Advent Reflection for the Third Sunday of Advent



Mother Mary Francis

Cleanliness

Taken from *Cause for Our Joy* by Mother Mary Francis, pp. 73–79

Materially, we might say that Advent is the season of cleanliness. In the heart of any woman is the urge to prepare for Christmas by cleaning. This is part of the way we show love. We want to clean this house; we want to scrub everything. We do indeed want to clean the house for the coming of the King. Even more than that, we want to clean the heart, to clean the mind, to clean the spirit.

At the beginning of December, we have the great solemnity of the clean one, the Immaculate Mother of God. The Church teaches us that she was free from all stain of original sin at the first moment of her conception. We marvel at the simultaneity of these two, her conception and her immaculateness—her pre-redemption achieved. She was the clean one from her beginning. She was without sin.

We have never been the clean ones. We were not immaculately conceived; we were born in original sin. We carry with us all through life the downward pull of that fallen nature, which is always capable of elevation by grace and by fidelity. We have never been the clean ones, but we are always—if we choose to be so—the cleansed ones. She had one cleansing. We need many.

On this great solemnity, we want to be occupied with cleansing. In the collect we pray that through the intercession of Our Lady, our souls may be cleansed and admitted to God's presence. What is it that makes a soul or keeps a soul uncleansed? We know that sins, faults, and self-centeredness stain us. Let us ask how concerned we are about stains. The more we value a thing, the more careful we are to keep it unstained, unbroken, unchipped. Ordinarily, the care that one exercises toward an object is in direct ratio to its value. Anybody who has any sense at all is more concerned with caring for a thing of great value. We cannot be less wise than the children of this generation.

What is it that is most precious? Our immortal soul. It is this that we want to keep cleansed from stain, from sin. Father James Donohue, in his masterfully poetic *Exile in the Stars: A Book of Hours for the First Sunday in Advent*, gives us the moving line that asks God

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to purify us before we pray the Divine Office: "Take what is twisted and astray, / Take what is foreign to a soul."[1] What is foreign to a soul? It is anything that takes us away from the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, the image of God in us. God is the Truth, the Absolute, and the theological virtue of faith responds to that, giving him back the human image of truth, the truth of himself in which we believe. Then there is hope, which is our reflecting back the image of God as the exalted One, the supreme One, to whom we reach out this response of hope. Love, the third theological virtue, is the direct image of God, because he has revealed to us that he is love. He begets the faith response; he elicits the hope response. But love is image for image, love for love.

What is foreign to a soul then? Foreign to faith is darkness; we are wanting in faith in God when we do not live and act as though God is quite adequate to what he asks of us, as though God is not totally aware of our most secret thoughts. Again, the poem says, "If we obey unobserved, if we sin unattended . . ." No, this can never be possible. When we obey, we are observed; if we do not obey, we are observed. If we sin, we are observed; if we recoil from sin and fault and infidelity, we are observed. This is the light, responding to God in light. Nothing that brings darkness into our hearts is from God. It is foreign to a soul. When we find dark thoughts in our hearts, somber thoughts in our hearts, a lack of true faith that we can do all things in him who strengthens us, then we are wanting in faith, and there is something foreign to a soul.

Again, when there is heaviness, this is the opposite of hope. The soul is pure spirit. Spirit has buoyancy; it always rises up. When we are heavy of heart (which expresses itself in heaviness of expression, heaviness of motion, heaviness of manner, heaviness of gait), we are lacking in hope. Where hope is at work, buoyancy prevails. Heaviness of spirit is what is foreign to a soul. The lifting of the spirit—hope—is normal to a soul.

Any lack of loving radiance, any hardness is foreign to a soul, because the soul is the image of God, who is love. Whenever there is lack of love in any measure, whenever there is any hardness or any harshness (which is a very different thing from firmness, or even from sternness, or even, in some instances, from severity), these are foreign to a soul. These have nothing to do with love. Our dear Lord, in his human life, often spoke very firmly, sometimes sternly, a few times severely, but never harshly, not ever. For even when he used what one might say was his most terrible word, "you hypocrites", he was really pleading with them not to be so. Some of them did convert. There were Pharisees who did rally to him.

These are the things foreign to a soul: darkness, heaviness, hardness. These things were never in the Immaculate Mother of God. She chose to be always full of light. She chose to be buoyant in hope. And she chose always to love.

The poem says, "Take what is twisted and astray." What twists the soul? Complexity twists the soul. How can a soul be focused on God when it is full of complexities, and he is simple? He is all-simple. He is simplicity itself. Any complexities or complications twist the soul; they contort the soul.

A soul can be twisted all out of shape (to use the material term) by self-absorption, because a soul is meant to be always opening out in love. Self-absorption twists a soul. It is heartrending to see people who are afflicted with severe crippling arthritis or other severe maladies of the muscular system or the skeletal system. They are turned in, and we ache for them because this is not the way a body should normally look. What shall we say of a soul that is turned in by its own choice? It is twisted, and it is horrible.

The third element that twists a soul is nonconfrontation with the truth. The soul must stand before the truth. Our dear Lord said, "I am . . . the truth" (Jn 14:6). Any deviation from confrontation of ourselves in the truth twists a soul, cripples a soul. Whereas physical crippling is often a great gift from God, crippling of the soul is never from God.

In Our Lady we see no crippling of soul, no twisting. She was all-simple. She was certainly never self-absorbed. Even when she turned inward in prayer at the greatest announcement of all history, the Annunciation,

[1] James J. Donohue, *Exile in the Stars: A Book of Hours for the First Sunday in Advent* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 1.

she turned right out. She went out to serve. Her prayer always turned in and out, in and out. It was never rooted in self. Always she confronted the truth.

Consider the word “astray”. In the great prayer of the Church, the Sequence of the Holy Spirit, we have the words *rege quod est devium*, “rule what is off the way”: *de-viam, de-vium*. What takes the soul astray? Again, we can consider three points. Willfulness, insisting on taking the dead-end road, leads us astray. I know God’s will, but no, I want it my way. This is the situation he proposes, the circumstances, the unexpected, but I want something else. I am willful. I want to go down this dead-end road.

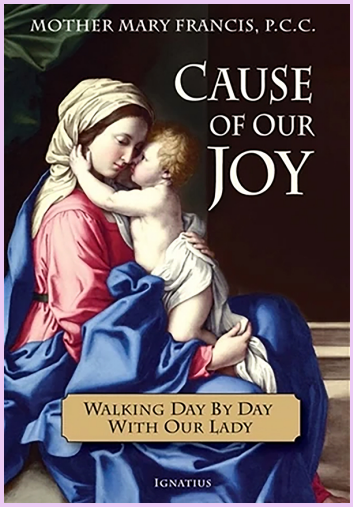
A pattern of unfaithfulness leads us astray, so that after a while we lose the straightness of the road. Our Lady never deviated from God’s will but continued straight forward. An inebriated man careens down the street. Sometimes cheap jokes are made about this, but it is not funny. That is not the way a human is made to walk. Spiritually, what shall we say of a pattern of unfaithfulness when we weave until we lose the path?

Third, excuses are dangerous bypaths that lead us off the road. Our Lady gave us a whole life of faithfulness; it is handed down that she lived to the age of seventy-two, a venerable age in those days. Certainly during those years, she never made excuses. For her there were no bypaths.

This is the cleanliness of soul with which we want to be especially occupied as we pray that God will indeed take what is foreign to a soul. We must allow him to take it. He will not force us into cleanliness. Remember, each act of contrition, each act of confrontation with the truth, each act of fidelity is achieving that cleanliness so that we may come with clean hearts to him. A house does not need to be cleaned just once. We might say in jest, “We don’t need to clean this Christmas. We cleaned sixty years ago when we came here. Why, we even cleaned last year.” We keep cleaning and cleaning. On the spiritual plane, we let God cleanse us and cleanse us. Contrition is a very beautiful thing when it is coupled with firm amendment.

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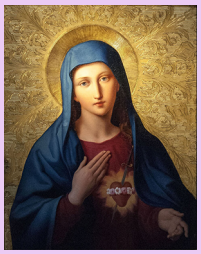
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Mother Mary Francis, P.C.C., is a contemplative Poor Clare nun and an acclaimed spiritual writer who wrote with an intimate familiarity of the Mother of God. To her Mary was real, lovable, and accessible, and her words help the reader to discover that walking with Our Lady day by day is the cause of our unending joy.

These meditations on Mary are filled with wisdom and hope. On ordinary days, on Marian holy days, and in times of spiritual and moral challenges, they offer the strength and the consolation that come from a relationship with the Mother of Jesus.



A Child's Prayer to the Immaculate One

O sinless one, behold your spotted child!
Reveal once more your mystery in me:

How maculate cries to Immaculata:
"Come, cleanse me,
Scour with love my spotted heart.

Dispatch me on my mission to proclaim
To all disheartened sinners on the earth:
Behold me, the forgiven one! Behold!

Till all despairing spirits find their wings
And fly on broken wings
Home to God's heart."