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Introduction

SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI (1181/2-1226) abandoned the comfortable life of the medieval Italian merchant class to embrace a life of radical Christian discipleship as he interpreted it being depicted in the gospels. Christ's birth greatly influenced Francis' understanding of what it meant to be a follower of Christ. For Francis, to live the life of a disciple of Christ meant that one had to embrace the poverty and humility of Christ as made manifest in Christ's own birth.

In *The Life of Saint Francis* (1229), the first account of the life of Saint Francis to be written, Brother Thomas of Celano describes Francis as having created a live nativity scene in the town of Greccio, Italy, three years prior to the saint's death. Francis desired to enter into the sights, smells, and sounds of the scene so that he could gain a more accurate sense of the real significance of the birth of Christ. Through the experience of this first known nativity scene, Francis was especially moved by the simplicity, humility, and poverty of the scene. There in this "new Bethlehem," Francis could grapple with how the infinite God, in an unfathomable act of love, had taken on our human condition as a vulnerable baby born amidst animals and laid in a manger.

When we turn to the writings of Francis himself, some that were actually written by the saint's own hand, others that were

transcribed by his followers, we come across many themes that are especially appropriate for the Advent and Christmas seasons. For example, Francis speaks of humility, love, joy, patience, hospitality, peace, gratitude, and openness to the will of God. Francis also speaks of poverty, which is especially important in that Francis believed that the Christ who had humbled himself by being born in the impoverished environment of a stable continues to be found amongst the poor and disenfranchised of our own world. May Francis' own words lead all of us to the wondrous miracle of the manger.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Advent—that period of great anticipatory joy—is a time of preparation for the celebration of Christ's arrival in Bethlehem as a helpless infant. In the Western liturgy, Advent begins four Sundays prior to December 25—the Sunday closest to November 30, which is the feast of Saint Andrew, one of Jesus' first disciples.

The annual commemoration of Christ's birth begins the Christmas cycle of the liturgical year—a cycle that runs from Christmas Eve to the Sunday after the feast of the Epiphany. In keeping with the unfolding of the message of the liturgical year, this book is designed to be used during the entire period from the first Sunday of Advent to the end of the Christmas cycle.

The four weeks of Advent are often thought of as symbolizing the four different ways that Christ comes into the world: (1) at his birth as a helpless infant in Bethlehem; (2) at his arrival in the hearts of believers; (3) at his death; and (4) at his arrival on Judgment Day.

Because Christmas falls on a different day of the week each year, the fourth week of Advent is never really finished; it is abruptly, joyously, and solemnly abrogated by the annual coming again of Christ at Christmas. Christ's Second Coming will also one day abruptly interrupt our sojourn here on earth.

Since the calendar dictates the number of days in Advent, this book includes Scripture quotations and meditative excerpts from the writings of Saint Francis of Assisi for a full twenty-eight days. These twenty-eight daily readings make up Part I of this book. It is suggested that the reader begin at the beginning and, on Christmas Day, switch to Part II, which contains materials for the twelve days of Christmas. If there are any "extra" entries from Part I, these may be read by doubling up days, if so desired, or by reading two entries on weekends. Alternately, one may just skip those entries that do not fit within the Advent time frame for that particular year.

Each "day" in this book begins with the words of Saint Francis of Assisi. Following that quotation is an excerpt from Scripture, which is related in some way to the beginning quote. Next is provided a small prayer, also built on the ideas from the two preceding passages. Finally, an Advent or Christmas activity is suggested as a way to apply the messages to one's daily life.

PART I



*R*EADINGS FOR
*A*DVENT



DAY 1

The Will of God

Most High,
glorious God,
enlighten the darkness of my heart
and give me
true faith,
certain hope,
and perfect charity,
sense and knowledge,
Lord,
that I may carry out
Your holy and true command.

SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI,
"THE PRAYER BEFORE THE CRUCIFIX," 40

LET IT BE

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. . . . Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

LUKE 1:30-31, 34-38

PRAYER

Lord, being a Christian means that I am called to live a life that involves a degree of uncertainty. Like Mary, I am unsure what your call will require of me in the next moment, tomorrow, or many years from now. Strengthen my trust in you so that I may be your faithful servant in the world.

ADVENT ACTION

We are often surrounded with much noise that drowns out the voice of God in our lives. Create an environment in which to listen to God speaking to you, so that you may better follow his will in your life. When in the car or when in your home, allow yourself a period of silence by not turning on the radio, stereo, or television.