



# Hail Mary

Reflections on the Mysteries of the Rosary

FOR INDIVIDUAL & GROUP REFLECTION

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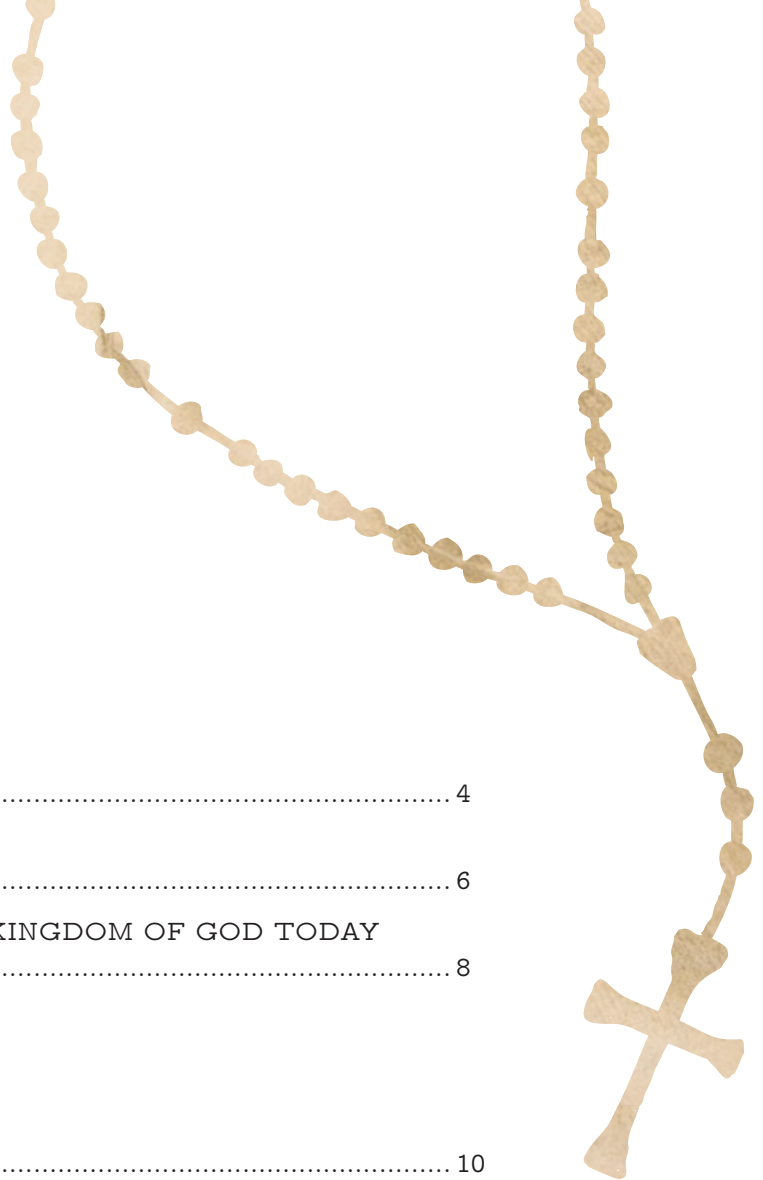
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## about this *resource*

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR INDIVIDUAL & GROUP REFLECTION

**T**he Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy has provided the Universal Church the opportunity to reflect, celebrate and re-invigorate the practice of Mercy. At the very heart of the Gospel message, this call to kindness, compassion and forgiveness for ourselves, each other and the world—especially the most vulnerable within the human family—demands a faithful response. As the mother of Jesus, Mary’s integrated faith-life journey provides an outstanding lens through which to focus and find new pathways that empower each of us to ‘Be Merciful...’ as we walk forward in faith.

As Pope Francis reflects in his message to young people on the occasion of the XXXI World Youth Day:

*The Old Testament uses various terms when it speaks about mercy. The most meaningful of these are “hesed” and “rahamim.” The first, when applied to God, expresses God’s unfailing fidelity to the Covenant with his people whom he loves and forgives for ever. The second, rahamim, which literally means “insides”, can be translated as “heartfelt mercy”. This particularly brings to mind the maternal womb and helps us understand that God’s love for his people is like that of a mother for her child. Thanks to the fiat of Mary, the mercy manifested so far as hesed and rahamim, is embodied, is made present in the world in a new, tangible way, with Christ and through Him! Let us pray that the Year of Mercy will allow us to be astonished by God’s grace and not ask: is it possible, but – how will this happen, Lord?” (From Meditations on the Rosary, based on the Message of Pope Francis on the Occasion of the XXXI WYD Krakow as translated by Thomas Harbeck)*

This resource, *Hail Mary: Reflections on the Mysteries of the Rosary*, provides a series of articles written by Br Mark O’Connor FMS, previously published as part of his regular column ‘Spirit is Moving’ in Kairos Catholic Journal (Vol. 25, Nos. 2-22).

Focussed on a selection of the Joyful, Sorrowful, Glorious and Luminous mysteries of the rosary, this collection sensitively addresses the Marian mysteries in the contemporary context of our post-modern world. Each article is followed by a number of questions for personal enrichment in a variety of parish and school settings. They are suitable for use individually or collectively, with small or large groups, within one or over several sessions or as an opening prayer reflection. They may also be used as a ‘take home sheet’ or bulletin/website activity at any time or to highlight a Marian feast day or focus. They do not have to be explored in a set order.

Embrace the richness of the content within and allow Mary’s inspiring journey and the movement of God’s Spirit lead you and your community to a deeper level of knowing, and toward a more generous, loving response as you too, walk on in faith. ■



The Annunciation by Henry O. Tanner

# strong enough to risk *believing*

‘THE ANNUNCIATION’  
THE FIRST JOYFUL MYSTERY

*The Word is made flesh. The flesh is the Mother's.  
The Mother is willing.*

—Sebastian Moore

**I**t is sad to see people in full flight denouncing others, especially when it is done publicly. Usually they are unhappy people, oblivious to their own character flaws and with absolutely no sense of humour about themselves.

If people can only ever denounce or condemn others, what is really going on? How can we instead develop a more balanced ‘climate’, where we can also communicate the abundant good news and love all around us?

Of course, denunciation of evil and injustice has its place in all authentic prophetic criticism.

But philosophers identify a type of ideological thinking—the ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’—omnipresent in our media-driven culture. It is an approach which has devastating effects in our culture and even within the Church.

Pope Francis brilliantly analyses this precise challenge in *Evangelii Gaudium* when he writes of ‘one [who] analyses and classifies others, and ... exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying’ (94).

Such lack of trust locks people into a tiny merciless world, dominated by suspicion and doubt.

Only the gift of faith and trust can diminish such deep suspicion. Mary, the first disciple and mother of Jesus of Nazareth, shows us another way forward.

True prophecy is not just denunciation, but ‘annunciation’: that is, the proclamation of the Good News.

This is what is at the very heart of Mary’s mystery of the Annunciation. Such ‘Good News’ may not sell papers but it is the core of our faith in what is ‘really real’.

Consider what is at stake in the Annunciation narrative. It is all about a vulnerability which opens up to the possibility of love. Mary, a single, vulnerable unmarried mother, is not paralysed by the thought of other people’s reactions. She does not resist or label the incredible challenge put to her as ‘bad news’ for her. Mary actively accepts. Others might well have reacted rather differently to the angel Gabriel’s message.

Mary puts her trust in the presence of God in her life. Mary’s encounter with the angel Gabriel actually strengthens her. For the Annunciation story is all about divine love as the source of empowerment. Such openness also allows Mary to trust Joseph. Joseph prevents her vulnerability from becoming exposure. His selfless love enfleshes God’s love as he protects her. For authentic love is the good presence of someone in vulnerability.

The Annunciation story then is about a self-possessed, self-focussed and self-conscious poor young woman who finds favour with God and is willing to cooperate with a wild plan of salvation. It is about a woman strong enough to risk believing something incredible about herself: ‘the Lord is with you’.

That beats all the ‘bad news’ the doomsayers and denouncers can rouse up. Alleluia! ■



## THE ANNUNCIATION

*We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,  
almost always a lectern, a book; always  
the tall lily.*

*Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,  
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,  
whom she acknowledges, a guest.*

*But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions  
courage*

*The engendering Spirit  
did not enter her without consent. God waited.*

*She was free  
to accept or refuse, choice  
integral to humanness.*

*Aren't there annunciations  
of one sort or another in most lives?  
Some unwillingly undertake great destinies,  
enact them in sullen pride,  
uncomprehending.*

*More often those moments  
when roads of light and storm  
open from darkness in a man or woman,  
are turned away from  
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair  
and with relief.*

*Ordinary lives continue.  
God does not smite them.*

*But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.  
She had been a child who played, ate, spelt  
like any other child—but unlike others,  
wept only for pity, laughed  
in joy not triumph.*

*Compassion and intelligence  
fused in her, indivisible.*

*Called to a destiny more momentous  
than any in all of Time,  
she did not quail,  
only asked*

*a simple, 'How can this be?'  
and gravely, courteously,  
took to heart the angel's reply,  
perceiving instantly*

*the astounding ministry she was offered:  
to bear in her womb*

*Infinite weight and lightness; to carry  
in hidden, finite inwardness,  
nine months of Eternity; to contain  
in slender vase of being,  
the sum of power—  
in narrow flesh,  
the sum of light.*

*Then bring to birth,  
push out into air, a Man-child  
needing, like any other,  
milk and love—  
but who was God.*

—Denise Levertov

## think about it

1. How has the 'gift of faith and trust' been Good News in your life? Is this gift 'annunciated' or evident to others? If so, how? If not, why?
2. Identify the times you have struggled to wait in your personal vulnerability to allow God's loving presence to enter. Recall how you felt at the time. Consider what you might do next time to 'let God in'.
3. 'The engendering spirit did not enter her without consent. God waited. She was free to accept or refuse, choice integral to humanness.' Reflect on the important choices in your life. What do you most value/admire about Mary as a model of faith? Why?

# a vulnerable God

‘THE PRESENTATION OF THE LORD’  
THE FOURTH JOYFUL MYSTERY

*The true God gives his flesh and blood.*

—Les Murray

We all have false images and representations of God. These often prevent us from seeing the real God at work in our lives. We actually make things difficult for ourselves and others by not properly appreciating the depths of our own faith. We substitute the wondrous and life-giving mystery of God with something (an idol) that diminishes us.

When, however, we reflect on how the Word was made flesh in the Incarnation we are being asked to hear liberating Good News. God has joined himself to us inseparably. When Mary presents the infant Jesus in the Temple, the ‘overshadowing’ presence of God is now fully revealed – not in ‘stones’, but in a precious child. God loves us so much that he becomes one of us!

This freeing truth is summed up in lines from Les Murray’s *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, where a dead World War I digger cries out: ‘the true god gives his flesh and blood. / Idols demand yours off you’.

The latter is what our essentially Calvinist media-driven culture does so effectively when it persuades us to seek revenge. ‘Crime and Punishment’ is their paradigm and the dominant idol they worship is an avenger.

Never mind that this drives ordinary people to despair. Why? Because to really join the human race (‘creaturehood’ is the lovely Ignatian term) means to accept oneself as a graced sinner. And even the most virtuous among us graced sinners needs more mercy, not more punishment.

But what does our culture characteristically offer as a response to human evil, frailty, psychopathology and sin? The mantra that is repeated endlessly is ‘punishment!’ Punish sinners. Punish the boat people. Punish the criminals. Punish the mentally ill. Punish the losers. Punish the different. Get even!

Yes, revenge does feel the appropriate response to evil, especially when vulnerable and innocent persons suffer unjustly.



After the Bath by Mary Cassatt

The only problem is that ‘getting even’ does not actually work! It never really heals the pain. The ‘spiral of violence’ goes on and on, taking us down ever more destructive paths.

How different is the merciful God of Jesus of Nazareth presented as a vulnerable babe in the Temple.

I love how Pope Francis talks so powerfully of the mercy of our compassionate God. He recently recalled an encounter of more than 20 years ago with an elderly woman in Buenos Aires, who told him: ‘If the Lord did not forgive all, the world would not exist.’ Pope Francis said he had wanted to ask her if she had studied at Rome’s prestigious Pontifical Gregorian University, because her words reflected the ‘wisdom that comes from the Holy Spirit: interior wisdom regarding the mercy of God’.

Indeed, biblical scholar Phyllis Trible has taught us that the Hebrew word for mercy is the word for womb, with different vowel points. So mercy, she suggests, is womb-like mother love.

We humans often struggle mightily our whole lives to really accept this love that gives itself so totally. But this is precisely the Good News. Our God becomes a tiny infant—fragile yet divine.

That’s right. God is not vindictive or a monster who demands his ‘pound of flesh’. Jesus is presented. God is compassion. The presentation of Jesus in the Temple means that the living God is greater (and bigger) than our hearts. (cf. 1 John 3:20). ■



think about it

1. Consider the false images and representations of God in our world.  
*What material 'idols' stop you from encountering the mystery of God in your life and the world around you?*
2. *Who is it that you most struggle to feel compassion for?*  
*How does Pope Francis' call for us to "Be merciful, just as the Father is Merciful" challenge you?*  
*What might you do to respond?*
3. *What does the beautiful image of a 'womb-like' mother love evoke for you and what words/feelings best describe your response?*

# children are living in the Kingdom of God *today*

‘THE FINDING OF JESUS IN THE TEMPLE’  
THE FIFTH JOYFUL MYSTERY

Child psychiatrist Robert Coles tells of Ruby Bridges, a then-six-year-old African-American girl he counselled as New Orleans city schools began court-ordered integration. Walking to school each morning with federal marshals, Ruby received taunts, insults and death threats from angry white protestors lining the school entrance.

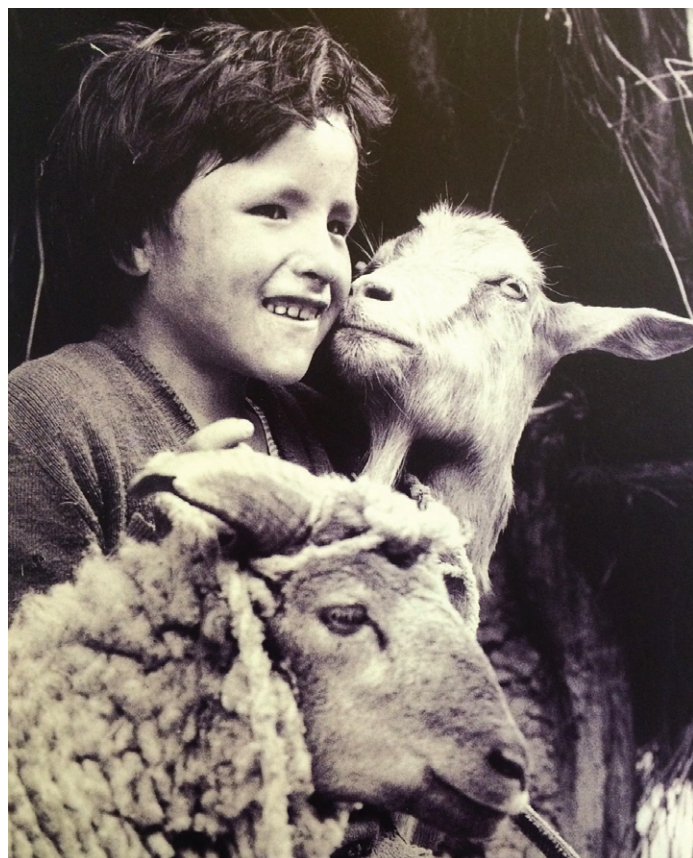
Intrigued by the young girl’s consistent composure, Professor Coles sensed a therapeutic breakthrough when Ruby stopped one morning, apparently to address the crowd. When he questioned her, however, Ruby explained that she had stopped to talk to God, not the screaming protestors.

‘I asked God to forgive those people,’ Ruby said, ‘because they didn’t know what they were doing.’ In considering how this six-year-old girl met hate with forgiveness, Professor Coles began to listen to Ruby—and other children—in a new way.

Perhaps we too should try to listen again in a new way to the classic Gospel story of an ‘experience’ of God in the childhood of Jesus. Jesus is a 12-year-old boy who went with his parents to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. After the festival was over, his parents began their trip home, confident that Jesus was with relatives and friends. Discovering that Jesus was not with relatives or friends, his parents returned to Jerusalem only to find him in the Temple expounding Torah with teachers who were amazed at his understanding.

Mary was upset with Jesus. She was astonished, not only by his ability to hold his own with the teachers in the Temple, but because he seemed to care so little about how Mary and Joseph would feel once they discovered he was not with relatives and friends.

Mary and Joseph ‘pondered’ this experience. In the Church today we also need to puzzle and ponder about how we nurture the rich experience of God that our children have abundantly.



Young Herdman, Peru. Photo by Ethan Hubbard

Our Catholic faith formation needs to be especially sensitive to the ‘life-world’ of children and young people. They are in touch with the mystery of God in a way that many adults lose in their ‘rational’ driven lives.

Indeed our children are the Church of today! The ways we choose to welcome them determine whether they will grow up with a sense of God’s presence in their lives. For children, like Jesus our brother and Lord, have real, undiluted experiences of the divine.

Gertrud Mueller Nelson once said: ‘Children are living in the kingdom of God today. Will we follow them in, or will we chase them out?’

‘Following children’ into the kingdom, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur points out, is the real goal of our adult lives. Ricoeur calls it returning to the ‘second innocence’.

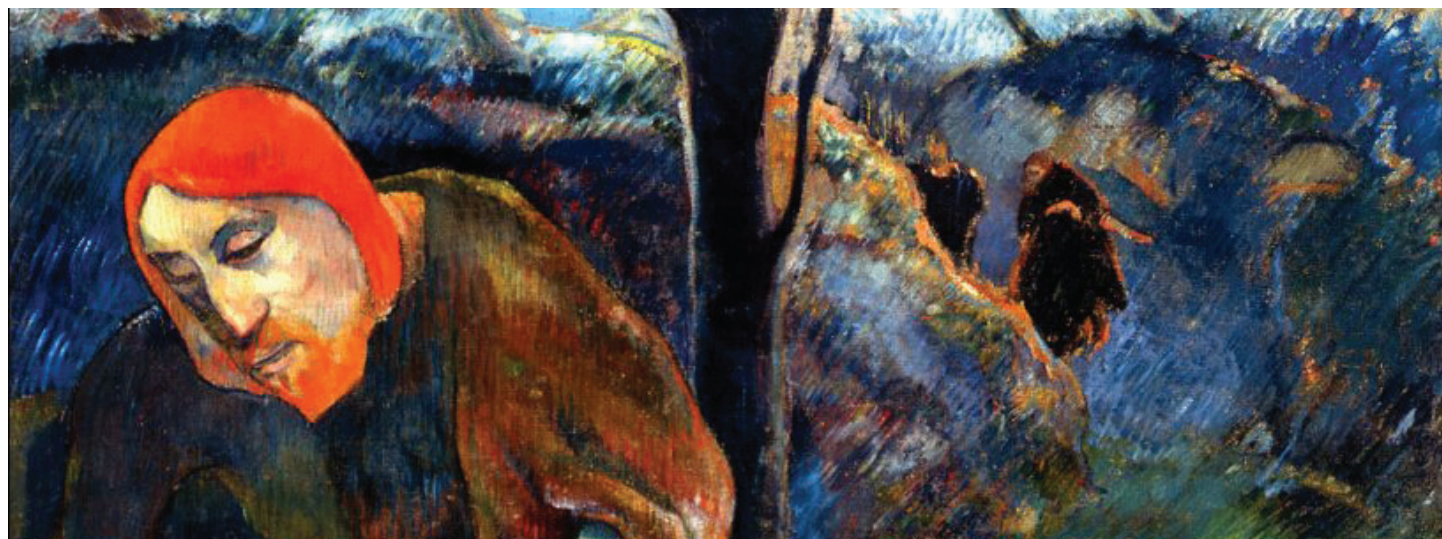
Our faith task then is ultimately to move beyond ‘sophistication’ and become ‘childlike’ again. Not for nothing does Jesus tell us that children enter the kingdom of heaven quite naturally. No wonder that as a child Jesus was at ‘home’ in his Father’s House.

A world that prides itself on its adulthood, sophistication and experience might want to ponder that. ■



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Christ on the Mount of Olives by Henri Eugène Paul Gauguin (1889)

## things fall *apart*

'JESUS' AGONY IN THE GARDEN'  
THE FIRST SORROWFUL MYSTERY

**T**he great Irish poet William Butler Yeats in his celebrated poem, *The Second Coming*, prophesied: 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.'

Hopefully, the journey of the life of faith gradually teaches us all how true that is. As individuals and as members of institutions we simply cannot deny or avoid these moments of 'disintegration' when 'things fall apart'.

Each person (and maybe even our Church at times) has to face the 'agony in the garden' and there is never any clear-cut rational way through these trials. Often the best one can do is to simply 'cling to the rock' like Jesus in Gethsemane and trust despite our emotional distress.

For it is in times of greatest humiliation that we come to real and true depth of soul. When we feel shame or powerlessness, or when we are being abused and cannot defend ourselves, we are certainly vulnerable to despair. But it is precisely through such humiliating times that we can grow deeper in compassion, graciousness and forgiveness, and not fall deeper into hate, anger and revenge.

I have found very helpful in my inner journey the reflections of a German theologian, Dorothee Sölle. In the context of a major crisis in her life (divorce) she experienced what it means to survive 'death' in the middle of life and to overcome the complete destruction of one's plans and goals.

You can feel her pain as she writes: *At that time I went to church to pray. But to say that I prayed, seems all wrong now. I was a single scream. I screamed for help and help for me meant either one of two things: my husband returns to me or that I die so that the pain finally ends. Then—in the midst of my screaming—I remembered a word from the Bible: 'My grace is sufficient for you' ...*

*I could not relate to the word 'grace' because my life nowhere resembled a graceful state. But God had 'told' me*

*precisely this word. I left the church and from then on I no longer prayed for my husband to return. (For a long time I continued to pray for death.) I began—in a very small way—to accept that my husband was gone. God did not comfort me but threw me face-down to the ground. I would rather have died. Later I noticed that the encounter with God was for many people bruising. Already Jacob began to limp after he fought with an angel (Genesis 32).*

When we pray the Rosary and reflect on the First Sorrowful Mystery, Jesus' Agony in the Garden, we see how Jesus, our brother, *totally* shared in our similar struggles. Jesus experienced how the encounter with God can be both terrifying and 'bruising'.

According to eminent Dominican biblical scholar Jerome Murphy O'Connor, Mark the Evangelist, in his Gospel account, is telling us that Jesus really and fully 'broke down' before the greatest crisis of his life. After all, it is a human thing to have a nervous breakdown if you are about to be tortured to death. This was no make-believe play acting. Jesus was 'falling apart' emotionally.

Some Christians do not like the idea of Jesus having a nervous breakdown, of him being 'out of control'. But personally I find it a great consolation. For our faith as Christians challenges us to accept the human frailty of Jesus, as well as his divine nature.

Even (perhaps especially) when 'things fall apart' he is our brother and God, our Emmanuel, sharing our lot with us in loving solidarity. ■



think about it

1. Recall a time when things have fallen apart in your life.  
*Can you identify the ways you managed to 'cling to the rock' of your faith? Did Jesus' Gethsemane experience provide a 'touchstone' for you? If so, how?*
2. Jesus' humanity was at its most vulnerable during his agony in the garden – to the point of total breakdown. And yet he was never spiritually alone.  
*How can this experience and knowledge inform you in your next time of crisis?*
3. Our faith as Christians challenges us to accept the human frailty of Jesus as well as his divine nature.  
*Take some quiet time to talk to Jesus about this paradox. Ask for a deeper appreciation, understanding and awareness of his omnipresence with you, especially when 'things fall apart'.*

# blessed be those who *suffer*

‘THE CROWNING OF THORNS’  
THE THIRD SORROWFUL MYSTERY

We are all appalled when we hear the dreadful stories of the torture of people in countless countries around the world.

Jesus, our brother and Lord, was tortured. Jesus is history’s most famous victim of torture. He was whipped, crowned with thorns and crucified to death by the powers of the Roman state.

Torture represents the logical outworking and endpoint of this power of the state over ‘the body’. In torture we see that the state can do whatever it wants to ‘the body’. That is why the Roman Empire humiliated and tortured Jesus. That is why oppressive regimes always use the instrument of torture to degrade and dehumanise human beings.

Torture is both a product of and a means of reinforcing a certain story about who we are and who our enemies are. Torture helps imagine the world as divided between friends and enemies. Our media stories are effectively controlled by this type of thinking.

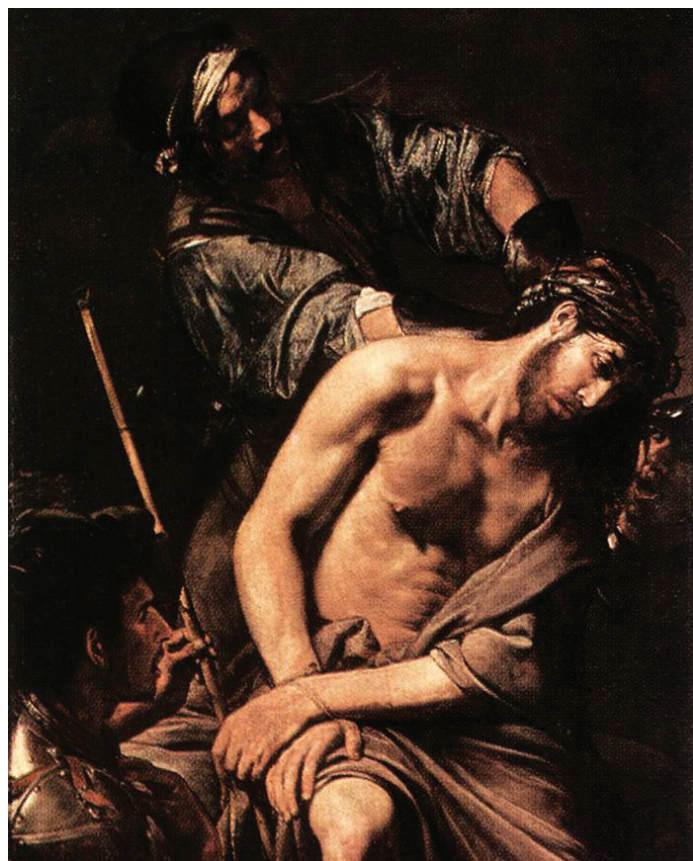
One could even say torture is the ‘liturgy’ of the state when it seeks to have total power over the bodies of individuals.

What is our answer as Christians to such horror and abuse of power? We Catholics have the medicine of the Eucharist.

To live the Eucharist is to live inside God’s imagination. The Eucharist is the ritual enactment of the redemptive power of God, rooted in the torture, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Where else would we look for the Christian response to torture than the ritual remembrance of the death by torture of Jesus Christ—that is, the Eucharist? As Pope John Paul II wrote in his encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, the Eucharist is ‘the sacrifice of the Cross perpetuated down the ages ... This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only after he had left us a means of sharing in it as if we had been present there.’

Consider this extraordinary phrase for a moment: ‘as if we had been present there’; that is, at the torture of Jesus Christ. What role would we have played?



Crowning with Thorns by Valentin de Boulogne

I love the lines of William Cavanaugh about this power of the Eucharist to overcome the horror of torture and injustice:

*Christianity itself is founded on a disappearance. The tomb is empty, the body is gone. At Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) Jesus blesses the bread, breaks it, and give it to his companions, but then vanishes from their sight. And yet the disappearance is not the last word. In the very act Jesus assures his followers that they will have his body, a body which the powers of death cannot bury or erase. When they hear the Emmaus story, the disciples cease to mourn, for they now recognise that they will always know Jesus in the breaking of the bread.* (William Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, p. 281)

Of course, this does not magically take away the great mystery as to why human beings can perpetrate such evil. To live within this mystery we must return again and again to gaze on the tortured One—Jesus of Nazareth.

Poet Denise Levertov once movingly reflected on this iconic mystery:

*Torture then, torture now,  
the same, the pain's the same,  
immemorial branding iron,  
electric prod.  
Hasn't a child dazed in the hospital ward they reserve  
for the most abused, known worse?*

Looking more deeply into the body of the tortured Jesus crowned with thorns she goes on:

*One only is 'King of Grief'.  
... the Godhead opened him utterly*



Jesus, victim of torture, give us the courage to respond to evil with the power of the Eucharist you gave us. ■

1. Very few people get through life without suffering which can indeed feel like 'torture'.  
*Recall a time of tortured suffering in your life (physical, mental or emotional).  
Did your belief and knowledge in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus bring you comfort at this time? If so, how? If not, how might it do so from now on?*
2. 'We Catholics have the medicine of the Eucharist.'  
*Is this statement true for you personally? If so, how? If not, can you re-imagine and re-visit Eucharist through this nourishing, healing and strengthening lens?*
3. *Take some time to identify the 'tortured' ones in your field of reference today. Hold them in prayer for a few moments now and ask our loving God to pour his healing peace into their lives and circumstance. Make a plan to be 'Eucharist' for them in some small way this week.*

# the things we carry

'JESUS CARRIES THE CROSS'  
THE FOURTH SORROWFUL MYSTERY



Funeral Procession by Ellis Wilson

*Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.*  
—Ian Maclaren

French novelist Andre Malraux once described a country parish priest who had heard confessions for many decades and summed up what he had learned about human nature in this manner: 'First of all, people are much more unhappy than one thinks ... and there is no such thing as a grown-up person.'

A dose of this type of 'tragic realism' about life is quite healthy for those of us who wish to follow Jesus in his journey through suffering and death to new life.

For everyone who joins the human race and accepts their creaturehood (and it is amazing how many people do not!) inevitably experiences, not only the exhilaration of life, but also its darkness: disillusionment, ageing, illness, isolation, loss, meaninglessness, painful choices, and death.

We are all pilgrims on the journey of faith and life. We are all in this together. And it is the beginning of compassion for ourselves and for others when we realise each person we encounter is deep down carrying a heavy cross in their life.

That is precisely the consolation of the Spirit, even amid absence and desolation. Jesus, our brother and Lord, has taken the *same* pilgrim path.

Consider where Jesus is making his way up to his death carrying the very weapon that will change all our lives. He stumbles. He falls. It was too much for him to carry on his own. In his humility he allowed another to step in, possibly to relieve but most definitely to participate in the pain and

suffering he was experiencing. He allowed both himself and another to be human.

So we must all stumble and fall. And that does not mean reading or just hearing about falling. We must actually be 'out of the driver's seat for a while'. Otherwise we will never learn how to give up control to the Real Guide.

This is the necessary pattern of Christian discipleship. Whatever happens to Jesus is what must and will happen to us. Christ has gone before us on the way of the cross.

He has first said 'let me go there'. Such is the Christ poetically described by RS Thomas in his poem *The Coming*:

*And God held in his hand  
A small globe. Look, he said.  
The son looked. Far off,  
As through water, he saw  
A scorched land of fierce  
Colour. The light burned  
There; crusted buildings  
Cast their shadows; a bright  
Serpent, a river  
Uncoiled itself, radiant  
With slime.  
On a bare  
Hill a bare tree saddened  
The sky. Many people  
Held out their thin arms  
To it, as though waiting  
For a vanished April  
To return to its crossed*

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1. The 'things we carry' make us the unique human beings we are – some things are 'inherited' and others are collected along life's journeys.  
*What is the heavy cross you bear? Can you ask Jesus to come alongside and help you to carry it?*
2. 'Be kind, because everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.'  
*Does this statement resonate for you?*  
*If so, how? If not, why?*  
*How does it challenge us as disciples of Jesus?*
3. As he carried his cross, Jesus not only allowed himself to be human – to 'stumble and fall' but he was also humble enough to ask for help.  
*Identify a time when you have been fully human enough to do the same.*  
*When have you been able to help a 'burdened' friend? When have you resisted... and why?*





Photo by Marcus Dall'Col

# he rose in *silence*

'THE RESURRECTION'  
THE FIRST GLORIOUS MYSTERY

*Let me keep my distance, always,  
from those  
who think they have the answers.  
Let me keep company always  
with those who say  
'Look!' and laugh in astonishment,  
and bow their heads.*

—Mary Oliver, from 'Mysteries, Yes' in *Evidence: Poems*

**I**n the Gospel of Mark the Resurrection takes place in silence! There is almost something modest and ordinary about it. There was a quiet, with a stillness that only love and fear can create.

Some in the early Church apparently had difficulty with the 'silence' of Mark. The ending was too sharp and abrupt for them. How could the Resurrection, which had begun in fear, not end in joy? How could it end in silence and even fear?

But maybe resurrection faith must always include an aspect of questioning, for the Easter mystery is so dazzling; it is beyond our rational comprehension.

Indeed, Dominican Herbert McCabe was fond of saying that God is not the answer. Rather, God is the question.

God is a mystery. 'The word "God" is a label for something we do not know,' McCabe writes. As Mark Vernon reflects in an article in *The Guardian* in 2009: *A mystery is not a problem. A problem is a puzzle to which techniques can be applied, intuition brought to bear, and a solution found. Science tackles problems. It's great at it. But a mystery is not*

*amenable to that strategy. And life is littered with them.*

The little that we know of God is, of course, revealed definitively in Jesus of Nazareth. But have you noticed how many times in the Gospels Jesus himself asks questions, rather than gives answers? Our journey living the Paschal Mystery is often more about the questions than the answers. Pontius Pilate asks Jesus a series of questions and Jesus answers cryptically, as if to say, you are really missing the point.

The Easter Mystery moves us through the terrible suffering and death of the Son of God, a man, the profound love and courage that kept the women by his side despite their own fears, and the time in the tomb, that in-between space in which we spend much of our own lives. It invites us to rest in mystery, and then the movement to the joyful moment of Resurrection where even the disciples do not have the right set of questions anymore because they fit the old answers.

Is this not the journey of our whole lives: the movement from sorrow to courage to grief to waiting to joy, often holding elements of each at the same time?

What are the questions stirring your soul these days? Can we make space to live in them, not needing to have the answers?

We are all on a search. Jesus is Risen! Truth exists. But discovering the truth about our God, universe, Church, culture and especially ourselves, also means taking seriously Rainer Rilke's advice: 'Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.' ■

think about it

1. The dazzling mystery of the Resurrection is the well-founded hope which anchors our faith. *What most challenges you about the Resurrection? What most excites you about this mystery?*
2. The Easter Mystery moves us from death to life, from despair to joy, from darkness to light. *Recall such 'Alleluia' moments in your own life. Did your faith inform this experience? If so, how? If not, consider why and how this might change in the future.*
3. *What are the questions stirring your soul these days? Try to identify two or three today and sit quietly in prayer for a few moments. Ask Our Lord for the grace to hold them and to live with their mystery for now.*



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# ‘the gaze of a *delighted* other’

‘THE DESCENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT’  
THE THIRD GLORIOUS MYSTERY

Sometimes it feels as if our Australian culture has lost its sense of the presence of the Spirit.

Perhaps an old Aboriginal man, quoted by W. E. H. Stanner, was partly right: ‘White man got no dreaming, him go ‘nother way. White man, him go different. Him got road belong himself.’

But we as Christians can never accept this as the total truth. For the Holy Spirit has ‘descended’ and is abundantly present among us, the Pentecostal, Spirit-filled People of God.

It is just that the Holy Spirit shows up in all sorts of ways and places in life that we do not expect! Somehow we are just not ‘seeing’ or ‘dreaming’ right!

The solution is not to try harder, or apply other versions of moralism. Rather it is accepting and yielding to the presence of the Spirit that is always pure, unearned gift.

In other words, the Spirit comes when we accept (usually after much resistance and struggle) that ‘we cannot do it ourselves’.

As the 12-step programs know so well, the salvation that comes from the Spirit happens by grace. There is a story of a little village in Bosnia that refused to join the fighting during the 1990s conflict. When militias recruited young men for battle, they said no. When the militias then burned their houses, other families took them in. Other towns had tried everything to keep from joining the war, but they failed. But in some way, the neighbours in this village remained at peace while fighting raged all around them. No one knows how it happened, but nearly everyone in the country knows the story.

They slowly shake their heads. ‘God,’ they say. ‘It can only have been God.’

When we do surrender to our God then we come to see the signs of the Holy Spirit in persons, events and things everywhere around us.

We notice that authentic experiences of the Spirit lead people to feel more identified with and open to the rest of humanity and the world. Experiences that lead to feelings of being more special or better than other people or to self-absorption are probably not authentic.

The Spirit also generates a particular kind of humility, one that painfully recognises more of one’s human inadequacy, yet at the same time increasingly realises one’s own preciousness and worth as a child of God. It is a humility that is combined with dignity. The Spirit never leads to arrogance or devaluing of oneself. It is never sectarian or cult-like.

While it is true that the Spirit can bring about spectacular ‘fireworks’, as at the first Pentecost—with celebration and enthusiasm or with fear and trepidation—our usual experience is more ordinary. Often we simply (re)discover that all life is holy, and the miraculous presence of God’s grace flows through all of it.

Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson once said that a foundational element of infant development was experiencing ‘the gaze of a delighted other’. The deepest act of love is not help or service; but this immediate, attentive, gazing presence.



Some mystics remind us that this is precisely how the Spirit 'descends' upon each of us. They call us to respond with 'the practice of the presence of God'. One of Denise Levertov's last poems, *The Conversion of Brother Lawrence*, tells the beautiful story of a 17th-century monk and of this openness to the Spirit's descent:

*... everything faded, thinned to nothing, beside  
the light which bathed and warmed,  
the Presence  
your being had opened to. Where it shone,  
there life was, and abundantly; it touched your dullest  
task, and the task was easy.  
Joyful, absorbed,  
you 'practiced the presence of God' as a musician  
practices hour after hour his art:  
'A stone before the carver',  
you 'entered into yourself'.*

Resting in the presence of the Holy Spirit—as it descends upon us in our mundane lives—is 'bathing' in this realisation. We are indeed each seen through the gaze of the *ultimate* delighted Other—the Holy Spirit. ■

## think about it

1. The fruits (evidence) of the Holy Spirit's presence are love, gentleness, kindness, joy, peace, self-control, patience, faithfulness and goodness.  
*Reflect on the 'signs of the Holy Spirit in persons, events and things everywhere around'. Name the 'evidence' you find.*
2. We notice "Spirit-filled" people as those who authentically 'walk the walk' and 'talk the talk' for the common good.  
*Identify someone who has personally inspired you in this way. Share their story with family or friends today.*
3. Our Christian faith calls each of us to respond to the descent of the Holy Spirit upon us, with the 'practice of the presence of God'.  
*Name some of the practical and emotional challenges of being this presence for others.*
4. *Make a time today to rest in the presence of the Holy Spirit and intentionally allow 'the gaze of the ultimate delighted Other' bathe you in love.*

# baptism is *enough*

‘THE BAPTISM OF JESUS’  
THE FIRST LUMINOUS MYSTERY

*Baptism is enough,  
it is sufficient to evangelise.*  
—Pope Francis

**T**ragically, Baptism today can often just be a rubber stamp into a school, or an excuse for a party, or something done to please a grandparent or older relative who feels it should be more important to the couple presenting a child for Baptism than it often can appear.

But Baptism is not something in our past! We live it out all our lives.

When Jesus is baptised he accepts his mission. Baptism is not something done to him; it is a confirmation of his mission. When we are baptised we too are given a mission, and that mission is to bring the Good News of the Gospel with us, into the arena of our living.

It is the same mission of compassion and justice given to Jesus of Nazareth at the Jordan. Jesus had not yet worked out a plan of action when he met John the Baptist. He was immediately seduced by this desert prophet. He had never seen anyone like him. Jesus’ baptism suggests that he shared John’s vision for Israel (which at the time was experiencing a hopeless situation under corrupt temple leadership) that involved radical repentance, forgiveness and a sense of living in community.

After being baptised by John, Jesus sees himself as the beloved Son of God, in whom God’s Spirit fully dwells. Breathed upon by this Spirit, Jesus begins to announce to everyone, through his life and his message, the Good News of a God who is friend and saviour to every human being.

Baptism—and all sacraments, for that matter—is so much more than the passing moment of a celebration. It neither begins nor ends with the liturgical ritual.

Baptism does not bring God’s love into being as if that love did not exist before the ceremony. Baptism is the Church’s way of celebrating and enacting the embrace of God who first loved us from the moment of our conception.

As Pope Francis often preaches, our faith will only flourish if we recover a profound sense of the beauty of this simple ritual. For Baptism touches the deepest dramas of human life: birth, growing up, falling in love, daring to give oneself to others, searching for meaning, becoming an adult, coping with suffering and failure, and eventually death.



Baptisterium der Orthodoxen in Ravenna. Photo by GFreihalter

As that great preacher and biblical scholar Archbishop Mark Coleridge once remarked: ‘Baptism is the Paschal Mystery with my name on it!’

Catholicism will flourish in the 21st century if we can grasp that the Church is above all the community of the baptised. Baptism is the great mystery of our faith. ■

## STEPPING IN THE MUD

*The mud of human evil  
is very deep,  
it stinks forcefully,  
it is full of dangerous gases,  
and there was Jesus,  
in front of John,  
asking to be allowed  
to bend down in that mud.  
And John,  
no wonder,  
hesitated.  
But he, Jesus,  
he went down,  
and when he came up,  
the mud still streaming ...  
HEAVEN OPENED,  
and a voice was heard ...  
and a new Spirit,  
a new life  
and a new heart  
were announced,*







PICTURE BY CNS/LOSSERVATORE ROMANO, POOL

# only the *Kingdom* is absolute

**'PROCLAMATION OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD'  
THE THIRD LUMINOUS MYSTERY**

*Only the kingdom therefore is absolute  
and it makes everything else relative.*

—Pope Paul VI

**W**e are living through a period of great crisis as Australian Catholics today. Rightly or wrongly, it is hard to deny that plenty of people struggle with the credibility of our witness.

Many, outside the Church, clearly have an image of us as an unapproachable institution that seems only to teach, judge, and condemn. Not to mention the impact of recent scandals that have profoundly shamed and embarrassed us all. Our credibility as preachers of the Good News of Jesus has been undermined.

Some others, inside the Church, seem stuck in a form of low-grade depression. They spend an awful lot of their energy evaluating colleagues, offering critiques, bemoaning the lack of leadership of others, disagreeing with other people's views and generally taking pleasure in others' frailties and mistakes (the Germans even have a word for it: Schadenfreude). Everyone else is always the problem.

Surprise! In the time of Jesus the people of God faced precisely the same situation!

So troubled was the world of Jesus' time, and so deep in despair was the populace, that it was commonly believed that nothing short of divine intervention could change things. People spoke of this hoped-for intervention as the kingdom of God. They imagined the kingdom coming in one fell swoop, as many do today.

When the masses in Jesus' day were looking for God to send a messiah to rescue them, Jesus introduced his followers to the kingdom as the expression of an invisible presence that lies at the heart of reality. Instead of viewing the depressing condition of the world as something only a divine intervention could change, he insisted that God's reign could begin in people's lives any time they were ready to awaken to this presence. It is 'at hand', he explained, there to be grasped. Do not look for God to appear in the desert or on a mountaintop, because the kingdom is not about location. Instead, 'The kingdom of God is within you'.

This was not a message most people of Jesus' time wanted to hear. I suspect it is not something we want to accept deep down either. They wanted a champion who would deliver them. We want a Church where we are in 'control'.

If, however, we can resist the temptation to despair and overcome the delusion that we can 'save' ourselves as Church, it is amazing where we can find the divine if only we look lovingly.

We discover that when God wants to take charge of the world or the Church, he does not send in the tanks. Instead he sends in the poor and the meek.

That is what Pope Francis has been tirelessly saying for the last few years! Our 'salvation' is not achieved by 'circling the wagons' and seeking refuge in some supposed 'golden age' of the Church. Nor is it even brought about through

With them we go on a journey to form a community of 'kinship'. God longs to be encountered in Jesus and at the margins. We need to rediscover him in the lowly places. We are called to stand with them, for the vision of the kingdom still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and it will not disappoint; and if it delays, wait for it (Habakkuk 2:3). Only the kingdom ... is absolute. ■

In memory of Oscar Romero (1917–1980)

It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.  
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision.  
We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.  
Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.  
No statement says all that could be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.  
This is what we are about.  
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water the seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.  
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising this. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.  
We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future not our own.

think about it

1. 'The kingdom of God is at hand'...  
'The kingdom of God is within you.'  
*Consider the 'signs of the kingdom' within and around you. What do they look, taste, sound, smell and feel like?*
- 'We are sent on mission as "kingdom people" to the peripheries.'  
*Who are the poor and meek in your field of reference? How do they make God present to you and others? If you don't know any... where might you look for them?*
2. 'This enables us to do something and to do it well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.'  
*What seeds of hope have you planted recently? What seeds do you wish to plant in the future?*

[illegible]

# the *dearest* freshness deep down things

'THE TRANSFIGURATION'  
THE FOURTH LUMINOUS MYSTERY



Transfiguration by Susan Tilt (2010). Current location : Artist's Private Collection, Colonial Beach, Virginia, USA.

We live in a post-Enlightenment time in which many of us (at least in the so-called 'developed' West) have undergone what sociologist Max Weber refers to as the 'disenchantment' of the world. As a result we have lost a sense of wonder, a sense of 'enchantment' at the possibilities present in creation.

We Christians, however, worship a God that took on the material (incarnation), we have within our Gospel formation the potential to appreciate what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called the 'dearest freshness deep down things'.

The Transfiguration reminds us of this 'freshness'—of God's divine, enchanting presence shining all around us.

So, what exactly happened on the mountain of Tabor? The uncreated Light, the Cloud of Unknowing, the overwhelming fear, the desire to cling to the moment—all these suggest the classic experience of an encounter with the Holy, with the Divine. Whatever else might be said, the disciples came face to face with the mystery of God in Jesus Christ.

And what was their reaction? In the accounts of Christ's Transfiguration we are told that Peter offers to make three dwellings: one each for Christ, Moses and Elijah, whom Peter, John and James have witnessed, gathered on top of the mount. It is easy for us to sneer at the naiveté of Peter's request: 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah ...'

Peter signifies all of us, as we try vainly to capture and control our experience of Jesus. All disciples are sent down

the mountain—on 'mission'—to 'see' the Lord amidst his people.

There is a wonderful story told by Trappist monk Thomas Merton about a profound experience he had of this very thing. He wrote that on 18 March 1958 he was standing at a street corner in downtown Louisville. It was an ordinary day and ordinary people were going about their business. But as he looked at them they suddenly changed.

He wrote: 'I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realisation that I loved these people ... I saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the person that each one is in God's eyes. To me, they seemed to be walking around shining like the sun.'

He went on to wonder what the world would be like if we could all see each other as we really are. He muses: 'I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other!' (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*)

Perhaps Merton had very special moments of ecstatic visions, of seeing as on Mount Tabor, in his solitude. But his Louisville epiphany reminds that we 'ordinary mystics' are called to see Jesus transfigured in unlikely places and in unlikely people. 'Because the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.' ■







# STATIONS *of* MARY



## ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

The *Stations of Mary* is a visual journey through some of the key moments in Mary's life. Through the ancient art of iconography, people are invited to remember the joys and sufferings of Mary's life and to walk in spirit with Mary on her journey, which is fundamentally a journey of relationship with Jesus. The activity consists of six (6) pull-up banners that are easily assembled and come with a reflection booklet.

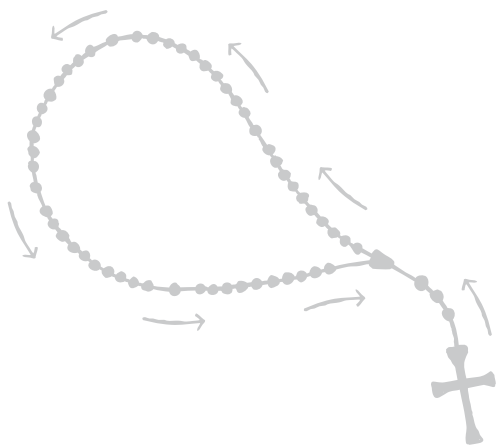
## BOOKING THE ACTIVITY

The activity is available as a resource for the parishes, groups and organisations of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne. It may be used as part of an event, such as feast day celebrations or parish missions. The resource is free to borrow and can be booked for up to two weeks. Contact the Archbishop's Office for Evangelisation on 9926 5761 or [evangelisation@cam.org.au](mailto:evangelisation@cam.org.au).



# THE WALKING ROSARY

A JOURNEY WITH MARY



## ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

The *Walking Rosary* aims to create a peaceful environment ideal for meditation or quiet reflection, building on the traditional Rosary, a well-known devotion to Mary that chronicles her life. Traditionally, the Rosary consists of a set number of specific prayers, such as the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be. Participants are invited to recite these prayers as they walk along the life-size rosary path. There is no prescription as to how long this activity can take. Participants may choose to stop at various points along the way to meditate on each mystery or prayer. The Walking Rosary can be assembled in the most suitable way for your space.

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# "If you want"

If you want, the Virgin will come walking down the road  
pregnant with the holy, and say,  
"I need shelter for the night,  
please take me inside your heart, my time is so close."  
Then, under the roof of your soul,  
you will witness the sublime intimacy,  
the divine, the Christ, taking birth forever,  
as she grasps your hand for help,  
for each of us is the midwife of God, each of us.  
Yes there, under the dome of your being  
does creation come into existence eternally,  
through your womb, dear pilgrim – the sacred womb of your soul,  
as God grasps our arms for help:  
for each of us is his beloved servant, never far.  
If you want, the Virgin will come walking down the street  
pregnant with Light and sing.

—ST JOHN OF THE CROSS

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