

AUGUSTINIAN FRIENDS - PRAYER RESOURCE GUIDE

SHARING THE SPIRITUALITY OF AUGUSTINE

Reflections on Christmas ~ with Mary in mind.....

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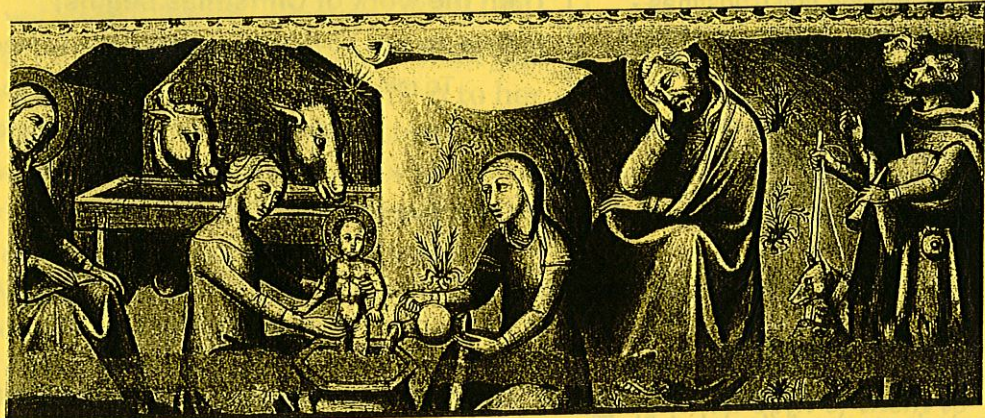
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In Augustine's Words.....

*Mary is not the night, but a star in the middle of the night;
it is for this reason that the birth of Jesus was indicated by a star
that lead the Magi, one great night, to adore the light, so that, in them,
"the light would shine in the middle of the darkness."* Sermon 223, D,2

In Augustine's Time.....

There was no separate feast for Mary in the church in North Africa. Christmas, however, was considered not just a celebration of the birth of Christ, but also a feast day of Mary, hence she was celebrated in conjunction with Christ. Augustine regarded Mary not so much as above all Christians, but in the centre of the Christian assembly as the most perfect of all Christians. Augustine said that for her own salvation, it was more important that Mary have God in her heart than the Son of God in her womb. (<http://www.augnet.org>)



The Purpose of the Prayer

Resource Guide

Each of us is on a journey to God like our patron Augustine.

The Friends prayer resource is offered to you as a support in your day to day prayer and will be sent to you 4 times a year.

It also contains a prayer orientated letter from our Chaplain.

In October 1999, during restoration of the Church of St. Augustine in San Gimignano, this fragment of a fresco by Bartolo di Fredi (1330-1410) was discovered.

In July 2006 the Australian Friends visitors took time to pray here.

(Used with permission.)

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will!"

(Luke 2:14)

Augustine, reflecting on Luke, wrote this:

"When the Gospel was read this morning, the passage leapt out. It was the lector's voice we heard, yes, but it was the Angelic Voice the Shepherds heard. Joyful voices both congratulating, not just the woman whose womb brought forth the child, but also the whole human race for whom the Virgin brought forth the Savior.

Truly worth all the applause, don't you think?"

Sermon 193

Christmas ideas for you and your family.

Christmas Tree Blessing

Holy Creator of Trees,
 Bless with your abundant grace this
 our Christmas tree as a symbol of joy.
 May its evergreen branches be a sign
 of your never-fading promises.
 May its colourful lights and ornaments
 call us to decorate with love our home
 and our world.
 May the gifts that surround this tree
 be symbols of the gifts we have received
 from the Tree of Christ's Cross.
 Holy Christmas tree within our home,
 may Joy and Peace come and nest
 in your branches and in our hearts.

Amen.

Prayer before opening

Presents

Lord and Giver of all good things,
 the Magi traveled for miles to bring
 the Christ Child the first Christmas
 presents. So may we, too, remember
 with thankful hearts the love that
 comes with each present we open.
 We also thank you for the love you
 have for each of us, and we thank
 you for the many gifts that you give
 us, especially the gift of life itself.

Amen.

For those who work on Christmas Day.

Lord, as I spend today
 going about my work,
 help me to put aside any
 bitterness that I'm not
 celebrating at home with
 loved ones.

I ask God to give me a
 sense of Your presence
 as I meet people,
 that I may shed on them
 the light of the

Bethlehem Star,
 the Spirit of Christmas.
 Amen.

Christmas Dinner Prayer.

God of all Gifts, we thank you
 for the many ways you have
 blessed us this day. We are
 grateful for each of those who
 are gathered around this table.
 We ask you to bless us and our
 food and to bless those we love
 who are not with us today. In
 our gratitude and love we re-
 member your humble birth into
 our lives and pray for those who
 are without enough to eat. We
 remember the stable in which
 you were born and pray for
 those who have no place to
 live. We remember your chal-
 lenging message of caring and
 giving and we pray for peace in
 our families and nations
 throughout the world.

We bless you and give you
 thanks in your Spirit who brings
 our hearts to life this Christmas
 day and forever. Amen.

Work of Christmas Begins.

When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with the flocks,

Then the work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost, To heal the broken spirit, To feed the hungry,

To release the oppressed, To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among all peoples,

To make a little music with the heart

And to radiate the Light of Christ,

Every day, in every way, in all that we do and in all that we say.

(Howard Thurman, adapted)

Returning To Augustine:

Consider the two animals at the manger. The prophet wrote: "The ox recognizes its owner and the donkey its master's manger" (Isaiah 1:3). The animals teach us that we should not be ashamed of being the Lord's beast of burden. Carrying Christ, you cannot go astray. Let the Lord sit upon us and take us wherever he wants. With him seated on us we are not weighed down but lifted up. With him guiding us, we can't go wrong.

Sermon 189,4

Donald Burt OSA (**In Day by Day with Saint Augustine**) adds his ideas to those of Augustine:

Isaiah seems to suggest that the animals recognized who Christ was. What a paradox! Not even Mary and Joseph knew that. For certain the people of the town did not know. It was fitting that animals should be at Christ's birth because the coming of God to this world was reason for rejoicing for all of nature. I wonder if that donkey was the same one who later on carried Mary and the baby into Egypt and then brought them back to Nazareth when it was safe. If it was, and if it could somehow understand, the donkey must have felt that the burden was light. We know that carrying Jesus throughout this world does not crush; rather, it lifts us up. In any case it was nice that animals were present at Christ's birth, children love animals.

This Christmas time may you go often to the Bethlehem of your heart and visit the One who offers you peace.

May you bring this peace into our world.

Monica & Mary.

Dear Friends,

This letter is being written to you on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, a title of Mary known in the Western world from the 11th Century and promulgated as a dogma of the Church by Pope Pius IX on this day in 1854. The Pope solemnly decreed that *"the most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception (in the womb of her mother Anna), by the singular grace and privilege of almighty God and in view of the merits of Christ Jesus the savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin"*

The Immaculate Conception shows that God can be, and is, utterly gracious toward us, not by reason of our deserving but out of divine love and mercy. Because of Mary's unique call to be the Mother of Jesus, she was from the very beginning of her existence united with God in a most grace-filled way. She continued to be a model of faithfulness to God's will through her entire life.

In St. Augustine's time there was no special feast in the church year to honour Mary. Augustine speaks of Mary in his sermons when she is mentioned in the scriptural account of the particular season e.g. at Christmas, at the foot of the cross or with the disciples at Pentecost. He has some wonderful things to say about Mary, but always in relationship to her Son and to the Church which is made up of many members united with her Son.

"Mary is holy, she is blessed, yet the Church is better than the Virgin Mary. Why? Because Mary is part of the Church, a holy member, an excellent member, an outstanding member, but still a member of the whole body, and it is clear that the body is greater than its member." (Sermon Denis 25,7)

For Augustine, Mary's faith makes her the perfect image of the Church. He sees Mary as specially associated with the Church, a symbol of the Church. He says 'she is very like the Church'. At the foot of the cross Mary is thus more than just an individual woman; she is Mother to all the of the children who have been given to her as brothers and sisters of her Son. Her motherhood of Christ is a type and pattern of the motherhood of the Church bringing us to birth through baptism and nourishing us by the other sacraments. *"Mary gave birth to Christ, the Church gave birth to you. Indeed the Church is both mother and virgin."* (Sermon 192,2)

Augustine sees Mary is the pride of all women, the one who towers over all others. In one of his sermons he tells his congregation:

"Christ deigned to bear the male sex in his person and he deigned to honour the female sex in his mother ... Now he has honoured both sexes, recommended both of them to us, and taken both of them to himself; he was born of a woman." (Sermon 190,3)

Among the Church Fathers Augustine's is a chivalrous voice to champion our Lady, the first to apply to her the words of the psalm "most beautiful of the children of men" (Ps 45). He also calls her 'the precious treasure of the earth'.

In these weeks leading up to Christmas we may be surprised by the peace that comes dropping down on us as we contemplate the role of Mary in the story of our salvation. As one prominent Augustinian (Martin Luther no less) has written,

"May she enlighten our intelligences, inflame our hearts and inspire our whole life. May Christ grant us this grace, through the intercession of his holy Mother."

With much love,

Paul

Richard Leonard's Reflection on Mary

Mary knows what it's like to bring a child into the world and claim his dead body in her arms

There are a variety of ways to speak with people about Mary. One is to attend to the advice of Paul VI in *Marialis Cultus* and start with the various episodes where Mary is portrayed in the New Testament:-

The annunciation; the visitation; the nativity; fleeing as a refugee to Egypt; losing Jesus in the temple; the time she goes to bring Jesus home from his public ministry in Mark 3; the crucifixion and Pentecost. The religious truths contained in the scripture events cannot lead us astray in our spiritual lives, and these texts provide enough flesh and blood moments for a lively devotion.

As helpful as Pope Paul's advice was for me in my devotion to Mary, it was another episode in the life of my family that helped me even more.

On August 15, 1975, the entire parish council of a village outside the capital of Chile was arrested by the military police. For months, the villagers tried to find out where the men had gone and why they had been taken away. Abduction, torture and illegal imprisonment were daily realities for Chilean people under General Pinochet.

Word arrived in November that the corpses of the parish councillors could be found in Santiago's morgue. My cousin, Catherine, an Australian nun working in that parish, took the mothers of the eight men to the morgue. Catherine later wrote to me:

"There were over 300 corpses piled high on each other and the mothers had to roll someone else's son over in an attempt to find their own. As the mothers searched they began to weep loudly, realising how evil we can be toward one another. As they wept they prayed the rosary. As one mother, and then another, found her son, they called out more desperately, "Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death."

Catherine's letter continued:

"For years I rejected devotion to Mary because I felt oppressed by the way generations of men in the Church presented her – blue veils, white skin, always smiling, a perpetual virgin and yet also a mother, an ideal I could never achieve, but one to which I was told I should aspire.

In the experience of the village mothers, however, the distortions of who Mary was for a poor and suffering world faded away. Far from feeling distant from their devotion, I found myself praying with them, knowing that Mary was with us in our shock, anger and grief.

One of the women told me, on the way home, that Mary knows what it's like to bring a child into the world and claim his dead body in her arms."

Twelve years later, in 1989, in that village, Catherine died of hepatitis. Her family had been trying to get her to come home for months, but she lied about how ill she was and said that she had everything she needed there. The only consolation Catherine's family received was when a letter arrived from the mothers in the village.

When it was translated into English it read:

*"We want you to know that we were with Catherine when she died. We would never have let her die alone for she was one of our children too. We often prayed the rosary with her. She seemed to like that, thumbing the beads she used ever since she brought us back with our boys. We have buried her next to our sons and put on her tombstone the line she asked us to inscribe, *Mary, my friend, my companion and mother of the poor, pray for me.**

Now is not the time for us to throw devotion to Mary out, but reclaim a relationship with her as prophet, friend and companion in faith.

*Dr Richard Leonard SJ is the author of *Movies That Matter and Preaching to the Converted.**

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