

AT
PRAYER
WITH MARY

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Foreword

In *At Prayer with Mary*, readers will find seven snapshots of the life and mystery of Mary, virgin mother of Jesus Christ, and so will be led to a deepened appreciation of the rich traditions of Church teachings and devotions surrounding the role of the Blessed Mother Mary in our lives and the life of the Church. Through quotes from Sacred Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and fine summaries of prayers and explanations of dogmas, participants will benefit from a richer understanding and, it is hoped, more fruitful prayer. I know that I experienced both benefits in my first reflective reading of the text.

Some have feared that devotion, imitation of, and intercessory prayer to our Blessed Virgin Mary might somehow lead us away from Jesus. I have found nothing to be farther from the truth. In fact, Blessed John Paul II spoke of the Rosary as a contemplation of the face of Jesus and with the institution of the Luminous Mysteries, bridged the gap of the public life of Jesus between the joyful and sorrowful mysteries.

I grew up with a strong devotion to our Blessed Mother, and the Rosary continues to be a major element of my spiritual practices. Growing up in the Diocese of Allentown at a parish called “St. Mary’s” (the formal title was Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary) and having the privilege of being a pastor in two parishes named in her honor (Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary or St. Mary’s in Catasauqua and Notre Dame in Bethlehem), I found the rhythm of the Rosary a very attractive way of praying, and so early on I was ushered into a natural understanding of the practice called intercessory prayer—asking the saints to intercede for others and for me.

Whether you experience *At Prayer with Mary* in a group or on your own, these spiritual lessons will present intercessory prayer as a way to tap into a living tradition of devotion. Intercessory prayer is little understood. It is, however, an experience of the communion of saints at its best, and it stems from the very human need to rely on others to assist us. Through this prayer, whether experienced privately or communally, we are joined in the mystery of our Triune God, not one at a time, but together. *At Prayer with Mary* is a wonderful resource for individuals or groups who wish to deepen their relationship with our Blessed Mother and enrich their prayer experiences.

Most Reverend Joseph E. Kurtz, D.D., Archbishop of Louisville
Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary
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'Here am I'

Environment

On a small table, place a Bible, opened to the Gospel passage read in this session. Also place on the table a small statue or a picture of Mary and a burning candle. Consider decorating the table in blue, a color symbolic of the Blessed Mother.

Aim

The leader invites one member to read aloud the aim of the session:

To recognize Mary as a model of faith and to deepen our own faith as “servants of the Lord.”

Invitation to Pray

The leader invites the group to pray “The Angelus” together.

Leader: The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.

All: **And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.**

Leader: Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.
Blessed are you among women and blessed is
the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

All: **Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death. Amen.**

Leader: Behold the handmaid of the Lord.

All: **Be it done unto me according to your word.**

Leader: Hail Mary, full of grace

All: **Holy Mary, Mother of God**

Leader: And the Word was made flesh.

All: **And dwelled among us.**

Leader: Hail Mary, full of grace

All: **Holy Mary, Mother of God**

Leader: Pray for us, O holy Mother of God.

All: **That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.**

All: **Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we to whom the Incarnation of Christ, your Son, was made known by the message of an angel, may, by his passion and cross, be brought to the glory of his Resurrection, through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Suggested Song

“Song of Mary” by Dan Schutte

A Personal Story

Actress Lourdes Benedicto, who has appeared in many television shows, said that while she was expecting a child she had to trust God more than at any other time, “trust that he will not fail me, trust that he will help me raise and protect this child.” You can hear her reflection and join her in praying one of the Joyful Mysteries, the Birth of Our Lord, on the DVD Rosary Stars, produced by Family Theater Productions and available from RENEW International at www.renewintl.org/Mary.

- Share in your group what the phrase “trust God” has meant in your life.

Scripture

Luke 1:26-38

The group reflects on the reading for a few moments.

Invitation to Share

- What word, phrase, or image from this Scripture reading touches your heart or speaks to your life?
- How can you connect this Scripture passage with an experience you have had?
- What is your response to Mary’s declaration, “Let it be with me according to your word”?

Reflection 1: John Phalen

Faith is not certainty. It is belief that helps one face the unknown, the darkness. It is a gift that is priceless and powerful. If I have faith, I can face the abyss and proclaim with confidence that God has not abandoned me, that God is still here, despite any possible evidence to the contrary.

If you have ever had the experience of being blindfolded and led around by another, you can understand how hesitant we are to “walk by faith.” It is daunting to have to trust another person completely. A person undergoing major surgery, for example, must have great faith in the doctors and other medical professionals who will take part in carrying out the procedure. Parents, too, must have great faith the first time they leave their child in the care of a babysitter. Letting go of one’s power and placing total trust in another person is difficult. Often, people are more comfortable trusting themselves than trusting others.

In view of this natural hesitation concerning the challenges of everyday life, imagine how difficult it must have been for a girl who may have been in her teens to accept an announcement, made by an angel, that she was to be the mother of the Son of God! She was evidently a person of prayer, undefiled by sin. But still, it was a great test of faith for her to be given this news and to respond—not only with, “How can this be?” but also with, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). What courage! What dedication! What strong faith!

Yet, Mary, a young Jewish woman of the first century, belonged to a people of faith whose living memory of God’s fidelity to them as his “chosen people” gave meaning and context to their daily lives. Mary’s faith-filled response to God was spoken within a long tradition of women, chosen and empowered by God, to be instrumental in salvation history. Mary knew the stories of her people, including stories of Miriam, Rachel, Rebecca, Ruth and Naomi, and Hannah—stories of faith in God’s saving power made flesh in “ordinary” lives.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out, “The Virgin Mary most perfectly embodies the obedience of faith” (CCC, 148). Mary, after receiving the news of the annunciation, did not leave herself time for worry and self-doubt. She expressed the communal dimension of faith in reaching out to another, her cousin Elizabeth, who was also with child by God’s grace. (cf. Luke 1:39-45). Faith is meant to be shared. It is strengthened by service to others.

Invitation to Share

- Who are some of the people who inspire you by the strength of their faith? Explain.
- In time of trouble or doubt, has service to others ever strengthened your faith? If so, how?
- Mary heard and believed that she was beloved of God; she heard and believed that Elizabeth, her elderly relative, was wonderfully blessed. How does our being loved enable us to love others? How does being part of a community invite us to care enough to care for others?

Reflection 2: John Phalen

When I was pastor of an African-American and Latino parish in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, I found myself encouraged in my faith life every time we began a service with a hymn such as this:

We've come this far by faith,
Leaning on the Lord,
Trusting in His holy word,
He's never failed us yet.
Oh we can't turn back,
We've come this far by faith.

Albert A. Goodson

People sang out with conviction about how much they trusted their God never to abandon them. This hymn comes out of the African-American experience of Church, in spite of slavery and the hanging of runaways, of relentless work in the fields, and in spite of the discouragement that comes with lack of freedom, racism, and the fear of reprisals. And the people in my parish sang with conviction, with forgiveness in their voices, and with great appreciation for the gift of faith, which had brought them all thus far.

Faith means trusting that God will do well by us, because God loves us and never abandons us. Miss Ethel Murray, now rejoicing in God's glory, would inspire us with testimony about being led through many operations after an accident. She knew that God was looking out for her. Once, she saw "a great light," but she knew that God did not want to call her yet: God had more for her to do, more witnessing to the power of faith. And when she told the young of her near-death experience, no one could doubt that God had a mission for her and for everyone.

Mary, too, witnessed to faith when she called herself "the servant of the Lord" and declared her obedience, "let it be with me" (Luke 1:38), even though she could not foresee the consequences of her commitment. She endured refugee status when she and her family were exiled to Egypt because of the threat against her son's life. She pondered in her heart how the child Jesus had to be about his Father's business. She knew Jesus would solve the problem of the wedding hosts at Cana, and she confidently said so. Mary showed belief in a God who never abandoned the people. Even to the day of Pentecost, Mary remained strong, having "come this far by faith."

Invitation to Share

- What challenges in your daily life have been testing your faith? What gives you assurance that God will not abandon you?

- While Mary wept at the foot of the cross, she did not lose heart. She had faith, and so she also had hope. How does her example inspire you to act likewise?
- While faith can provide strength in situations of crisis, it also encourages us in day-by-day situations. How have you been challenged recently to be generous, to be kind, to witness to the God of your belief?

THE MYSTERIES OF MARY

Mary, the mother of Jesus, fully shared our human nature, and yet, by God's grace, she was a unique human being in several respects. The church proclaims and celebrates her distinction in the mysteries of the Immaculate Conception, the Virgin Birth, and the Assumption.

The mystery of the Immaculate Conception refers to the fact that Mary was conceived without original sin. Human beings have inherited the burden of the first sin against God, which is dramatized in the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis. We are cleansed of that burden by the sacrament of baptism, through which we receive the grace Jesus won for us with his death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. Mary, who was to be the mother of God, was spared the stain of that sin. A feast based on this mystery was celebrated in Syria as early as the fifth century. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was proclaimed by Pope Alexander VII in 1661, and it was defined as a dogmatic teaching of the church by Pope Pius IX in 1854.

The mystery of the Virgin Birth refers to the fact that Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb by the action of the Holy Spirit ("Hail, full of grace!"), and not by man. The doctrine of the virgin birth is based on the gospel accounts, specifically Luke 2:1-7 and Matthew 2:1.

The mystery of the Assumption refers to the fact that Mary, at the end of her life in this world, was taken body and soul into heaven—that is, into the presence of God. This doctrine, which had been a part of Catholic piety since at least the third or fourth century, was defined as dogma by Pope Pius XII in 1950. The pope wrote that it seemed impossible to think of Mary, "the one who conceived Christ, brought him forth, nursed him with her milk, held him in her arms, and clasped him to her breast, as being apart from him in body, even though not in soul, after this earthly life. Since our Redeemer is the Son of Mary, he could not do otherwise, as the perfect observer of God's law, than to honor, not only his eternal Father, but also his most beloved Mother. And, since it was within his power to grant her this great honor, to preserve her from the corruption of the tomb, we must believe that he really acted in this way" (*Munificentissimus Deus*, 38).

Invitation to Act

Jesus emphasized the connection between faith and action, between what we believe and what we do. In that spirit, decide on an individual or group action that flows from what you have shared in this session. If you decide to act on your own, share your decision with the group. If you decide on a group action, determine among you whether individual members will take responsibility for various aspects of the action.

You are likely to benefit most from taking an action that arises from your own response to the session. However, if you don't sense God asking something specific of you, you can consider one of the following suggestions or use these ideas to help develop one of your own:

Some Suggestions

- Determine a time when you will personally reflect on the strength of Mary's faith vis-a-vis your own personal faith (Luke 1:28-38; 2:34-35; Acts of the Apostles 1:14; John 19:25-26).
- Share faith with one who has a difficult time believing in God's loving presence. Challenge yourself to communicate with another the effect that "walking in faith" has upon you and your family.
- Witness to another how Mary's faith is an inspiration to you.
- Set a time during the next week to visit a nursing home as a group. Lead a faith-sharing discussion on Mary's "yes" and our own.
- Share with a family member, a teen, or a young adult how you came to understand what God meant for you to do with your life. "Annunciation experiences" are not always recognized as such when they happen, so share this faith dimension of your life with frankness and courage.
- Consider praying the rosary either with your family or on your own for your family using *Praying the Family Rosary* by Fr. Thomas P. Looney, CSC. See details at www.renewintl.org.

Invitation to Pray

The leader divides the group in two to pray the following:

Side 1: O Mary, model of a faith-filled life,
 you were committed to turning over all things
 to your Lord and Maker.
 Help us to imitate you in our own lives
 by praying with you, "Let it be."

Side 2: When annunciations from God
 leave questions and wonderment,

help us to know down deep that we, like you,
are always totally dependent upon God.
Loving handmaid of the Lord,
you can teach us to “walk by faith and not by sight.”

All: **We ask your prayerful assistance
as we direct our prayer to the Father,
through Jesus, the Son of God and your son
by the Spirit’s overshadowing.
Amen.**

PRAYER OPTION: As an alternative to the closing prayer, you may like to pray a decade of the rosary along with actress Lourdes Benedicto or one of the other personalities on the DVD Rosary Stars. If you choose this option, please see page 71 for instructions on using the DVD.

Suggested Song

“I Say ‘Yes’ My Lord” by Donna Peña

Looking Ahead

Prepare for your next gathering by prayerfully reviewing the scripture passage and the reflections.

RESOURCES FROM **RENEW** INTERNATIONAL

PRAYER TIME Cycle A, B, C: Faith-Sharing Reflections on the Sunday Gospels

This faith-sharing resource responds to the U.S. Bishops' suggestion that "every parish meeting can begin with the reading of the upcoming Sunday's Gospel, followed by a time of reflection and faith sharing."

With each Sunday's Gospel as a focus, *PRAYER TIME* proposes meaningful reflections, focused faith-sharing questions, related questions for consideration, and prayers as a source of spiritual nourishment and inspiration.

Use *PRAYER TIME* any time of year, whenever the small community needs. It is also ideal for beginning meetings of the pastoral council, staff, and other parish groups. The themes can also be read personally as a way to prepare for Sunday Mass.



GLEANINGS: A Personal Prayer Journal



Many participants in small communities tell us how much they are helped in both their shared discussion and their personal reflection by the technique known as journaling: keeping a notebook for the expression of thoughts and ideas.

Gleanings is a valuable tool for both avid and occasional journal writers. Each page spread is decorated with a spiritual quotation or musing that can inspire prayerful reflection on your relationship with God. The comfortably-sized format makes it an excellent companion for your personal faith journey, helping tap into the richness of God's wisdom within you. It is also a thoughtful gift for friends or family.