

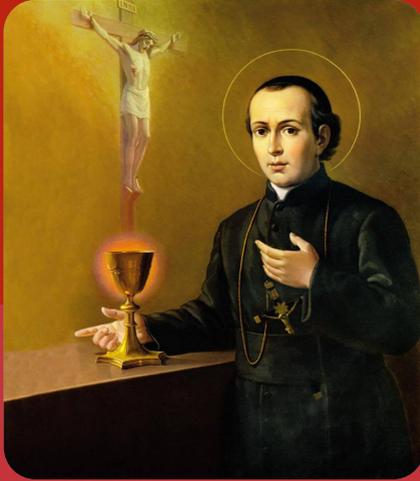
VOLUME 30 • ISSUE 3 • DECEMBER 2023

Advent-Christmas



When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman. (Galatians 4:4)

THE PRECIOUS BLOOD FAMILY



The Precious Blood Family
is published three times a
year by the Congregation of
Missionaries of the Precious
Blood, Atlantic Province.

EDITOR

Fr. John Colacino, C.P.P.S.

GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Stephen Imburgia

To submit questions, articles,
story ideas, news and
suggestions, send email to
cppspublications@gmail.com

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EDITORIAL

This issue of the *Precious Blood Magazine* looks at the many ways the Blessed Virgin Mary features prominently in the liturgies of the Advent and Christmas seasons. The articles follow the sequence of days on which she appears as a central protagonist in the unfolding events of salvation history from her own conception on December 8 to her divine maternity on January 1. Each celebration invites us to ponder, along with her, the Angel Gabriel's greeting, "Hail, full of grace." I hope the following contributions will encourage you to take her as your guide through the coming weeks, accompanying you with her example and prayers, so that the Word first formed in her womb might become flesh and blood anew in your own lives as members of the Body of Christ.

A blessed Advent, joyous Christmas, and prosperous New Year to all,

Fr. John Colacino, C.P.P.S.

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (December 8)

John Kevern

Knowledgeable Catholics will certainly recognize the title “Immaculate Conception” as denoting Mary, and not Jesus, whose virginal conception is celebrated on March 25, Solemnity of the Annunciation — precisely nine months before Christmas. So if the miraculous conception of Jesus by Mary is not what our feast is all about, what is it about? And what is the significance of December 8th coming as it does a bit after the beginning of Advent, that season highlighting the judgment of God at the Second Coming before switching to the gentler theme of the manger, the shepherds, and the Holy Family?

Well, it turns out that our feast celebrates the conception of Mary by her mother, conventionally called St. Anne. So we’re going back from Jesus to the level of his grandmother and asserting that even here God was specially and miraculously at work in the conception of Mary without original sin and in the ordinary course of human generation. Now “original sin” does NOT mean that we are all rotten as rotten can be. While some Catholics have held a dark view of humanity, Catholic theology in general has rejected this.

By contrast, “original sin” means that the human person is born into a web of brokenness, and, while we can work very hard on our “issues”, and make progress in this and that area, we cannot transform ourselves into perfect lovers of God

and humankind. Though our ultimate goal is God, we cannot reach that goal ourselves unless God breaks through the blockages.

One joins the Church, the community of the blessed, in baptism which the Church says effaces original sin. We don’t much use that very traditional language these days, preferring to accent the positive: a joyful joining of ourselves to the God of love. But the traditional way of putting it is not denied either, even if composed of a double negative: “takes away” (the first negative) “original sin” (second negative).

Are you still with me? Our mediaeval mothers and fathers in the faith, when they pondered the ways of God, could see that Jesus was God’s plan from all eternity. In other words, Jesus was not God’s Plan B after Adam messed things up. God would not be God if He were caught by surprise and had to stitch together a backup plan to rescue the human race. But — if Jesus was intended from all times, then.....so must his mother have been. And the Bible has a fair amount to say about her. She took a massive risk in trusting God to bring forth.....well, a Saviour, but what precisely would that mean and look like?

We may pleasantly speculate what kind of home life Jesus experienced. These days, drenched as we are in psychology and therapy talk (frequently at the expense of God-talk)

Jesus appears to have been balanced in every way, except that his passion for God was off the charts. And yet the God he talked about seemed to expand and expand and expand in possibility, not at all like the crabbed and ill-tempered God proposed by the religious fanatics. Something strange and wonderful was indeed going on here.....beginning in Nazareth.

So let us make the last move in our theological musings as we work backward from Jesus to Mary, and by dint of logic, to Mary's mother and her forebears from all eternity. God had refined and refined and refined the human race in the religious history of the people of Israel — to the point that it crystallized in one person, Mary, through whom Jesus comes into the world. And if this be true, it seems only natural, nay necessary, to assert that Mary had broken through the web of sin which encumbers one simply by being born.

Popular piety and careful verbal doctrine converge here in deeply pondering this working out of God's plan from all eternity which began, really, with Mary's own pondering "what sort of greeting" Gabriel meant in calling her "full of grace." December 8th is the Church's long-considered answer to the question.

Observance of this feast is first attested in the 6th Century in the Christian East whence it migrated to Western Europe and spread throughout the Catholic Church. But it was at first called merely the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, since not everyone agreed on going so far as to say "Immaculate". For example, the greatest Catholic theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas, was against it. Still, the Church settled on celebrating only three birthdays in the

liturgical calendar: the Nativity of St. John the Baptist on June 24, of Jesus on December 25th and of Mary on September 8. Like with the Annunciation, December 8th is calculated exactly nine months prior to the latter. The subtext is that the only births that are celebrated are miraculous ones.

The debates of various groups within the Catholic Church over whether Mary could be asserted as immaculately conceived are instructive. There was disagreement because the teaching was not explicitly in the Bible, although the logic of God's eternal plan of salvation certainly was. The matter was finally and definitively settled in 1854 by Pope Pius IX who explicitly defined the dogma in such a way — *ex cathedra* — that it is regarded by Catholics as infallible.

Now the Collect for the feast carefully states that Mary was preserved from original sin "by virtue of the death" of her Son or, more accurately, "by the foreseen death" of Jesus. This matter of "foreknowledge" contains a lot more to think about than just the simple assertion that God had all the information available to His fingertips all along. The second reading for the feast is from the Epistle to the Ephesians and contains the splendid couple of lines: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, Having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will..." (1:3- 5).

What a wonderful and comforting thought it is to realize that Jesus was the point at which God had been aiming all along; it certainly relativizes the feeling we may have that the innumerable pains of earthly life have been foreseen by God and are part and parcel of some incomprehensibly rich drama in which there must necessarily be pain—but a pain already taken into the victory of Christ. Our lives are not just an occasion provoking God’s rescue operation; they are in some sense part of His willed drama in which Christ and His Kingdom have always been the intended goal, and in which our lives have an integral part to play.

In other words, if God predestined Jesus as the culmination of all creation and therefore predestined Mary as the active entrance point by which this was to be accomplished, then God predestined Anne too as the purification of Israel resulting in the Immaculate Conception of her daughter. There are, moreover, each and every one of us, in all our uniqueness, predestined too by God from all eternity. We are not just a mess to be cleaned up. We are what God has wanted in the first place. So if we think we are not that noble or lovely or interesting or significant, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception cheers us by asserting we are indeed intended by God as was Mary. And that our failures, indeed our sins, have been anticipated and already overcome in the drama of Jesus...and Mary...and Anne...all the way back to Eden. Just as Mary was “preserved” from original sin, so have we overcome all sin, and death, in the person of Mary’s Son, Jesus our Saviour.

The late Rev. Dr. John Kevern was resident in the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester, NY.



Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12)

Antonio Selvaggi

SURRENDER

I

O woman clothed with the sun,
Far too young was I to know you;
Your strong delicate beauty.
Late have I loved
This sea of fragrant flowers –
A heavenly scent,
Attractive and delicious –
Giving thanks in the delight
Of your love.
Rejoicing in your innocent fragrance,
In a garden so fine, full and lush.

Sweet surrender rose
Fragrant grace a-rouse
Spirit-Spouse so moved
Overshadow an'd power
Excite on a gentle petal sublime.
Lilies breath run on high
Virgin's lips call – yes...
Humble surrender sweet
Faithful rose so deep.

II

Into the wilderness
Upon eagles wings,
Deeply embedded
In a special place prepared by the Father,
She is nourished by Paraclete dew and fire.
Where the Lamb of God
Speaks to her low estate
In words of Flesh and Blood –
And the wine never runs out.
Where the Maiden's soul
Is magnified for all heaven and earth to see
By Womb, Cross and Christ –
She ponders...

III

Hail Mary, full of grace,
That heavenly scent which greets you;
Living tabernacle
Of the Incarnate Word of God.
You are the stem standing strong at the
foot of the Cross
With the beloved son,
For us, your little buds.

Deep red full-blown bloom –
Hail Mystical Rose –
Mother Church –
I surrender...

Your virgin soul consoled –
Where the Bread of Life nourishes you –
And the wine never runs out.
Magnified is your soul
Across the heavens and the earth,
Where your majesty is well known
And no beast can try to overtake you.

O woman,
The dew from a dove replenishes
You from your journey.
Angel's eyes wide open –
Transfixed stare at the
Woman clothed with the sun;
No harm will be done
Unto you...

Unto you sweet Mother Church –
Chaste spouse
With beloved son.

*Antonio Selvaggi resides in Toronto,
Canada.*

Annunciation (Fourth Sunday of Advent)

Katherine Cappuccio

The phone call came right before I had to teach the last class of the day. My husband told me he'd had a heart attack. Joe calmly said, "Take care of things. Do what you have to do. I'll call you after I see my doctor". So I taught the class, prepared plans for the next day's sub, picked up my sons, and called a friend to stay with them. Then I went to the hospital... every day for the next three weeks. Every night I collapsed in bed, too weary to say prayers. Every night the song "Breath of Heaven" became my prayer. And I thought, if Mary could trust God enough to do what she did, I can do this. The pregnant Mary sings "I am waiting in a silent prayer, I am frightened by the load I bear". She asks the Holy Spirit, the "Breath of Heaven", to hold her together and she prays "be with me now... Help me be strong... help me be." Mary didn't show me "how to do"... she showed me "how to be".

Mary teaches me the power of presence, the "being with" that is so important in any relationship of love. I asked if Mary could help me trust God more and help me accept the things I didn't understand. As my husband became sicker, many times the best thing I could do for him was simply to be with him. Without words he knew what was in my heart, "I love you and I'm here". The silence drew us closer together and so it is with God. My prayer became "being with" God... being with one who knows my every thought, desire and action.

But the hardest thing for most of us to do is simply be! You see a relationship with God isn't based on doing something special. It's about being someone special. God's self-giving love means that God loves you so much that you're a dwelling place for God! ... Listen to Mary's reply to the angel. She said "May it be done to me", not "I will do it". She understood God's the active one. And she allowed the Spirit of God to work through her and in her.

Mary shows me to simply be open and available for God to be God in me. She helped me make a remarkable shift... from seeing God as outside, to seeing God from the inside out! Like Mary, I asked, how can this be? But somehow I knew all God needed was my yes. When an unexpected Annunciation comes, begin with a yes to God. Then offer what Mary offered – (no not time, talent and treasure). She offered trust, love and space - a welcome dwelling place for God in her womb. We focus on what can be seen, like the birth of a newborn baby. But so much happens that can't be seen. From the first cells to the fully formed child, there's amazing growth and development. It's like that with God's life in us. Something important is happening within you... even when you don't see it or feel it. Especially in dry periods of prayer, God is dynamically forming us. Saying yes is truly the beginning of knowing God, not just knowing about God.

The philosopher, Gabriel Marcel said “I came to know God by loving someone in whom God dwelt”. My experience of being a mother helps me to fathom God’s self-giving love. I came to know and love my children before they were born. And like an expectant mother living for and with another, I began to cherish and nurture God’s life within me.

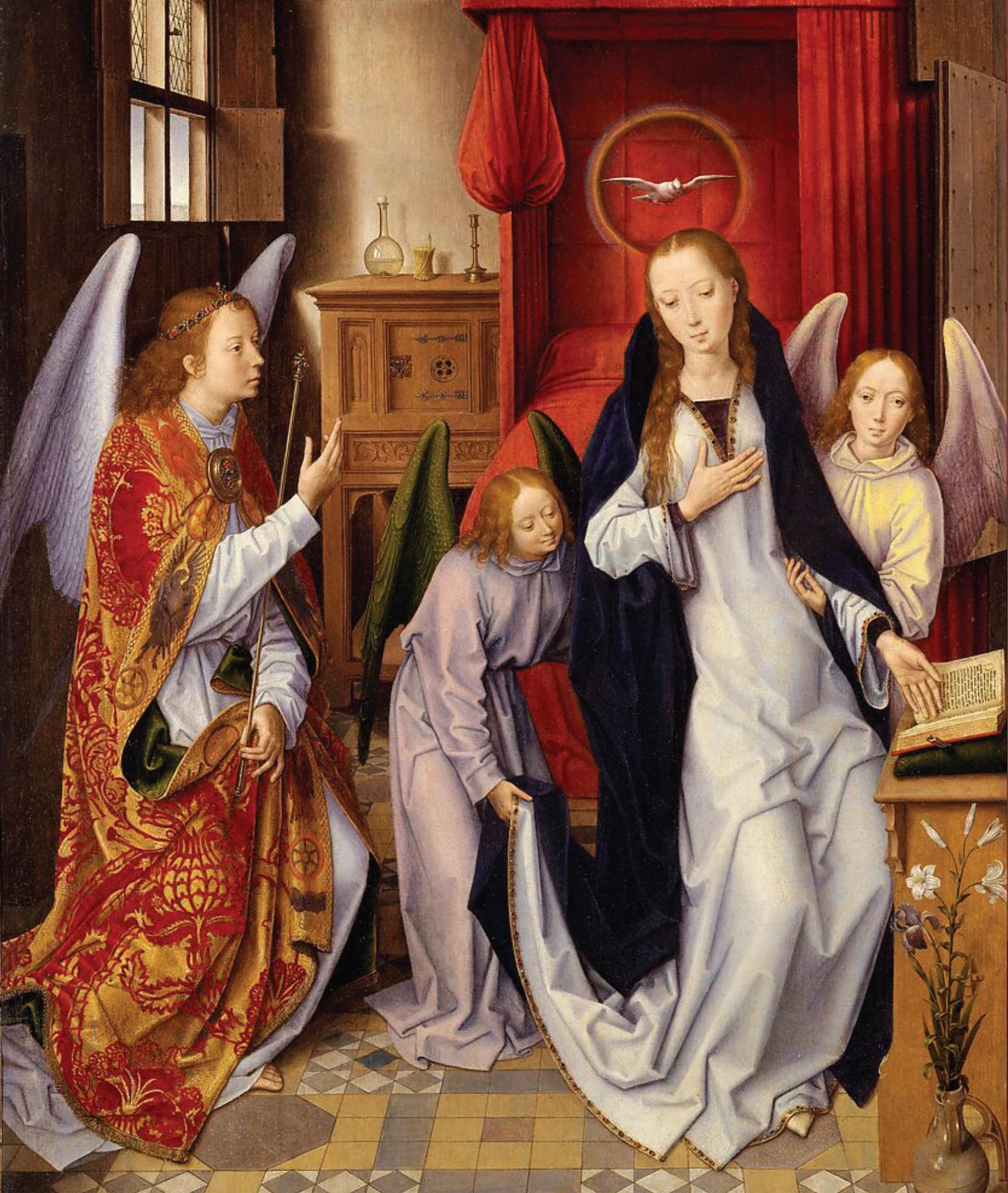
You see, Mary encourages me to expect God’s active presence in my life. I feel many of us don’t expect to be personally involved with the Spirit of God - to have promptings or gifts from the Holy Spirit requiring our response. Maybe we just don’t recognize the Spirit’s love, power or wisdom in our lives. The Spirit is always present but rarely experienced if we’re preoccupied or unreceptive – not “tuned in”. Unless a radio is set for the right frequency, we don’t hear the signal a radio station sends out. Or if you prefer, go back to the idea of space. The clutter must continually be cleared out to make space for the Spirit to fill us with grace.

And I’ve experienced God’s grace even when dealing with darkness. I stood with Mary at the foot of the cross as Joe suffered... for twelve years... through one affliction after another... until like Mary’s spouse Joseph, my Joseph died too... And then Mary brought me to Jesus who was to be with me as I grieved... In my dying with Christ, I rose with him too... I know what God did with my pain. God is with us sharing in our daily lives, in our joys and in our suffering. So my response to God’s healing touch in my life is ministering to others. I desire to “to be with” them, listen to their stories and pray with them. You see this is where our time, talent and treasure

come in. We offer them to God as our response to God’s love for us. It’s never to earn or to make ourselves worthy of God’s love. The relationship that develops from “being with” God in prayer is crucial so what we “do” comes from knowing and loving God.

Mary’s yes allowed the Holy Spirit to come upon her and the power of the Most High to overshadow her. You might think those words are just for Mary - a poetic way to say Mary conceived Jesus by the Holy Spirit. Well, Luke uses the Greek word for “come upon” in one other place, this time at the beginning of Acts (1:8). Jesus tells the disciples right before his Ascension “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.” The same word for overshadow is used at the Transfiguration and for the cloud of God’s presence at Mt. Sinai. It’s the power of the presence of God in the relationship of “being with”. So you see, this Gospel describes the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that happens once you say yes to God... Then the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you... We’re all empowered to co-create with God birthing Christ into our world. Be open to God. Be a willing womb. Be expectant... Be.

Katherine Cappuccio is a member of the Rochester Mission House.



A Voice from Tradition

St. Bernard of Clairvaux

You have heard, O Virgin, that you will conceive and bear a son; you have heard that it will not be by man but by the Holy Spirit. The angel awaits an answer; it is time for him to return to God who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for your word of compassion; the sentence of condemnation weighs heavily upon us.

The price of our salvation is offered to you. We shall be set free at once if you consent. In the eternal Word of God we all came to be, and behold, we die. In your brief response we are to be remade in order to be recalled to life.

Tearful Adam with his sorrowing family begs this of you, O loving Virgin, in their exile from Paradise. Abraham begs it, David begs it. All the other holy patriarchs, your ancestors, ask it of you, as they dwell in the country of the shadow of death. This is what the whole earth waits for, prostrate at your feet. It is right in doing so, for on your word depends comfort for the wretched, ransom for the captive, freedom for the condemned, indeed, salvation for all the sons of Adam, the whole of your race.

Answer quickly, O Virgin. Reply in haste to the angel, or rather through the angel to the Lord. Answer with a word, receive the Word of God. Speak your own word, conceive the divine Word. Breathe a passing word, embrace the eternal Word.

Why do you delay, why are you afraid? Believe, give praise, and receive. Let humility be bold, let modesty be confident. This is no time for virginal simplicity to forget prudence. In this matter alone, O prudent Virgin, do not fear to be presumptuous. Though modest silence is pleasing, dutiful speech is now more necessary. Open your heart to faith, O blessed Virgin, your lips to praise, your womb to the Creator. See, the desired of all nations is at your door, knocking to enter. If he should pass by because of your delay, in sorrow you would begin to seek him afresh, the One whom your soul loves. Arise, hasten, open. Arise in faith, hasten in devotion, open in praise and thanksgiving. *Behold the handmaid of the Lord, she says, be it done to me according to your word.* (Homily 4:8-9)

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (+1153) was a key figure in the Cistercian reform of monastic life, a papal adviser, author of works on the spiritual life and is a doctor of the church.

Solemnity of Christmas

December 25

Craig Bullock

The Christmas story is not only about heaven intervening in Mary's life, but in all of human history, including your life and mine. Because of Mary's radical yes to God's will, which is the very essence of Christmas, heaven's highest and most powerful wisdom entered into the arena of human affairs. God's Spirit is laboring to birth Christ into our history, to give birth to the fullness of God's truth, beauty, and goodness within our individual and collective lives. Can we even begin to comprehend that the Christ Light shines brighter than the light of a thousand suns in the interior depths of our souls? As we turn inwards, diving into our interior depths, this Light radiates outwards, giving life to our bodies, light to our minds, and warmth to our hearts. We do not have to earn this grace; it is freely given. We only need to surrender to the Christ percolating in the depth of our souls. All of us are called to realize the ongoing mystery of Christmas in our day-to-day lives.

I was asked once by a scientifically-oriented person whether I actually believe in the virgin birth. I asked him in turn if he believes in the Big

Bang theory of creation. Annoyed, he replied, 'What is your point?' Again I answered with questions: Is it any harder to believe in the virgin birth than it is to believe something came from nothing? That nonbeing gave birth to being? That out of oblivion a great explosion occurred that eventually gave birth to rational human beings like us? He said, "I never thought about it that way."

Yes, the Christmas story is filled with miracles: the virgin birth, angels, and the birth of the God-man Jesus. Perhaps the reason the world is in such a hot mess is that we have lost our faith in the miraculous to such a degree that we tend to believe only what we can measure with our five senses. Whether we are Christian, Jewish, Hindu, or Muslim, Christmas is an invitation for all of us to see beyond what is and to believe in the impossible. Otherwise, we remain mired in the quicksand of habit and hopelessness. The world does not need more politicians or tired ideologies. The world needs the many miracles faith brings.

One of the challenges of living in a culture intoxicated with a materialistic worldview is the denial of anything transcendent, including faith in God. This materialistic orientation stunts our spiritual imagination. Faith in God opens us to new possibilities. Faith is not merely a proposition, but the willingness to both trust and act on those divinely inspired ideas that percolate in the depths of our souls. Through the silence born of meditation, we are able to intuit new possibilities for our lives, and when we act on those possibilities a stream of divine energy empowers us to move forward in new and enlightened ways. Miracles, large and small, become commonplace; we find ourselves doing things we never imagined possible. Christmas is an invitation to live our lives from the all-powerful and all-wise stream of God's ineffable love. Francis of Assisi tells us, "Start by doing what is necessary. Then, do what is possible, and soon, you will find yourself doing the impossible."

In the Christmas narrative, the angels worship God, the shepherds worship God, and the three magi worship the Christ Child. The word worship comes from the same root as the word worth. In a sense, we are worshiping whatever we find worthy of our time, attention, and energy. To worship something is to give our mind, heart, and soul over to it. Some

people worship money; others, their intellects. Some worship fame, and others worship people. This is the key point: we take on the energy and life of those things we worship. If we worship money and material possessions, for example, we inevitably become greedy. If we worship God, our lives become Divine. To worship God is to be in awe of love, truth, beauty, and goodness, and to lean into these manifestations of Divine Light. Many years ago a spiritual mentor asked me, "Do you love goodness?" When I answered in the affirmative, he said, "Good, you are destined to find God." Every day, ask yourself, "What am I leaning into today? Remember, you become what you worship."

Worship is also a communal event: a choir of angels sang God's praises, Jewish shepherds participated in this praise, and the three Magi knelt together before the Christ Child. Of course, individual devotion is both necessary and effective, but when people come together to pray, God's blessings increase exponentially. Communal worship is an essential aspect of the spiritual life because it opens wide the door to God's glorious presence.

Communal worship is also an antidote to today's secular culture. Whether we are talking worship in a church, synagogue, or temple, a



civilization that does not worship will necessarily fall into division and decline. One of the popular expressions in our secular culture is, “I am spiritual, not religious, and don’t go to a church. At a certain level, I understand this sentiment, even though it tends to throw the baby out with the bathwater. We need communal rituals in life. We need to celebrate the sacred, together; we need rites of passage. If we are going to maximize our potential to live healthy and sacred lives, we need each other.

Another reason we celebrate Jesus’ birth with such vigor and devotion is because in the Western world Jesus is the “particular of particulars.” In his absolute surrender to the force of love he became love personified, the visible image of the invisible God. In and through Jesus’ birth, he infused human history with such an intensification of divine energy that heaven’s highest blessings became available to all of us, regardless of our religious orientation.



Yet there was only one way Jesus could fulfill his mission: he had to undergo an emptying process, letting go of his exalted status and becoming a helpless baby in his mother's womb. St. Paul makes this abundantly clear, reminding us, "Though in the form of God, He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied Himself by taking the form of a bond-servant and being born in the likeness of men. And being found

in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death: death on a cross. For this reason also God highly exalted Him. (Phil 2:6-9)

Christmas is an invitation from the heavens to follow the Jesus pattern of self-emptying. We are asked to let go of those attitudes, beliefs, and actions that do not honor us as children of God, especially our self-hatred. Ultimately, we are asked to let go of who we think we are so that we can discover our real identity in God. In the spiritual world, emptiness always precedes fullness. What we do not know is always much larger than what we do know, and far more valuable. Only an empty cup can hold the sweet wine of God's ineffable love.

Craig Bullock is the Spiritual Director of the Assisi Institute in Rochester, NY and a practicing psychotherapist.

Feast of the Holy Family

Sunday within the Octave of Christmas

Renée Tembeckjian

*When is the time for love to be born? The inn is full on the planet Earth,
and by greed and pride the sky is torn. Yet love still takes the risk of birth.*

(Madeleine L'Engel; The Risk of Birth)

Madeleine L'Engle is perhaps best known for her children's book, *A Wrinkle in Time* – about a girl visited by immortal beings who guide her quest through a cosmic fold in time. She sees wondrous things, but also encounters darkness, represented by the evil IT, which can be defeated by one power alone: IT cannot stand in the presence of love.

You might assume Christian bookstores would have loved this story of a young woman visited from another world, a journey of mystery and awe, and the triumph of love over darkness. But no.... Many refused to carry the book – there would be no room at the inn for this story or any other metaphors, symbols, or images of divine wisdom. There could only be one version, one set of words, to express God's presence in the human world.

What then to make of Mary who asked Gabriel – *How can this be?* – the same question we ask when we cannot imagine any version of our own life story in which God might show up in utterly new and surprising ways, joined to that poetic question: *When is the time for love to be born?*

It's a question Joseph too faced, given a serious problem of his own. His betrothed, Mary, is pregnant, a scandal that will stain his family name for generations to come. With

that, he is entitled to legal recourse – Joseph can ban this story from the bookshelf of his life. He can sever ties with Mary, thereby condemning her and the child to public disgrace, the desperation of exile, and abject poverty. He decides to do just that, but, being a decent sort, he will do it quietly.

But from a place as deep within him as the child is within Mary, Joseph dreams a life-changing insight. Described as a visitation from an immortal being – an angel, in this case – he is encouraged to imagine the possibility of God's presence in this strange and implausible story, to trust it, and to pattern his behavior in line with it.

And so, in his first act of sacred caretaking, Joseph honors Mary's child in the manner of a first-century Jewish father, by giving him a name. Where Isaiah named the divine promise, Immanuel – *God With Us* – Joseph names it Yehoshua (Jesus) – *God delivers*.

With that, Joseph and Mary begin a new chapter in their story, as a newly forged and holy family. Their road will not be easy – they will experience wondrous things, yes, but they will also encounter darkness – the evil IT – as they are repeatedly denied shelter, hunted and threatened, and driven to flee into exile.

But...there is an unexpected wrinkle: That same road will lead them into a scandalously new address in the cosmos. They will make a nest for their newborn child at the intersection of all creation – beasts of the field, stars in the heavens, hard-working local shepherds, and exotic visitors from foreign lands – all witnessing and honoring the birth of divine Love, against which no darkness – the evil IT – will ultimately prevail...because the dream of God will not be held captive by any boundary of human time, the weight of human fear, the insistence of human ego, or the limits of our human imagination.

And so, in this Christmas season, we again ponder that poetic question:

When is the time for love to be born?

Well, turns out it is always the time for love to be born.... No matter how dark the world gets, or how heavy our hearts become, no matter how late the hour grows or how improbable it may seem, the divine Light will always break through and divine Love will *always* be born...through a mysterious, wondrous, often unexpected, but always possible...wrinkle in time. Amen.

*The Very Rev. Renée Tembeckjian, PhD
is rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in
Fayetteville, NY.*



Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (January 1)

John Colacino C.PP.S.

A curiosity that has often given me pause is the apparent discrepancy in Luke's gospel when it comes to Mary's own understanding of who and what her Son was. This may sound strange since we often have this image of Mary being "in-on-the-plan" from the moment of Gabriel's annunciation. And we would be justified in thinking so; after all the Archangel makes it very clear who is about to enter her body: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end....So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." (1:32-33,25). Then when she travels to be with her relative Elizabeth, she is greeted with the astounding title "mother of my Lord" while being called "blessed" for believing "that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" after which she utters her Magnificat in which she prophesizes how "all generations will call me blessed" (1:43,45,49) Could anything be clearer in her own mind as to the meaning of her Divine Maternity?

Well, apparently, yes. For in Luke's account of the Nativity, after the visit of the shepherds to the manger, we are told "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (2:19). And while this in itself does not convey incomprehension, when the evangelist tells us of the boyhood escapade of remaining in the Temple following a Passover pilgrimage to converse with the Jerusalem scholars, Luke does not shy from the rather surprising statement that, upon locating him, Mary and Joseph "were astonished" and "did not understand what he was saying to them," when he asked, "Did you not know I had to be in my Father's house?" All of which led, once more, to Luke telling us Mary "treasured all these things in her heart" — but this time, it sounds like some incomprehension was indeed involved (2:48-51).

Finally, there's the cryptic response of Jesus when, during his public ministry, his mother and relatives attempt to see him — for an unexplained reason — and when told of their arrival, he replied "My mother

and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice" (8:21). And as if to reinforce the seeming slight, when a woman later called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you," he replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (11:27-28). Only on Pentecost does Luke clearly situate the mother of Jesus and family member within the community of Jesus' disciples as they awaited the promised Spirit (Acts 1:13-14).

What, then, shall we make of this interval between the Annunciation and Pentecost? And what does it tell us about the ways of God in human life, even the life of the Mother of God? Luke himself gives us a clue and this with reference to Jesus when he notes how, after Jesus returned to Nazareth with his parents, "the child grew and became strong" (2:40). In other words, owing to the self-emptying (kenosis; Phil. 2:7) entailed by the Incarnation, the Son of God was subject to the laws of human nature whereby we grow and mature, progressing in knowledge and self-understanding.

Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar notes here how "if he does grow in wisdom this is not the least of all because of his incarnate obedience, which makes him grow more deeply into the will of the Father, who wants to make his Word penetrate down to the most material reality." And if this is true of the very Word-made-flesh then it must be true of his Mother as well whom von Balthasar says "will remain a striver all her life long" (*The Threefold Garland*; 1978). He writes elsewhere:

"She is continually involved in mysteries the sense and meaning of which tower over her, but instead of resigning herself to bafflement she gives them space in her heart continually to mull over them there.... This means that in no way at all does she understand everything completely from the first moment onward but has to work away tirelessly in order to understand all these overpowering ideas as well she may....The Incarnation is a fact on which she was continually to ponder without comprehending it."

(Mary for Today; 1987)

There is one further thing here, I believe, well worth pondering ourselves and this has to do with the very ordinary manner in which the Mystery of Christ unfolded. After all, someone who was told she would be the Mother of the Messiah might have expected to live rather grandly. He was to be a king, no? And yet, from the moment of the Annunciation nothing seemed to corroborate an understandable expectation. Not the impoverished circumstances of his birth — even if it took place in Bethlehem, the city of David, and his adoption by Joseph from the house of David to secure his messianic credentials. Nor the mysterious mention by Simeon at the Child's presentation about his being "destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against," and how "a sword will pierce [Mary's] own soul too." (2:34-35) Nor the obscurity of life in Nazareth to the point when returning there after he began his public ministry the townspeople could only remark upon marveling at his gracious words, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" (4:22) — before he insulted them and they ran him out of town and attempted to throw him off a cliff (4:22, 29). Imagine Mary and Joseph's life after that incident. And when we finally get to the Cross, among the several "women who had followed him from Galilee" (23:49) she is not mentioned by name.

Is there any wonder that she pondered without comprehending? Caryll Houselander in her book on the Blessed Virgin, *The Reed of God* (1944) highlights the utterly unexpected way in which the Messiah came among us:

"Yes, it certainly seemed that God wanted to give the world the impression that it is ordinary for him to be born of a human creature. Well, that is a fact. God did mean it to be the ordinary thing, for it is his will that Christ shall be born in every human being's life and not, as a rule, through extraordinary things, but through the ordinary daily life and the human love that people give to one another."

Therein lies a lesson — God is ordinarily ordinary. His greatest deed done on our behalf took place in an obscure village, in a manger, in a carpentry shop, on a cross, in a darkened tomb and now — under the Appearance of bread and wine. And while I do believe in miracles, they are, just that, miracles. God is more often than not in the quotidian humdrum of human life, 'the most material reality.'"

Unless we're careful, we could miss it!

Fr. John Colacino C.P.P.S., STD, is a member of the Atlantic Province of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood. Follow him at sanguischristi.com for various liturgical and devotional resources.



OUR APOSTOLATE



C.P.P.S. MISSION PROJECTS

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*Loving Mother of the Redeemer,
Gate of heaven, star of the sea,
Assist your people
who have fallen yet strive to rise again.
To the wonderment of nature you bore your Creator,
yet remained a virgin after as before.
You who received Gabriel's joyful greeting,
have pity on us, poor sinners.*

(Liturgy of the Hours)

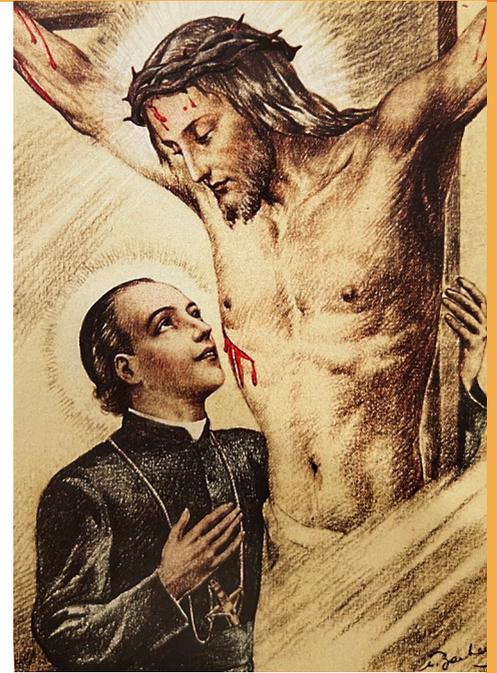
*Lord our God,
you sent your Son from heaven
into the womb of the Blessed Virgin
to be your saving Word and our Bread of Life.
Grant that like Mary we may welcome Christ
by treasuring his words in our hearts
and celebrating with deep faith
the mysteries of our redemption.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity
of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

(Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary)



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Founded in 1851 by the Ven. Giovanni Merlini, third Moderator General of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, and approved by Pope Pius IX, the Union serves to promote the spirituality of the Blood of Christ through a variety of activities.



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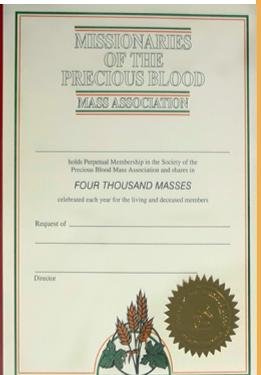
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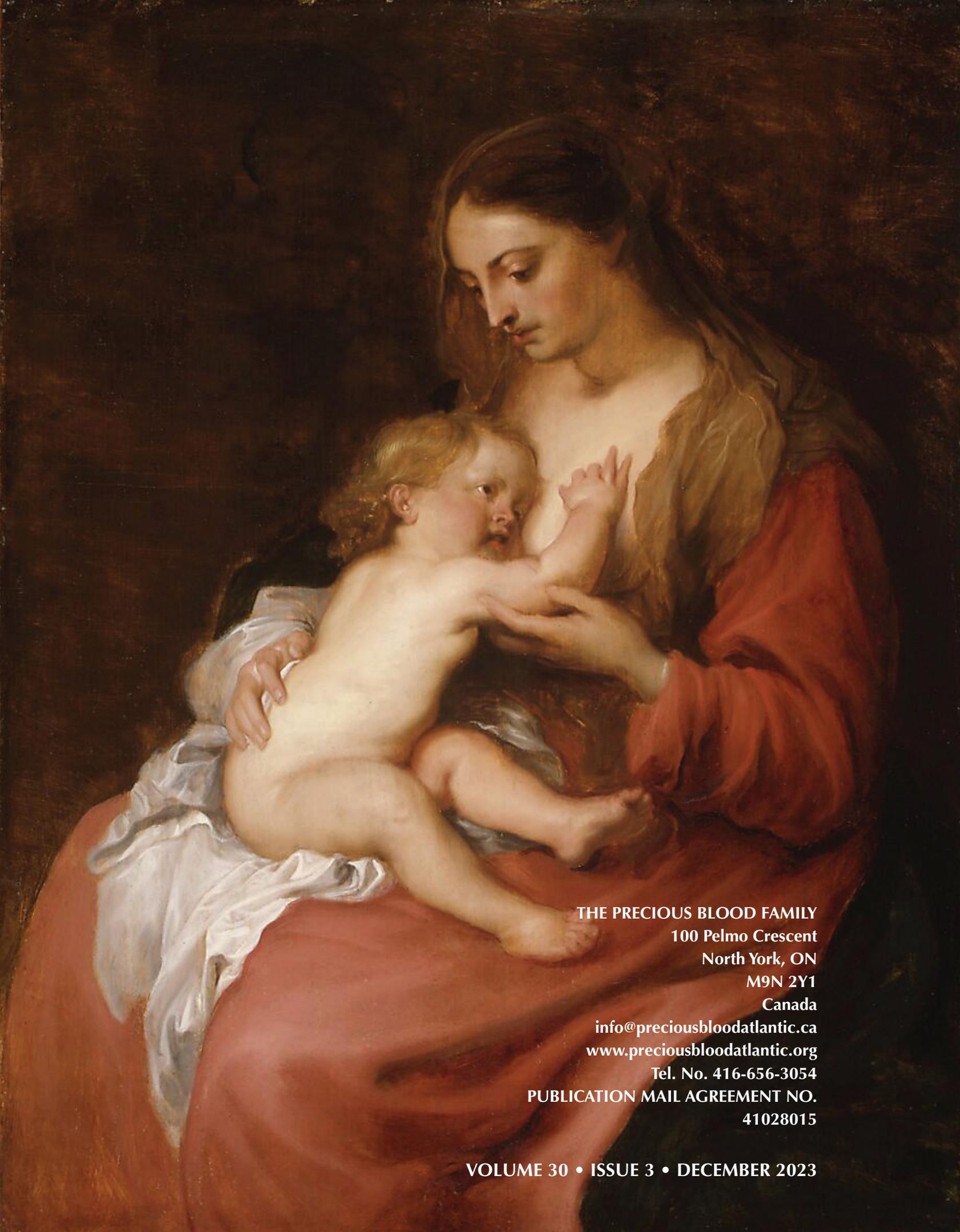


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THE PRECIOUS BLOOD FAMILY

100 Pelmo Crescent

North York, ON

M9N 2Y1

Canada

info@preciousbloodatlantic.ca

www.preciousbloodatlantic.org

Tel. No. 416-656-3054

PUBLICATION MAIL AGREEMENT NO.

41028015

VOLUME 30 • ISSUE 3 • DECEMBER 2023