



# HAIL

REFLECTIONS ON THE  
MYSTERIES OF THE ROSARY

# MARY

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ASSOCIATION OF  
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## STRONG ENOUGH TO BELIEVE

THE WORD IS MADE FLESH. THE FLESH IS THE MOTHER'S. THE MOTHER IS WILLING.

—Sebastian Moore

It 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 mediadriven 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!





## *Ponder...*

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?

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'.

'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 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.

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).





## *Ponder...*

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?

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?

What does the beautiful image of a 'womb-like' mother love evoke for you and what words/feelings best describe your response?



## THINGS FALL APART

The 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 clearcut 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 things fall apart 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).*

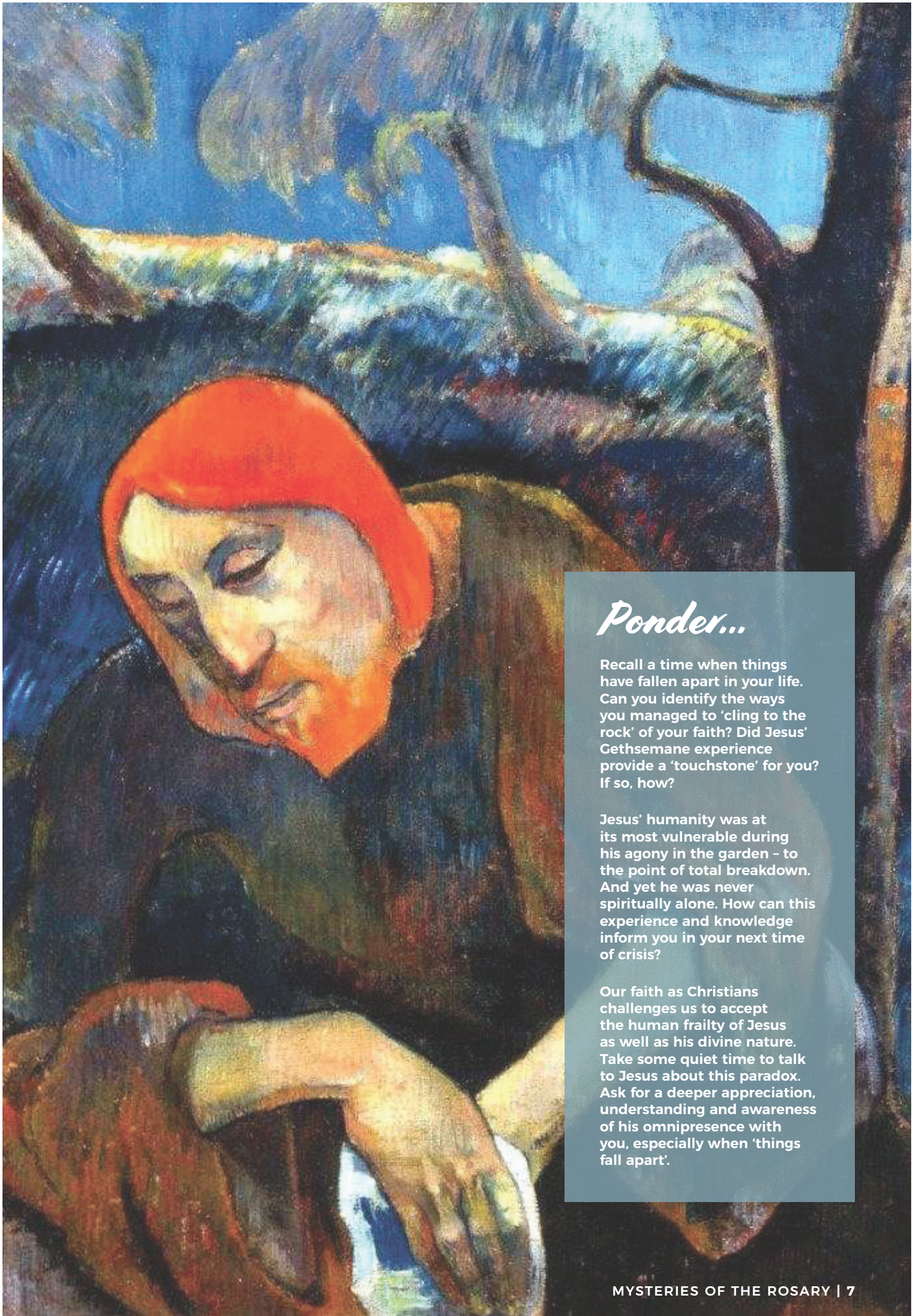
When we pray the Rosary and reflect on the First Sorrowful Mystery, Jesus' Agony in the Garden, we see how Jesus, our brother, totally shared in our similar struggles. Jesus experienced how the encounter with God can be both terrifying and 'bruising'.

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.





## *Ponder...*

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?

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?

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'.



## THINGS WE CARRY

BE KIND, FOR EVERYONE YOU MEET IS FIGHTING A HARD BATTLE.

—lan 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  
boughs. The son watched  
Them. Let me go there, he said.*

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Here is the Christ pattern of the journey of faith. In becoming human, in living a life of ordinariness, trial, faith, death, surrender, Resurrection and return to God, he is our 'way'.





## *Ponder...*

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?

'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?

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?

## HE ROSE IN SILENCE

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*

In 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.'





## *Ponder...*

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?

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.

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.

## THE GAZE OF THE DELIGHTED OTHER

THE TRUE GOD GIVES HIS FLESH AND BLOOD. —Les Murray

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.





## *Ponder...*

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.

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.

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.

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.

## THE DEAREST FRESHNESS DEEP DOWN THINGS

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.'

### GOD'S GRANDEUR

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God*

...

*Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared  
with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's  
smell; the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down  
things;  
And though the last lights off the black West  
went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward,  
springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah!  
bright wings.*

—Gerard Manley Hopkins SJ (1877)

*Transfiguration* (2010)  
by Susan Tilt





## *Ponder...*

Can you recall a time in your own faith journey when you have come 'face to face' with the mystery of Jesus? Perhaps in a time of personal prayer or at a significant liturgical celebration (Christmas/ Easter, Sacramental, Requiem) or perhaps in a 'one on one' encounter with another human being. Recall and savour the 'enchantment' of the experience.

'What would the world look like if we could all see each other as we really are?' i.e. the way God sees each one of us. Try intentionally doing this for a day and reflect on the outcome. How did it challenge you? How did it console you?

As an 'ordinary mystic', in which unlikely people and unlikely places do you see Jesus transfigured ('the divine shining presence of God')? Are you ever one of the unlikely? When? How?



# 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*