

INTRODUCTION

It's tempting to think of the Blessed Virgin Mary, she who was born more than 2,000 years ago free of original sin, as someone who might not understand the challenges of life today.

Resist that temptation.

Like us, Mary knew great joy—the birth of her son, for example—and great sorrow—his death, which she was powerless to stop. In her life as in ours, joy and sorrow often intermingled. But through it all, she trusted in God's plan for her, just as we are called to do.

In this booklet, you'll find short reflections, prayers, and prompts on the seven joys and seven sorrows of Mary. They don't align exactly with the Rosary, but rather appear to have their origins in medieval times.

Mary's final words recorded in the gospels are at the wedding at Cana, when she tells the servants to do whatever Jesus says. That's good advice for all of us. My prayer is that this short study of Mary's life helps you appreciate our Blessed Mother—and to obey the Lord with confidence.

Melanie Rigney

The Annunciation

The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” ♦ LUKE 1:30

“Do not be afraid,” the angel Gabriel tells the young Nazarene woman. Well, if she wasn’t a bit afraid when the angel appeared, it’s probably safe to say she was more than perplexed by his next words: that she, a betrothed virgin, will give birth to the Son of God.

Mary was born without original sin, but she was still human. Are her next words “Thank you” or “How great is that”? No, she wants to know how it can happen. Gabriel tells her she’s about to conceive in a most unconventional way.

And Mary surrenders.

Joyful moment? Perhaps more joyful to us, for we know the story has a happy ending. For Mary, it may have been more a moment of confusion—followed by surrender.

IMAGINE: You find out you’re having twins, and you and your husband already have three children under the age of ten.

IMAGINE: You’re asked, in what to you is a total surprise, to be the school PT president, the lead for a new team at work, the facilitator for your Bible study group.

IMAGINE: You feel a stirring in your soul—or a daughter or son does—that you have a vocation as a consecrated or ordained religious. No one in your family has ever been a priest or sister.

Questions... you've got questions. Not all of them can be answered. You just have to trust it will play out as God plans. You just have to pray—and believe.

Not long after, Mary sets out to see her relative Elizabeth. There, some answers come to light, and Mary offers her beautiful song of praise. She didn't have those answers when she said yes to bearing God's Son. What she had, and all she really needed, was a rock-solid belief in God's plan, whether she understood it or not. She abandoned fear—and embraced trust.

JOURNAL: Write down three of those things you're going to ask God in heaven—why people suffered, why people died, why good people were seemingly punished. Then burn the piece of paper as you pray a Hail Mary.

REFLECT: How can you stop asking questions about something God has placed on your heart—and surrender?

PRAY: *Virgin Mary, sometimes I doubt whether I truly have found favor with God. I pray that you help me banish them so I can fearlessly embrace what lies ahead.*

The Nativity of Jesus

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ♦ LUKE 2:7

It likely was not the birthing experience Mary had envisioned. Rather than being in Nazareth, surrounded by trusted relatives and friends who had been through it themselves, she was giving birth a hundred miles away in Bethlehem. At best, she may have had a kind stranger or midwife helping her.

The degree of pain obviously varies, but giving birth in any way is hard in the moment. It becomes harder when the support you anticipated isn't available.

IMAGINE: Your husband, who is the only one you wanted in the delivery room, is out of town when you go into labor two weeks early.

IMAGINE: Your baby of a business is set to launch—and your mentor and main cheerleader is incapacitated the day before.

IMAGINE: You're going to speak at the end of weekend Masses about a new parish ministry you're heading up—and the pastor, who has supported this creation from the beginning, has to go out of town for a funeral.

What does Mary do? Does she scream and cry and curse God for getting her into this strange situation? Not as far as we know. She mothers her baby. She wraps him in bands of cloth, a practice of the time aimed at helping newborns feel safe, as they did in the womb. She puts him in a manger, maybe for the same reason.

Later, we will read the symbolism in these acts: Bands of cloth may be similar to burial cloths. The manger may be similar to a tomb. The manger shows us Jesus is food for the world. The setting sets expectations of a warrior messiah on their head; this is a humble king, come as a helpless baby. In short, it fulfills the prophecies.

But Mary, body wracked with the pain that comes with birthing, likely wasn't pondering the prophecies. She was doing what a handmaid of the Lord should do: caring for her son as if his life and hers depended on it. That brought her joy.

Living our lives for Jesus can wrack our egos with others' ridicule and sometimes our bodies with pain. But those slings and arrows pass. Joy awaits us on the other side.

JOURNAL: What would you do if you knew it would please God but puzzle your family and friends?

REFLECT: Consider a time when bodily pain or heartache was intense in the moment but brought you joy shortly thereafter. How can your faith help the pains you are feeling today recede?

PRAY: *Blessed Mother, your birth pain was fleeting, your love for your son everlasting. Guide me as I face down the hurts in my life. Help me to believe joy awaits.*

The Adoration of the Magi

*On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother;
and they knelt down and paid him homage. ♦ MATTHEW 2:11*

Tradition has it that the three visitors from the East came when Jesus was twelve days old, bearing gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Some scholars believe it is more likely the child was 18 months old. Regardless, Scripture does not mention Joseph's presence at the Adoration.

What did Mary think and feel when these august personages arrived at her home? Perhaps she was becoming more acclimated to the unusual situations that surrounded her baby. Perhaps she stopped and pondered the meaning of the gifts, especially myrrh, used to anoint the dead. Perhaps she smiled at this visual sign of humility and respect for Jesus and the Almighty.

IMAGINE: A new friend, meeting your child for the first time, focuses on her quick wit and beautiful smile, not her wheelchair.

IMAGINE: Your brother, seeing your husband for the first time after a disfiguring car crash, talks about how your husband's favorite sports team is doing, not the scars that traverse his face.

IMAGINE: The priest you just don't see eye to eye with at parish council meetings asks for your help with his poetry.

All signs of respect, truly. Each, in a way, a sign of homage—to the humanity of the person and to God, respecting the unique gifts provided to them.

It's unlikely that Mary told the visitors to come back another time or apologized for her home's relative poverty. Mary's gift to the Magi was to accept their adoration and homage on her son's behalf. She knew he was special, and now the world was beginning to find that out.



JOURNAL: Identify three of your God-given gifts. What do you do and say when others praise them?

REFLECT: The last time unexpected visitors stopped by your home or office, did you welcome them and make them comfortable, or did you refuse to open the door or apologize for the mess? How would you have welcomed Jesus, cloaked in humanity?

PRAY: *Mary, you allowed the Magi to complete this leg of their journey and to see and adore your son. May I learn from your example and welcome the stranger.*

≡ SORROW ≡

The Prophecy of Simeon during the Presentation in the Temple

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” ♦ LUKE 2:34–35

When the old man Simeon approaches the little family at the temple, he takes the baby into his arms. He calls Jesus “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:32).

This would certainly be a scene of joy for Mary—if Simeon had not then told her Jesus would be opposed and that her very soul would be pierced because of him.

IMAGINE: You’re at your child’s or grandchild’s baptism, and a stranger outside the church congratulates you, then says the baby will cause you a lot of pain.

IMAGINE: You’ve just closed on your new house. A stranger at the title company congratulates you, then says there will be much heartache associated with that decision.

IMAGINE: You or your spouse have just been hired for the perfect job. Amid excitement at a festive restaurant dinner, some

stranger at the next table high-fives you, then says that perfect job will include personal agony.

We don't see Mary's reaction, not even whether later she pondered all this in her heart, as we have seen her do previously. Maybe by this time, she was becoming inured to radical, confusing changes in her life. Maybe so many tangible things had happened in the previous year that in addition to her complete faith and trust in God, she was beginning to recognize the events as fulfillment of the prophecies.

Mary had grown so much since she asked the angel Gabriel how she could become pregnant while a virgin. Would she really have done anything other than thank Simeon for the blessing and marvel at what he and Anna had said about her infant son? She lived in the moment rather than deluding herself that she could control the future. Yes, this was a sorrowful moment. But it was also a moment that fortified her faith and led her to abandon dread. It was a moment to treasure.

JOURNAL: Consider a time when someone told you that life as you knew it was coming to an end. Maybe it was an unexpected diagnosis or an unanticipated relocation. Write down three things that worried you about the change. Then write down three unexpected blessings that resulted. How can you use what you learned to deal with a challenge you see on the horizon?

REFLECT: How can you cultivate the patience and faith to hold fast to what is good now?

PRAY: *Blessed Mother, I feel like I have no control over anything. As a result, I dread or become panicked about the future. Help me to appreciate today's goodness and grace.*