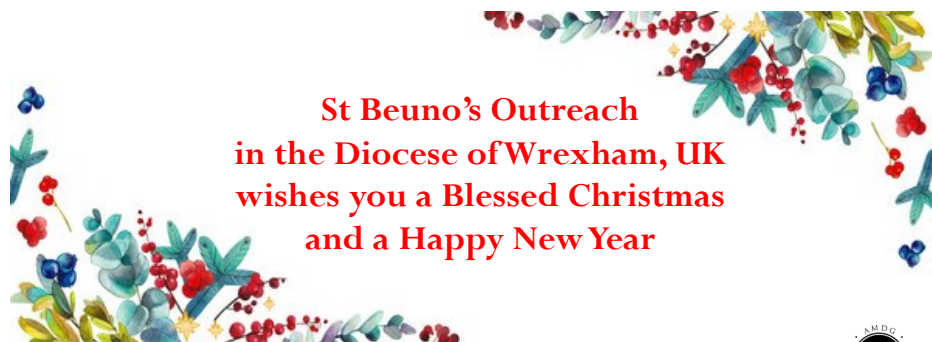


‘Let us pause here for a moment, and pray in silence
for all these families in difficulty.’ Pope Francis



Kateryna Shadrina, *Holy Family* (2021)

Iconart Contemporary Sacred Art Gallery, used by kind permission



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ST BEUNO'S OUTREACH 2023–24 PRAYING CHRISTMASTIDE WITH POPE FRANCIS

Sihnan Mansour, *Symbol of Hope* (1985)



‘Christmas celebrations are often full of sound.

It would be good for us to make room for silence, to hear the voice of Love.’

Pope Francis @Pontifex, 23 December 2013

The period around Christmas can sometimes be frantic, allowing little space to meditate on the mystery of the Incarnation: God's love coming to us in the person of Jesus. But busy or not, we can still pause awhile to marvel anew at the miracle of this small baby born into obscurity and poverty. This year, St Beuno's Outreach invites you to pray with a blend of familiar scripture passages and related reflections by Pope Francis. Please use them in whatever way works best for you. On some days, a single phrase or image may be enough; on others, you may have time for a more leisurely celebration of the joy and hope brought about by this holy birth.



‘What made these men of the East set out on their journey? Let us look to ourselves and ask: How is the journey of my faith going? This is a question that each one of us can ask ourselves today.

Faith, if it is to grow, has to begin ever anew. It needs to be sparked by desire, to take up the challenge of entering into a living and lively relationship with God. Does my heart still burn with desire for God? Or have I allowed force of habit and my own disappointments to extinguish that flame?

Let us never forget this: the journey of faith finds renewed strength and fulfilment only when it is made in the presence of God. Only if we recover our “taste” for adoration will our desire be rekindled.

In this way, like the Magi, we will have the daily certainty that even in the darkest nights, a star continues to shine. It is the star of the Lord, who comes to care for our frail humanity.

Let us set out on the path towards him.

Like the Magi, let us lift up our eyes, listen to the desire lodged in our hearts, and follow the star that God makes shine above us.’

Pope Francis, St Peter's Basilica, Rome, 6 January, 2022



Lyuba Yatskiv, *Adoration of the Magi* (2020)

Iconart Contemporary Sacred Art Gallery, Lviv, Ukraine (iconart-gallery.com/en)

Image used by kind permission of Iconart Gallery

The Epiphany of the Lord, 7 January 2024

Gospel Matthew 2: 1–3, 9-12

After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judaea during the reign of King Herod, some wise men came to Jerusalem from the east. 'Where is the infant King of the Jews?' they asked. 'We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage.' When King Herod heard this he was perturbed.

Having listened to what the king had to say, the wise men set out. And there in front of them was the star they had seen rising. The sight of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. But they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and returned to their own country by a different way.

As Christmastide is coming to an end, I spend time recalling what has happened in my prayer over this festive period. Briefly, I relive the good moments ... and perhaps also the not-so-good ones.

Like the Magi, I may have been on a kind of journey following the star. It has been leading me, in the silence of my prayer, to the light of God in the person of the helpless little baby Jesus.

How do I feel? Am I full of energy and good resolutions, or tired and despondent?

Perhaps I simply yearn for some quiet moments spent in adoration and worship in God's presence, so I can '*hear the voice of Love*', as Pope Francis puts it. I take the time I need to ponder, and offer the Lord my own particular gifts.

Eventually, I set out again, lifting my eyes to follow '*the star that God made shine above me*'. Perhaps I come to realise how brightly it shines even in the darkness. I may find that I, too, need to continue my journey 'by a different way', in my desire to be faithful and to serve him.

As my prayer time comes to an end, I thank the Lord for this Epiphany, asking him to help me know, love, and follow him better in the coming year, day by day.

'We see Jesus in the children ...'

'Christmas invites us to focus on the sign of the Child and to recognize him in the faces of little children, especially those for whom, like Jesus, 'there is no place in the inn' (Luke 2:7).

We see Jesus in the children of the Middle East, who continue to suffer because of tensions between Israelis and Palestinians.

We see Jesus in children worldwide, wherever peace and security are threatened by the danger of new conflicts.

We see Jesus in the children of unemployed parents, who struggle to offer their children a secure and peaceful future.

We see Jesus in children whose childhood has been robbed, and who, from a very young age, have been forced to work or to be enrolled as soldiers by unscrupulous mercenaries.

We see Jesus in the many children forced to leave their countries to travel alone in inhuman conditions, and who become an easy target for human traffickers.

May our hearts not be closed, as they were in the homes of Bethlehem.

May we welcome in the Baby Jesus the love of God made man for us.

And may we commit ourselves, with the help of his grace, to making our world more human and more worthy for the children of today and of the future.'

Pope Francis, *Urbi et Orbi* message, Christmas 2017

Our images this year come mostly from the Holy Land and Ukraine, with special thanks to the Palestinian artist Sliman Mansour, and the young iconographers of the Iconart Gallery, Lviv, Ukraine. Their work has been chosen to help us pray for peace in all parts of the world where people are broken and suffering this Christmastide.

Opposite: Sliman Mansour, *The Flight into Egypt* (1984)

Mansour was born in 1947 in a Palestinian Christian town north of Ramallah. His work reflects the Palestinian struggle, especially his own sense of gradual loss since the occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem in 1967.

The Nativity of the Lord, 25 December 2023 (Midnight Mass)
Gospel Luke 2: 6–14

While Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her first born. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room at the inn. In the countryside close by there were shepherds who lived in the fields and took it in turns to watch their flocks during the night. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone round them. They were terrified, but the angel said, ‘Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly with the angel was a great throng of the heavenly host, praising God and singing: ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to all who enjoy his favour’.

If finding time for prayer is a challenge today, I may just want to read through the text, take one phrase to heart and ponder its meaning for me throughout the day.

If I have the luxury of more time, I settle in a quiet place and become still in whatever way works best for me. I read these familiar words from Luke, lingering if a particular word or phrase draws my attention.

As I read, I may want to place myself within the scene on the hillside. What do I see ...? What do I hear as the sky is filled with angels?

Perhaps there is fear or exhilaration ...? Or perhaps I don't have words to describe what I'm experiencing. If so, I just stay with how it makes me feel.

Maybe I now find myself among the shepherds, making their way into the stable. As I look around, what strikes me here? How do the sights, the sounds, the smell of the stable affect me?

I reflect on what I notice, and how it feels to know that this is the place which God chose to become present in our world.

Finally, I focus on the manger and on Jesus, the saviour who ‘*assumed my frailty, my suffering, my anxieties, my desires and my limitations*’.

I speak to the Lord from the bottom of my heart and then simply, as Pope Francis suggests, I let him love me.

‘The heart of the Lord began to beat within Mary; the God of life drew oxygen from her. Ever since then, Mary has united us to God because in her God bound himself to our flesh, and he has never left it. ...

She is not only the bridge joining us to God; she is more. She is the road that God travelled in order to reach us, and the road that we must travel in order to reach him. Through Mary, we encounter God the way he wants us to: in tender love, in intimacy, in the flesh. ...

The holy Mother of God teaches us that the first step in giving life to those around us is to cherish it within ourselves. Today's Gospel tells us that Mary “kept these things in her heart”. And goodness comes from the heart.

How important it is to keep our hearts pure, to cultivate our interior life and to persevere in prayer!’

Pope Francis, Homily at Mass, Vatican Basilica
New Year's Day 2021, the 54th World Day of Peace



Sliman Mansour, *Motherhood* (1980)

Mary, Holy Mother of God, 1 January 2024

Luke 2: 15–20

Now when the angels had gone from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us’. So they hurried away and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about him, and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds had to say. As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen; it was exactly as they had been told.

Entering into my time of prayer today, I take as long as I need to become still. Then I begin to read the text, which invites me to journey again with the shepherds to greet the new born saviour.

As we travel across the hills and into the town, what do I feel? Remembering the appearance of the angels and the heavenly host, perhaps there is excitement ... trepidation ... wonderment at what has possessed us to set out like this?

Reaching our destination, we stand at the stable door, hesitant about entering into the peaceful calm of the stable. It's Mary herself who beckons me to draw closer, to sit down beside her, next to the manger. As I reach out to caress his cheek, Jesus grasps my finger in his tiny hand – and doesn't want to let go. Mary smiles, and we talk.

In that moment, what is it that I want to tell her about the things that I treasure?

Perhaps I speak to her of my desires for the year ahead: for family or friends who may be facing difficult times – illness, bereavement, financial hardship. Perhaps I speak of my community; of people and places torn apart by war.

‘And you?’ she asks. ‘What is it that *you* want?’

Like Mary, I ponder.

If I can, I speak from the bottom of my heart.

When it's time to go, I thank Mary for the time we've spent together.

I take my leave, glorifying and praising God for the gift of Jesus, my saviour.

‘When the angels announced the birth of the Redeemer to the shepherds, they did so with these words:

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12).

The “sign” ... is the love with which, that night, he assumed our frailty, our suffering, our anxieties, our desires and our limitations. ...

On this holy night, while we contemplate the Infant Jesus just born and placed in the manger, we are invited to reflect.

Do I allow myself to be taken up by God, to be embraced by him, or do I prevent him from drawing close?

“But I am searching for the Lord” – we could respond.

Nevertheless, what is most important is not seeking him, but rather allowing him to seek me, find me and caress me with tenderness. The question put to us simply by the Infant's presence is: do I allow God to love me?’

Pope Francis, Vatican Basilica, 24 December 2014



JESUSMAFA, *The birth of Jesus with shepherds* (1973)

Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN

Original source: www.librairie-emmanuel.fr

The Feast of the Holy Family
Sunday in the Octave of Christmas 31 December 2023
Luke 2: 22, 38–40

And when the day came for them to be purified as laid down by the Law of Moses, Mary and Joseph took Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

When they had done everything the Law of the Lord required, they went back to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. Meanwhile the child grew to maturity, and he was filled with wisdom; and God's favour was with him.

Whether you have spent these days surrounded by family and loved ones, or have been quietly by yourself, today we are invited to look at the Holy Family.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are an example of what is best in human relationships.

After pausing a moment to come to quiet, I read these verses from Luke. Then I spend as long as I need bringing to mind my own family, or those close to me.

Maybe I recollect happy, warm memories, funny incidents, laughter ... or maybe hurtful, difficult, bitter moments come to the fore.

I pause, and speak to the Lord in gratitude for the good times.

If I need to, I ask him for healing and support.

What light can the Holy Family throw on my particular situation?

Perhaps I, too, was 'a child growing to maturity and wisdom', or maybe life was difficult, and I drifted away from everything those around me held dear.

I reflect on my own personal journey, conscious that, even though I may not have been aware of it at the time, 'God's favour was with me'. I give thanks.

Before concluding my prayer, I pray, with Pope Francis, for all those families who experience heartache and strife. I ask the Lord to give them the peace, harmony and forgiveness they need.

When I am ready, I express, in my own words, my thanks to the Lord for giving me the opportunity of spending time with him and with Mary and Joseph.

Altar reredos, Holy Family Catholic Church, Gaza City (opposite)

Many of those within Gaza's small Christian community have chosen to take refuge in this church since the beginning of the conflict in early October.

Pope Francis has been telephoning them regularly to enquire after their welfare. Today we join our prayers with theirs, and with all Christians in the Holy Land.

'The Baby Jesus with his Mother Mary and with St Joseph are a simple but so luminous icon of the family. The light it casts is the light of mercy and salvation ... for the human family and for individual families.

This light which comes from the Holy Family encourages us to offer human warmth in those family situations in which, for various reasons, peace, harmony, and forgiveness are lacking.

Let us pause here for a moment and pray in silence for all these families in difficulty, whether due to problems of illness, unemployment, discrimination, the need to emigrate, or difficulty in understanding each other. Let us pray in silence for all these families.'

Pope Francis, Angelus homily on the Feast of the Holy Family
St Peter's Square, Rome, 28 December, 2014

