

Preparing for the Advent Penance Service

TAKING STOCK OF WHERE YOU ARE WITH YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

We are the most blessed people. Our God once took on human flesh and lived on our earth because of an ordinary woman lived her life with extraordinary faith. The way God has left it is that God asks to be born over and over, but in us. And so we are gifted with faith and call to live it, like Mary, in a profound way. Let us, with Mary as our guide, look at our lives and our faith to see how significantly we have brought God into our world.

We are invited to review our life in response to God's commandment: love God, love neighbors, love myself. This might help us prepare to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We can do this ahead of time, before the start of the Advent Penance Service. Do not feel rushed—take the time you need. The following is adapted from "Celebrating Reconciliation" by Linda K. Valasik, H.M.

Mary's faith grew deeper as the events of her life unfolded.

Scripture tells us she reflected on her daily life patterns.

- Do I foster the habit of remembering God is Immanuel, "God is with us?"
- How do I listen for God's voice, look for signs of God's action in the people and circumstances around me?
- How willing am I to be open to God's invitation to grow in faith?
- What does God seem to be asking of me now?
- Do I ask God to increase my faith?

As a spouse and parent Mary faced many unforeseen events in her family relationships. She believed God would help her give love and life to those nearest to her each time a new challenge in their relationship arose.

- What circumstances in my family life is most difficult for me now?
- Do I respond by condemning, or with violence?
- How clear to those with whom I live is my example of faith?
- When I experience no evidence that faith will make a difference, do I, like Mary, continue to hope and act in hope?

Mary's faith in God's ways led her to stand outside accepted circles socially, politically, and even at times, religiously. She was the peaceful, strong, compassionate, presence that supported others, even the apostles, when human structures

had to change. She trusted God to be at work in very radical situations.

- How accepting am I of others who are different, who are marginalized, who seek sanctuary for political, social, or religious reasons?
- What attitudes grow deeply in my heart that make me a slave to the law for my own security?
- What fears keep me from reaching out to the oppressed?
- How would I act if I really believed that I could call God, "Abba," "Daddy," and depend on that relationship as warm, stable, and life-giving?
- Is there a current situation that calls me to respond to others in need because of my faith?

Mary lived with God as the center of her life. She continually tried to learn about God and to make her life's decisions in the light of what God would want.

- What is my understanding of God?
- Is my image of God in harmony with the way Jesus describes God?
- What am I doing to get to know God better? When do we talk?
- What are the signs that our relationship is growing?
- How do I invite God into the decisions I make?

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Alternate Examination of Conscience

Based on Pope Francis' reflection on the Beatitudes in "Gaudete et Exsultate"

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven

The Gospel invites us to peer into the depths of our heart, to see where we find our security in life... to configure ourselves to Jesus who, though rich, 'made Himself poor' (2 Cor 8:9)." (67,70)

Was I responsible with my gifts of time and money today? Did I overspend or overindulge?

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth

"These are strong words in a world...where we constantly pigeonhole others on the basis of their ideas, their customs and even their way of speaking or dressing. Ultimately, it is the reign of pride and vanity, where each person thinks he or she has the right to dominate others." (71)

Did I seek to 'dominate' others today? Did I judge others unfairly?

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted

"The worldly person ignores problems of sickness or sorrow in the family or all around him; he averts his gaze. The world has no desire to mourn; it would rather disregard painful situations, cover them up or hide them."(75)

Did I ignore someone who could have used my comfort today? Did I disregard the pain of another?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled

"Experience shows how easy it is to become mired in corruption, ensnared in the daily politics of quid pro quo, where everything becomes business. How many people suffer injustice, standing by powerlessly while others divvy up the good things of this life." (78)

How did I use my power or position today, either at work, in society, or in my family? Did I seek to benefit myself to the neglect or cost of others?

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy

"Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you" (Luke 6:36-38)

Did I judge someone harshly today? Even if in a small way, did I seek revenge against someone who wronged me?

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God

Nothing stained by falsehood has any real worth in the Lord's eyes. He "flees from deceit, and rises and departs from foolish thoughts" (Wis 1:5) (84)

Acknowledging that thoughts themselves are not sinful, did I allow myself to dwell on thoughts that might lead me to sin? Did I dwell on lustful, angry, or prideful thoughts? Did they lead me to unloving actions?

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God

"We ourselves are often a cause of conflict or at least of misunderstanding. For example, I may hear something about someone and I go off and repeat it. I may even embellish it the second time around and keep spreading it... And the more harm it does, the more satisfaction I seem to derive from it." (87)

Did I spread gossip, cause conflict, or misunderstanding for my own pleasure or benefit?

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

"In living the Gospel, we cannot expect that everything will be easy, for the thirst for power and worldly interests often stands in our way." (91)

Did I neglect my call to holiness in favor of an easier way of living? If others treated me unfairly, did I allow myself to become bitter or lash out in anger or defensiveness?