud.

Luke, like Paul when he first started writing his letters, believed that the end of the world was about to happen very soon. It would be so terrifying to those who did not know Jesus, that men would die of fright with the second coming of the Son of Man. Nearly two thousand years later we know, as Paul came to realise in his later writings, that the second coming might not be coming as soon as all that.

During Advent, however, this passage has a fresh significance for us. In Advent we are, in a sense, living in the 'end-times' as we prepare for the moment when Jesus comes to live amongst us. This passage from the Gospel tells us that if we are to be properly prepared, we must live well and pray at all times. For only in this way will we be able to stand with confidence before the Son of Man. We must also stay awake to the possibility of

Christ coming, not necessarily in the way that we expect. Our own day of reckoning will come at the end of our lives. When that happens we need to be sure that ‘our hearts have not been coarsened’ and that we are ready for Christ or we will be caught as in a trap.

This Advent we are not just ‘getting ready for Christmas’, with all that implies of shopping and good cheer, family rituals and parties. We are opening ourselves to God’s Son who came down to us from heaven. We pray that the Christ who came to us, not in a cloud with great power, but as a little baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, may find an eager welcome in our hearts.

For Discussion:

- When or where have I encountered Christ in an unexpected way?
- Am I ready to ‘stand with confidence before the Son of Man’?

D. Concluding Prayer:

If the group wishes to, spend a few minutes in intercessory prayer, ending with the Our Father. Then pray together the following:

Lord Jesus, you came to us, born of the Virgin Mary,
and we look for you to come again.
May your coming bring us the light of your holiness
and your blessing bring us freedom. **Amen**

Saint of the Week: St. Andrew (Feast Day - 30 November)

Andrew was the brother of Simon Peter, the ‘rock’ on which the Church is built. Like Simon Peter, Andrew was a fisherman but was also a follower of John the Baptist. In the Gospel of St. John (1:35-42) we learn that it was to Andrew that John (the Baptist) said ‘Behold the Lamb of God!’ and Andrew immediately understood that Jesus was the Messiah and became the first of his disciples. The Gospel tells us that the first thing Andrew did was to go and find his brother and take him to Jesus.

Andrew’s trust in Jesus and his answer to His call is an inspiration for all of us, and it was Andrew who introduced Peter to his life of discipleship of Jesus. Without Andrew’s response to the call of Jesus there would have been no Rock on which to build the Church; without our commitment to respond to the call of Jesus, the Church would cease to exist.

**STAND UP AND
RAISE YOUR HEADS...
SALVATION IS NEAR**



Week Two: A Voice In the Wilderness

*Based on the readings for the Second Sunday of Advent
(Bar 5:1-9; Ps 125; Phil 1:3-6, 8-11; Lk 3:1-6)*

A. Welcome and Opening Prayer:

Welcome back members of the group. Ask how the last week has been for them and whether they heard the readings of the First Sunday of Advent differently as a result of last week's session. How are we hoping to live this Advent season? Light the group candle (or wreath).

All say together the Psalm (Psalm 125) for the Second Sunday of Advent:

Response: *What marvels the Lord worked for us!
Indeed we were glad.*

When the Lord delivered Zion from bondage,
it seemed like a dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
on our lips there were songs.

The heathens themselves said: “What marvels
the Lord worked for them!”
What marvels the Lord worked for us!
Indeed we were glad.

Deliver us, O Lord, from our bondage
as streams in dry land.
Those who are sowing in tears
will sing when they reap.

They go out, they go out, full of tears,
carrying seed for the sowing:
they come back, they come back, full of song,
carrying their sheaves.

B. Second Reading (*Philippians 1:3-6, 8-11*):

Ask a group member to read the passage aloud and then take 2-3 minutes to reflect in silence on what you have heard. If you wish, share a phrase which has struck you or a thought which has occurred to you, but this is a time for prayerful contemplation, not discussion. If not everyone has a copy of the text available it may be useful to read the passage through once more, aloud.

Commentary

This letter is very much addressed to the Philippians as a community, emphasizing the concrete demands of living as an authentic *koinonia* (a Greek work, best translated as ‘communion’) in Christ. Living *koinonia* involves a sharing of life that includes proclamation of the Gospel, willingly uniting our sufferings with Christ’s, and the generous sharing of resources.

In view of Paul’s understanding of the Philippians as a *koinonia*, we gain a deeper insight into the rest of his words here, and our Advent theme of joy. Paul is urging them to hold firm by journeying deeper as a community into Christ (v9): to delve below surface realities and passing happiness, to penetrate into the lasting joy that God alone offers. And it is through the love at the heart of true *koinonia* that they will be able to stand firm amid trials and hold fast to the truth against the proclamation of persuasive counter-truths. Community is a necessity if we are to persevere in our Christian journeys over the long haul - it is not an optional extra!

This reading is an invitation to us to re-evaluate our participation in community as Christians - family, parish or in other forms - and to recognize it as the context in which we are called to grow together in holiness (v10). Community can be challenging and painfully confronting, and takes a sustained effort. Paul invites the community at Philippi, and us today, to re-dedicate ourselves to deepening our love for one another in the nitty gritty of the common life of the Church. But Paul is adamant it is well worth the effort, with its fruit of lasting joy!

For Discussion:

- What are the causes of joy in your Christian community? What are the signs of *koinonia*?
- What are the struggles and challenges your Christian community faces? How can these trials be faced and embraced in order for an authentic Christian joy to be born more deeply in our lives and communities this Advent?

Passage from Christifideles Laici 17:

The dignity as a Christian, the source of equality for all members of the Church, guarantees and fosters the spirit of communion and fellowship, and, at the same time, becomes the hidden dynamic force in the lay faithful's apostolate and mission. It is a dignity, however, which brings demands, the dignity of labourers called by the Lord to work in his vineyard: "Upon all the lay faithful, then, rests the exalted duty of working to assure that each day the divine plan of salvation is further extended to every person, of every era, in every part of the earth"(Lumen Gentium 33).

C. Gospel (Luke 3:1-6):

Ask a group member to read the passage aloud and then take 2-3 minutes to reflect in silence on what you have heard. If you wish, share a phrase which has struck you or a thought which has occurred to you, but this is a time for prayerful contemplation, not discussion. If not everyone has a copy of the text available it may be useful to read the passage through once more, aloud.

Commentary

John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, a voice that cries 'Prepare a way for the Lord'! Why is the desert so important for preparing the way for the coming of the Saviour?

The desert is free from the many distractions that clutter our hearts and lives. Here, in the silence we are able to hear the Word of God with greater clarity. Advent is an invitation to enter into the desert to de-clutter and re-assess our priorities. Preparing the way for Christ who is the Word of God involves

actively and in practical, concrete ways, making interior space to receive Him.

This raises an important question: do we truly want to receive? Are we prepared to let go of our self-sufficiency and the illusion of strength, and admit before God that we are weak and broken people, in need of the healing of God's forgiving love? Because if we don't know we need a Saviour, we cannot be saved; we will be closed-off and unable to receive life as gift, and therefore to respond in gratitude with the gift of our own lives for others.

This is the paradox which John the Baptist signals: we are called into the poverty of the desert where we will find a wellspring of joy; we are invited to cultivate an emptiness within, in order to be filled with an incredible gift. Crucially, preparing the way for the Lord means accepting and celebrating our neediness, in order to be filled by God Himself.

For discussion:

- How can we make more room for Christ in our hearts and lives, personally and as a community? What clutters our hearts?
- What are the things we cling to in fear and self-preservation that we are called to surrender to Christ this Advent, in order to renew our trust in God and live in the freedom of the new life that Christ brings?

D. Concluding Prayer:

If the group wishes to, spend a few minutes in intercessory prayer, ending with the Our Father. Then pray together the following:

Lord Jesus, you came to us, born of the Virgin Mary, and we look for you to come again.

May your coming bring us the light of your holiness and your blessing bring us freedom. **Amen**

Saint of the Week: St. Ambrose (Feast Day - 7 December)

Born in 339 in Italy, Ambrose was a successful lawyer with the patronage of the emperor, large estates, and as Governor of Milan, he was an important politician. Sent to pacify riots that broke out following the death of the bishop of Milan as a result of the heresies that threatened to destroy the Church, Ambrose was astonished when the cry came up from the crowd: “Ambrose for Bishop”.

In spite of his protests he was indeed made Bishop, whereupon he gave all his property to the poor and immersed himself in the study of Scripture and theology so that he could aid the spiritual welfare of his people. In this uncertain period of the Roman Empire, Ambrose faced many trials and tribulations and it was to calm his frightened congregation when his basilica was besieged by imperial troops that he taught his people to sing hymns he had composed. This is the first record of communal singing in Church, and when the soldiers heard the singing through the walls of the basilica their hearts were touched, they joined in the songs of praise of God and the siege was over.



Week Three: A Time For Rejoicing

*Based on the readings for the Third Sunday of Advent
(Zeph 3:14-18; Isa 12:2-6 (as Canticle); Phil 4:4-7; Lk 3:10-18)*

A. Welcome and Opening Prayer:

This is 'Gaudete Sunday', named from the first word of the Latin version of the Entrance Antiphon and the Second Reading. It's an order: "Rejoice!" So, before our opening prayer, share with someone else in the group two reasons you have for being cheerful! (Listen carefully - this is privileged information!).

Light the group candle (or wreath).

All say together the Canticle (Isaiah 12:2-6) for the Third Sunday of Advent:

Response: *Sing and shout for joy
 for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel*

Truly, God is my salvation,
I trust, I shall not fear.
For the Lord is my strength, my song,
he became my Saviour.
With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.

Give thanks to the Lord, give praise to his name!
make his mighty deeds known to the peoples!
Declare the greatness of his name.

Sing a psalm to the Lord
for he has done glorious deeds,
make them known to all the earth!
People of Zion, sing and shout for joy,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

B. Second Reading (*Philippians 4:4-7*):

Ask a group member to read the passage aloud and then take 2-3 minutes to reflect in silence on what you have heard. If you wish, share a phrase which has struck you or a thought which has occurred to you, but this is a time for prayerful contemplation, not discussion. If not everyone has a copy of the text available it may be useful to read the passage through once more, aloud.

Commentary

This short passage is part of an exhortation from Paul on how to live our lives. With its message of joy it is particularly significant for Advent, but these words have become so familiar to us that we need to look at them afresh.

The Philippians were being asked to rejoice although their lives were far from easy. The joy that they were asked to feel was joy in the good news that is the Gospel – they needed to be reminded to rejoice in spite of the difficulties they faced. All Christians are called to experience joy in God. This is about more than just positive thinking; it is about allowing our lives to be transformed by filling our hearts and minds with God.

When Paul asks us not to ‘worry’, there is an acceptance that as humans we are natural ‘worry-ers’. However we have been redeemed from the debilitating effects of our worry by God's promise: a promise of peace if only we would commit to praying both prayers of petition and those of thanksgiving and praise. I can choose to trust in God's goodness and his faithfulness or I can continue to be caught up in a state of anxiety about the present and the future. If I truly believe in Jesus' resurrection then I must hold onto his promise of salvation in all situations, for myself and for those closest to me. Ask the peace of God to stand guard at the doors of your heart and your mind today: allow God to work within you and see what difference it makes!

For Discussion:

- What worries or disturbs me in my life today?
- “Anything you need, pray for it”. How do we handle God’s response to our prayer?

Passage from Christifideles Laici 59:

There cannot be two parallel lives in the lay faithful's existence: on the one hand, the so-called 'spiritual' life, with its values and demands; and on the other, the so-called 'secular' life, that is, life in a family, at work, in social relationships, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture. Every area of the lay faithful's lives, as different as they are, enters into the plan of God, who desires that these very areas be the 'places in time' where the love of Christ is revealed and realised for both the glory of the Father and service of others. Every activity, every situation, every precise responsibility are the occasions ordained by Providence for a continuous exercise of faith, hope and charity.

C. Gospel (Luke 3:10-18):

Ask a group member to read the passage aloud and then take 2-3 minutes to reflect in silence on what you have heard. If you wish, share a phrase which has struck you or a thought which has occurred to you, but this is a time for prayerful contemplation, not discussion. If not everyone has a copy of the text available it may be useful to read the passage through once more, aloud.

Commentary

John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, followed in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, calling people to a radical change of life with dire warnings for those who failed to heed the message (see v.7-9). No wonder the people were worried: "What must we do then?"

They had come to this man of God to be baptised, to make a fresh start, to demonstrate their change of heart. John is very practical in his reply: do what you have to do and do it well. Look

out for those worse off than you. Don't cheat people, don't exploit them.

But notice that John, in his turn, does not let his popularity/notoriety run away with him: he is not the Christ, no matter how much the people would wish him to be. Instead it is his role to proclaim the Christ and “prepare the way”. Today it is for each one of us to live our own God-given role, and to do it well, thus ensuring that the 'good news' is proclaimed to our world.

For Discussion

- What do I see as my contribution to proclaiming the good news?
- Looking back to the passage from *Christifideles Laici*; what makes it hard for me to see the whole of my life as Godly?
- When do I find it most difficult to treat others as I would wish them to treat me?

D. Concluding Prayer:

If the group wishes to, spend a few minutes in intercessory prayer, ending with the Our Father. Then pray together the following, which has been adapted from the Solemn Blessing for the 1st and 3rd Sundays of Advent.

Lord Jesus, you came to us, born of the Virgin Mary,
and we look for you to come again.
May your coming bring us the light of your holiness
and your blessing bring us freedom. **Amen**

Saint of the Week: St. John of the Cross (Feast Day - 14 December)

Juan de Yepis y Alvarez was born in 1542, a member of a Spanish noble family which had fallen on hard times. He became a Carmelite monk and was ordained priest. With the help of St. Teresa of Avila, he tried to reform the religious order he belonged to, pressing for others to adopt the 'Discalced' (barefoot) way of life. He fell foul of Church politics and spent his last 14 years virtually imprisoned in one of the monasteries. Despite all the hardships, St. John was a mystic and a great poet, trying to express the joy of living in the presence of the ever-loving God, even if it sometimes felt like 'the dark night of the soul'. He died, exhausted, aged 49. He is revered as a Doctor of the Church, particularly for his understanding of mystical theology and the contemplative life. Ask him to help us to learn to live faithfully as lay people in the world of today.



Week Four: Singing Christ’s Song

*Based on the readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent
(Micah 5:1-4; Ps 79; Heb 10:5-10; Lk 1:39-44)*

A. Welcome and Opening Prayer:

Welcome back members of the group. Ask how the last week has been for them and whether they heard the readings of the Third Sunday of Advent differently as a result of last week’s session. How are we finding this Advent season? Light the group candle (or wreath).

All say together the Psalm (Psalm 79) for the Fourth Sunday of Advent:

Response: *God of hosts, bring us back;
let your face shine on us and we shall be saved.*

O shepherd of Israel, hear us,
shine forth from your cherubim throne,
O Lord, rouse up your might,
O Lord, come to our help.

God of hosts, turn again, we implore,
look down from heaven and see.
Visit this vine and protect it,
the vine your right hand has planted.

May your hand be on the man you have chosen,
the man you have given your strength.
And we shall never forsake you again:
give us life that we may call upon your name.

B. Second Reading (*Hebrews 10:5-10*):

Ask a group member to read the passage aloud and then take 2-3 minutes to reflect in silence on what you have heard. If you wish, share a phrase which has struck you or a thought which has occurred to you, but this is a time for prayerful contemplation, not discussion. If not everyone has a copy of the text available it may be useful to read the passage through once more, aloud.

Commentary

The idea that ritual sacrifice of rams and calves alone, however scrupulously observed according to the dictates of cultic law, was empty and meaningless in God’s eyes unless it was accompanied by appropriate interior attitudes was already known to the Jewish people. See, for example, Isaiah 1:11-17 where the Lord professes to be “sick of burnt offerings” and commands the people instead to “learn to do good, search for justice...”

Intellectually this is an easy concept to grasp, especially as we live in an age when sacrificing calves would be seen as little more than barbaric!

In this passage the call for personal sanctification is looked at in the light of Christ’s New Covenant. Jesus himself is described as the offering “made once and for all” which “abolishes” the sin-offerings of the old dispensation, and it is stressed that the value of his self-offering lies in its obedience to God’s will.

However, as with all religious ideals, this teaching needs to be related to our real everyday lives. *Our* ritual sacrifice is the Mass, the source and summit of our faith, wherein we unite ourselves with Christ’s self-offering made once and for all. Since it is by this offering that we are made holy, the implication is clear – our path to God is through the offering of our very selves and our fidelity to the will of God. How does this impact on our everyday lives?

For Discussion:

- “(His) will was for us to be made holy by the offering of his body made once and for all by Jesus Christ.” In the Eucharist we share in the self-offering of Christ. How can we take this gift with us into our daily lives?

- The letter to the Hebrews has Christ saying “God, here I am! I am coming to obey your will.” How do we discern the will of God in our daily lives?

Passage from Christifideles Laici 17

The vocation of the lay faithful to holiness implies that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their *involvement in temporal affairs* and in their *participation in earthly activities*... The Synod Fathers have said: “The unity of life of the lay faithful is of the greatest importance: indeed they must be sanctified in everyday professional and social life. Therefore, to respond to their vocation, the lay faithful must see their daily activities as an occasion to join themselves to God, fulfill his will, serve other people and lead them to communion with God in Christ.” ...

The eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of a countless number of lay people, both women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite unacclaimed by the world, unknown to the world’s great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, untiring labourers who work in the Lord’s vineyard. Confident and steadfast through the power of God’s grace, these are the humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history.

C. Gospel (Luke 1:39-44):

Ask a group member to read the passage aloud and then take 2-3 minutes to reflect in silence on what you have heard. If you wish, share a phrase which has struck you or a thought which has occurred to you, but this is a time for prayerful contemplation, not discussion. Then read the passage through once more, aloud.

Commentary

From start to finish, this passage is about the fulfilment of promise, divine blessing and the appropriate human response – joy and reverence.

It is worth thinking both backwards and forwards in the history of Israel and placing this passage in context. We have two families both blessed with a child in unlikely circumstances: Elizabeth, Zechariah and John and Mary, Joseph and Jesus. John’s

movement indicates a relationship between himself and Jesus: this relationship is spelled out by Zechariah in Luke 1:76 when he prophesies that John will “go before the Lord to prepare a way for him”, referring back to Isaiah 40:3. Similarly, Mary’s *Magnificat* in the verses immediately following our passage echo the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-11 when she is finally blessed with a child, who in her gratitude she dedicates to the Lord.

In other words, what we have here is a “bridging scene” where the Old Covenant (Elizabeth and her prophetic son, John) meets the New (Mary and her son the Christ). Elizabeth and John recognise their visiting relatives as the embodied fulfilment of God’s promises to His people: one cries out in praise, the other leaps for joy.

We might notice two things in particular about these events. Firstly, they take place in and through human history, not through dramatic occurrences but normal everyday scenarios: the birth of children, family life. Secondly, they are the result of the free cooperation of very ordinary human beings with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Look back at our passage from *Christifideles Laici*. We too are called to be the “humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history”.

For discussion:

- Do I see the personal story of my life as part of the bigger story of the history of human salvation? What difference might it make, to see my life in this way?
- Do I tend to see my life as shaped by coincidences, ‘God-incidences’ or my own decisions?
- In the light of what we have read today, how do I see “the call to holiness” in my life? What is holiness?

D. Concluding Prayer:

If the group wishes to, spend a few minutes in intercessory prayer. Then pray together the following, a prayer asking the intercession of Our Lady which concludes Christifideles Laici and is based on the Magnificat.

O Most Blessed Virgin Mary,
Mother of Christ and Mother of
the Church, With joy and
wonder we seek to make our
own your *Magnificat*, joining
you in your hymn of
thankfulness and love.

With you we give thanks to
God,
"whose mercy
is from generation to
generation",
for the exalted vocation
and the many forms of mission
entrusted to the lay faithful...

O Virgin of the *Magnificat*,
fill (our) hearts
with a gratitude and
enthusiasm
for this vocation and mission...

Open our hearts
to the great anticipation
of the Kingdom of God
and of the proclamation of the
Gospel
to the whole of creation...

O Virgin full of courage,
may your spiritual strength
and trust in God inspire us,

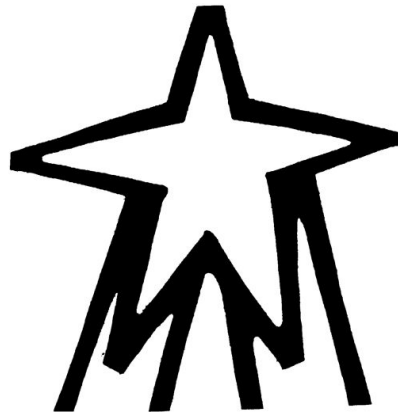
so that we might know
how to overcome all the
obstacles
that we encounter
in accomplishing our mission...

You who were gathered in
prayer
with the Apostles in the
Cenacle,
awaiting the coming
of the Spirit at Pentecost,
implore his renewed outpouring
on all the faithful, men and
women alike,
so that they might more fully
respond
to their vocation and mission,
as branches engrafted to the
true vine,
called to bear much fruit
for the life of the world.

O Virgin Mother,
guide and sustain us
so that we might always live
as true sons and daughters
of the Church of your Son.
Enable us to do our part
in helping to establish on earth
the civilization of truth and love,
as God wills it,
for his glory. Amen

Saint of the Week: Mary, Mother of God

This Sunday, the Church honours Mary and her role in our salvation. Mary's life typifies the Christian ideal of humble loving service. Moreover, God uses her to accomplish great things for humankind. She is the ultimate role model for Christian sanctity in and through everyday life, an example of personal sanctification and of trust in God's will even when we are not sure where it is taking us.



Year for Priests - 2009/2010

Pope Benedict XVI has called the whole Church to celebrate a Year for Priests beginning on 19th June 2009, the Feast of the Sacred Heart. His purpose for this year is to encourage priests in their “striving for spiritual perfection on which, above all, the effectiveness of their ministry depends” and to highlight “the importance of the priest’s role and mission in the Church and in contemporary society”.

A Prayer for Priests

Father, you have appointed your Son, Jesus Christ, eternal High priest.
Guide those He has chosen to be ministers of word and sacrament.
Help them to be faith in fulfilling the ministry they have received.
Lord our God, you guide your people by the ministry of priests.
Keep them faithful in obedient service to you
that by their life and ministry they may bring you glory in Christ. Amen.

Further information: www.calledbyname.org.uk

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Excerpts from Christifideles Laici are taken from the original text. This is available online at:

www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici_en.html

Translations of Psalms 24, 79, 125 & Cantic of Isaiah 12:2-6 from *The Psalms: A New Translation* © 1963 The Grail (England) published by HarperCollins.

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COMING SOON!

Lent 2010 – A&B Faith Sharing Group Material

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