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ASPIRE

A MAGAZINE FOR HIGH SCHOOL RELIGION TEACHERS



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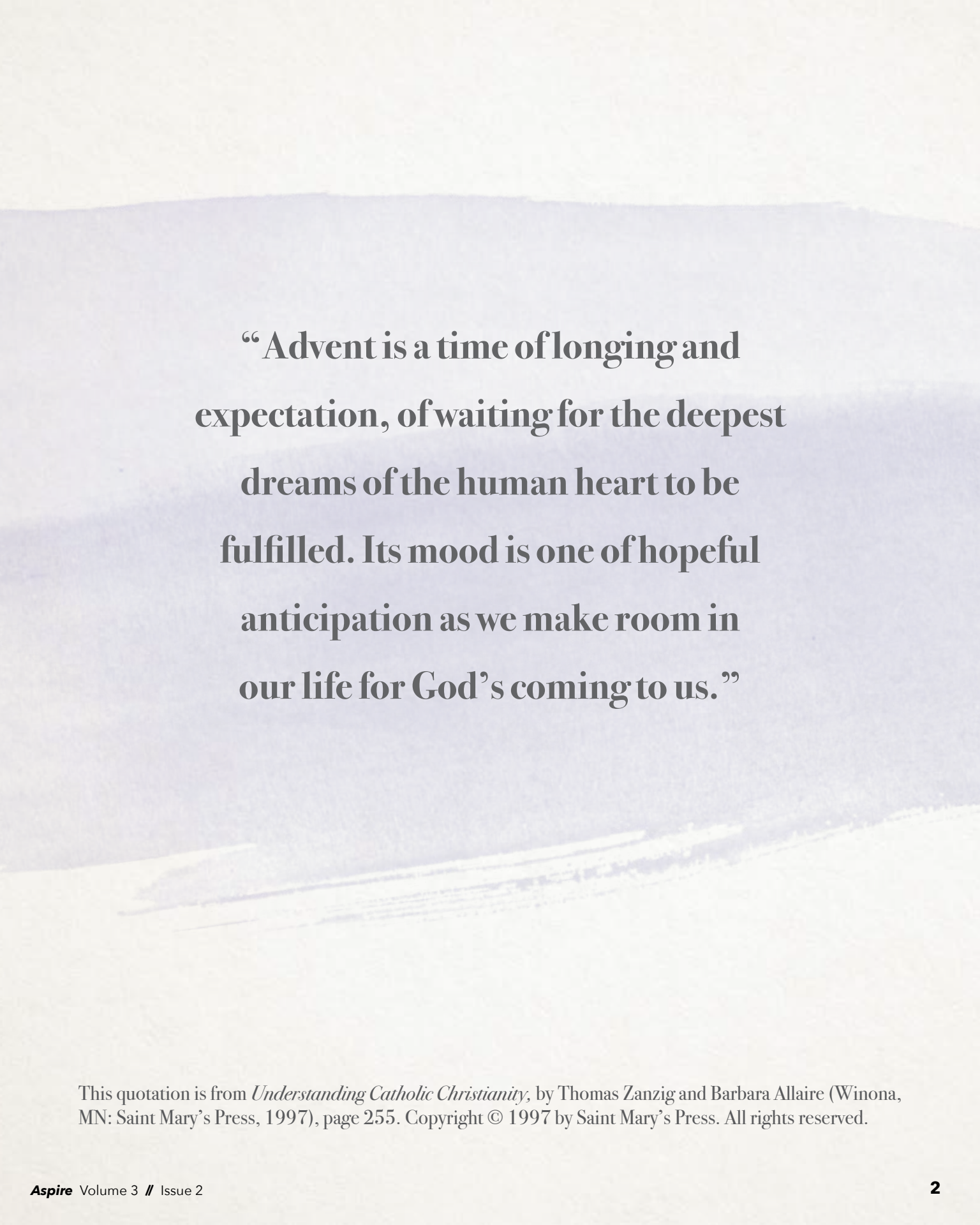
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Advent: Let God Be God



“Advent is a time of longing and expectation, of waiting for the deepest dreams of the human heart to be fulfilled. Its mood is one of hopeful anticipation as we make room in our life for God’s coming to us.”

This quotation is from *Understanding Catholic Christianity*, by Thomas Zanzig and Barbara Allaire (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 1997), page 255. Copyright © 1997 by Saint Mary’s Press. All rights reserved.

FROM THE EDITOR

Advent is a time of invitation. This holy season invites us to empty our hearts of all that holds us back from a loving relationship with God and with one another. Fear, selfishness, insecurity, busyness, regret, and so many other negative attitudes and behaviors weigh us down in darkness. Advent reminds us that we are called to be people of the light. This issue of *Aspire* offers inspiration and some practical tips for opening our hearts once again to the light of Christ.

We take a deep dive into Mary and her vital yes that made the Incarnation possible. As the ideal disciple, Mary inspires us to venture through Advent with the same bold yes! Yes to Jesus. Yes to the call to remain faithful. Yes to the vulnerability that love requires. Yes to finding new ways to live out a Christian life. Mary, as the first and most faithful disciple, can guide us with her beautiful witness as we study and emulate her tremendous faith this Advent season.

We supplement this study of Mary with practical resources to help you and your students find depth in this Advent journey. For those who thrive on practical to-do lists, the reflection "Five Ways to Jump-Start Your Faith this Advent Season" offers clear steps for growth and awareness. For the more contemplative among us, an Advent poem invites us to pause and reflect. For us all, an examination of conscience invites us to reflect on the darkness in our hearts and clear the way for the coming of Christ.

As we light each candle on the Advent wreath, let us respond to God's invitation, as Mary did, with a resounding yes!



Julie Mickler

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

Saint Mary's Press is a nonprofit, Lasallian Catholic publisher administered by the Christian Brothers of the Midwest District. Our focus is a contemporary expression of the Catholic Church's mission to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and the Lasallian mission to provide a human and Christian education for young people, including those who are economically deprived. With our partners in schools, parishes, and families, we share the Good News of Jesus Christ with Catholic Christian children and young people through publications and services.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Mallorie Bussey, Janet Claussen,
Dennis M. Doyle, Steven Ellair, Pat Finan,
Anne T. Herrick, Rick Keller-Scholz,
Ann Marie Lustig, Julie Mickler,
Steve Mino, Alan J. Talley, Laurie Ziliak

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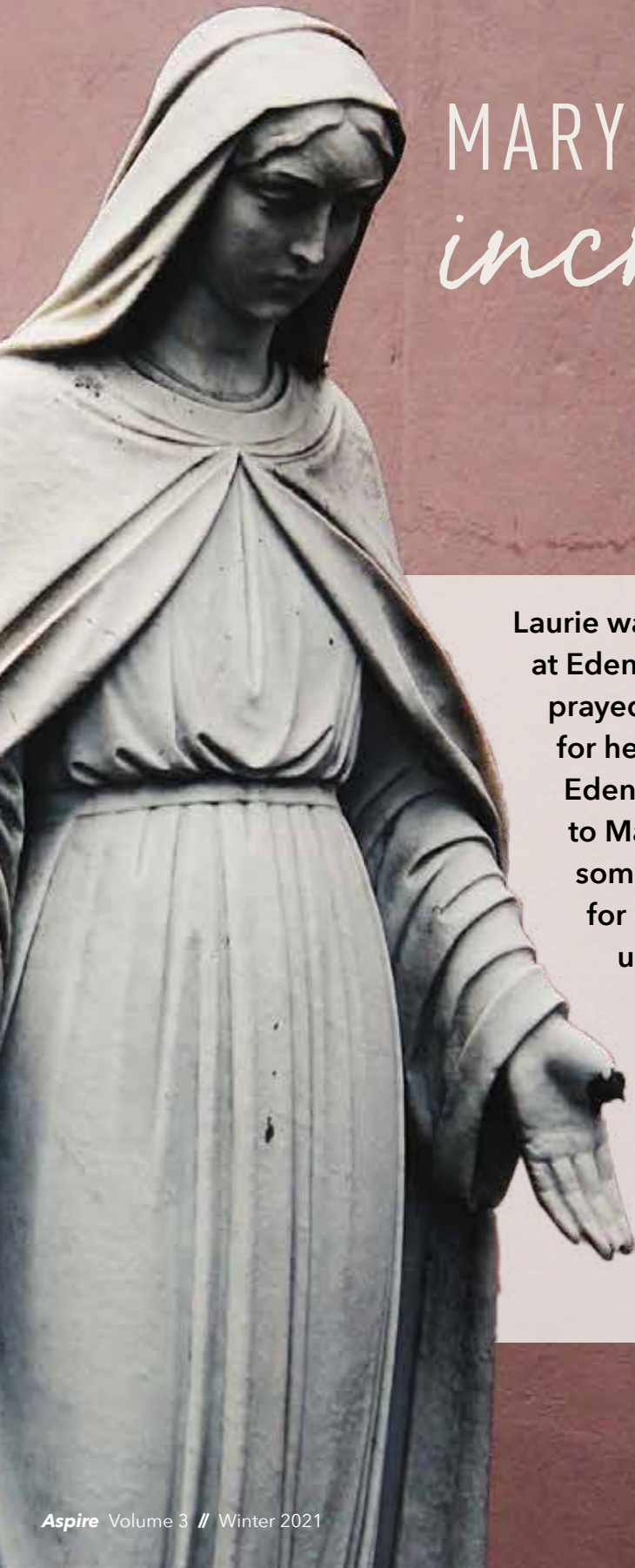


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An Examination of Conscience

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MARY'S *incredible role* IN GOD'S PLAN

BY ALAN J. TALLEY

Laurie was confused when she spent the night at Eden's house. Before Eden went to bed, she prayed a Hail Mary for her sick grandmother and for her brother who is in the army. Laurie said to Eden: "God is all-powerful. Why are you praying to Mary?" Eden replied: "I do pray to God. But sometimes I pray to Mary to ask her to intercede for me. Mary is the mother of Jesus; if anyone understands my fears and need for comfort, it would be her! It's kind of like asking you to pray for me. Catholics don't think Mary is God. We just recognize her special role as the mother of Jesus."

Catholic beliefs about Mary are often misunderstood, but they are firmly rooted in the Bible. The Gospel of Luke tells us a great deal about Mary and her role in God's saving plan.

THE HANDMAID OF THE LORD

The Gospel of Luke begins with a situation that is a frequent theme in Scripture. A faithful husband and wife, Zechariah and Elizabeth, are entering old age without having had any children. Sound like anyone you know from the Old Testament? Just as God promised Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age, he promises Zechariah and Elizabeth a son (who will grow up to be John the Baptist). Zechariah has a hard time believing this could happen and is given an unusual punishment—you'll have to read it for yourself (see Luke 1:5-25). However, this is all a warm-up for the main event.

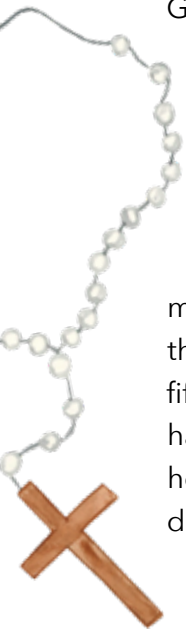
What comes next lays the foundation for the Incarnation and explains why Mary of Nazareth plays such an important role in God's plan and in the Catholic faith. As

Luke tells it, the angel Gabriel comes to Mary, explaining that although she is and will remain a virgin, she will miraculously conceive and have a son through the power of the Holy Spirit (see 1:26-38). Keep in mind that Mary is a young woman when this occurs, probably just fourteen or fifteen years old. This pregnancy is a hardship and even dangerous. Joseph, her fiancé, might very well leave her (he doesn't). In her culture, as an unwed,

pregnant woman, she would be shamed and very likely even stoned to death by her community. It is hard to imagine what she is thinking and feeling, but her response is a beautiful and powerful act of faith: **"May it be done to me according to your word"** (Luke 1:38).

Mary could say no, but she doesn't. Her openness to God's will leads to the Incarnation. At the moment she conceives, she becomes the Mother of God. The baby in her womb is the son of Mary and the Son of God, fully human and fully divine. As such an important moment in salvation history, it is no wonder we celebrate Mary's courageous yes to the angel Gabriel during the Feast of the Annunciation, on March 25 every year.

Can you imagine the all-powerful God allowing a key part of his plan for our salvation to depend on the actions of an uneducated teenager from a small, remote village? Yet this is what he does, and because of Mary's complete trust in God, she plays a crucial role in God's plan for our salvation. In Luke, she describes herself as the "handmaid of the Lord" (1:38). Mary is expressing her willingness to be God's servant, putting God's plan ahead of her own wants.





“FULL OF GRACE”

Our beliefs about Mary also show that even though God may ask a lot of us, he always provides for us and cares for us. **When Mary says yes to the angel Gabriel, she does not know where this decision will take her.** The author of Luke gives us a hint in chapter 2. Forty days after Jesus is born, Mary and Joseph go to the Temple in Jerusalem for Mary’s purification (as required by the Mosaic Law) and to consecrate Jesus to God’s service (see Luke 2:22-38). While they are there, a devout older Jew named Simeon recognizes that Mary’s baby is the promised Messiah. Simeon blesses God for allowing him to see this and then makes a prediction. He tells Mary, “This child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted (and you yourself a sword will pierce)” (verses 34-35).

Simeon’s prophecy must have been another shock to Mary. He is telling her that Jesus is going to change the world and that she herself will experience sorrow and pain. Her yes to the angel Gabriel will take her on a challenging journey. She will see her baby grow into a loving son. She will see him leave his family to complete his divine mission, following God the Father’s will. The Jewish religious leaders’ opposition to his mission will confuse her. And her heart will break when Jesus’ mission seemingly ends as she witnesses his Crucifixion.

Despite all these things, **Mary’s faith in God never wavers.** She teaches us an important spiritual truth: God never asks us to do something without giving us the grace we need to handle it. God gave Mary unparalleled graces

to prepare her to be the Mother of God. One of those graces was the gift of her Immaculate Conception. It's a popular misunderstanding that the Immaculate Conception is about Jesus' conception. It actually refers to Mary's conception.

As the future mother of the Son of God, Mary is conceived without Original Sin.

Moreover, she remains free from sin throughout her whole life. Imagine that . . . living your entire life without once giving in to the temptation to commit a single sin!

God's grace guides Mary throughout her life. She remains a virgin her entire life, which is a sign of her total

dedication to serving God as "the handmaid of the Lord" (Luke 1:38). This might seem confusing because some Scripture passages mention Jesus' "brothers" (see Luke 8:19-21). However, these are not Jesus' biological siblings. There are two possible explanations for this. The first is that Joseph may have been a widower when he married Mary, and these brothers are Joseph's children by his previous wife. The second explanation is that in the culture of that time, extended families were very close. You thought of your uncles and aunts as your second parents and your cousins as your brothers and sisters. So, people often referred to their cousins as their brothers and sisters.

God's grace also helps Mary in her role as the first disciple. A disciple is someone who follows an influential teacher. Mary is the most faithful follower of Jesus. She, along with Joseph, seeks the twelve-year-old Jesus when he is lost and finds him in the Temple (see Luke 2:41-52). She is the first to believe in his power at the

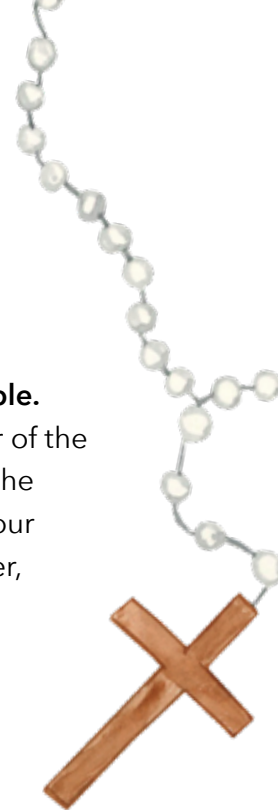


wedding in Cana (see John 2:5). She follows Jesus throughout his ministry, is at the foot of the cross (see Luke 23:49), and is in the upper room with the disciples awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 1:14).

When Mary and the Beloved Disciple are at the foot of the cross, Jesus tells her, “Woman, behold, your son.” He tells the Beloved Disciple, “Behold, your mother”

(John 19:26–27). **Jesus now shares his mother with the entire Church, represented by the Beloved Disciple.**

This is why we call Mary the Mother of the Church. As our mother, she wants the best for us, which is why we bring our needs and concerns to her in prayer, knowing that she will intercede for us with her Son, Jesus Christ.



Alan J. Talley has worked as director of religious education, youth minister, teacher, and author. Alan holds a bachelor's degree with majors in government and religion from the College of William and Mary and a master's degree in religious education/catechetics from the Catholic University of America. Alan and his wife, Emily, live in Carrollton, Georgia. In addition to ministry and writing, Alan is a busy stay-at-home dad raising their two children, Rachel and Alex.



This article is from *Jesus Christ and the New Testament*, by Alan J. Talley, and is part of the framework curriculum series *Live Jesus in Our Hearts* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2019), pages 186–189. Copyright © 2019 by Saint Mary's Press. All rights reserved.

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Mary as a Disciple

This activity helps young people meet Mary in the Scriptures and understand her role as the first disciple.

1. Begin an exploration of Mary as the first disciple by explaining the word *disciple*, which means “follower, or one who believes in the teachings of a leader.”
2. Invite the students to examine the ways Mary was a disciple by copying the bolded statements about discipleship on this page and the next onto a sheet of newsprint. On another sheet of newsprint, write, in random order, the citations for the Scripture passages that illustrate how Mary is a model for each quality of discipleship.
3. Arrange the students into small groups, and assign each group several Scripture passages. Instruct the students to read each of the assigned passages and match the Scripture citation with the statement about discipleship that best shows how Mary illustrates it. When the students are done, discuss their responses, sharing the following explanations as appropriate:

Disciples of Jesus hear the Good News and freely choose to accept it.

(Luke 1:26–38) Mary accepted God’s invitation to be the mother of Jesus. She was the first one to hear the Gospel and freely choose to accept it.

Disciples do not keep the Gospel to themselves; they communicate it to others.

(Luke 1:39–44) Mary shared the Good News with Elizabeth.

Disciples of Jesus understand and live the call to stand with people who are poor and people who are oppressed.

(Luke 1:46–56) Mary’s Magnificat anticipated her Son’s message that God stands with people who are poor and people who are oppressed, throughout the ages.



Discipleship requires faith in the midst of difficulty or confusion.

(Luke 2:41-52) Mary found Jesus in the Temple. She did not fully understand his actions or his words, but she did respect his explanation.

Disciples are not afraid to challenge and to be persistent.

(John 2:1-12) Mary challenged Jesus at a wedding feast in Cana, prodding him to begin his ministry. He did not immediately grant her request for him to do something. When he was twelve, he had been about his Father's business. As an adult, he said it was not his time. Mary persisted and proclaimed her faith in him when she directed the stewards to do what he told them to do.

Disciples hear the Word of God and do it.

(Luke 8:19-21) Mary was the first of many to be called a disciple because of her belief and actions.

Disciples are faithful to Jesus in the face of suffering and tragedy.

(John 19:25-27) Mary and a handful of other women were with Jesus at his death. In the face of great suffering and tragedy, being a disciple of Jesus can be a great challenge and yet a comfort.

Disciples are part of the larger community of the Church.

(Acts 1:13-14) Mary was present in the upper room with the other disciples who devoted themselves constantly to prayer. This group witnessed the coming of the Holy Spirit, the first Pentecost, the beginning of the Church.



This activity is adapted from *Biblical Women: Exploring Their Stories with Girls*, from the *Voices* series, by Janet Claussen (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2002), page 88. Copyright © 2002 by Saint Mary's Press. All rights reserved.

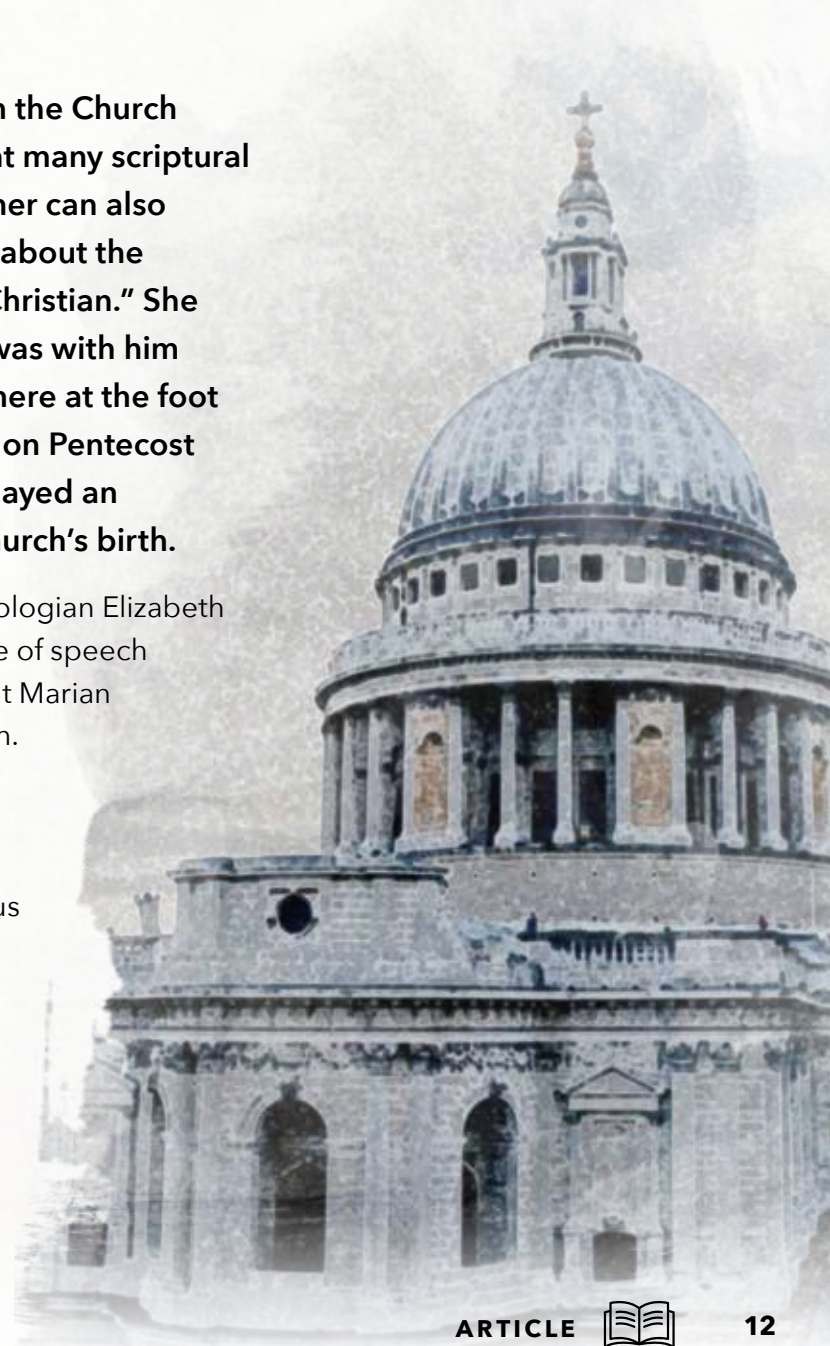


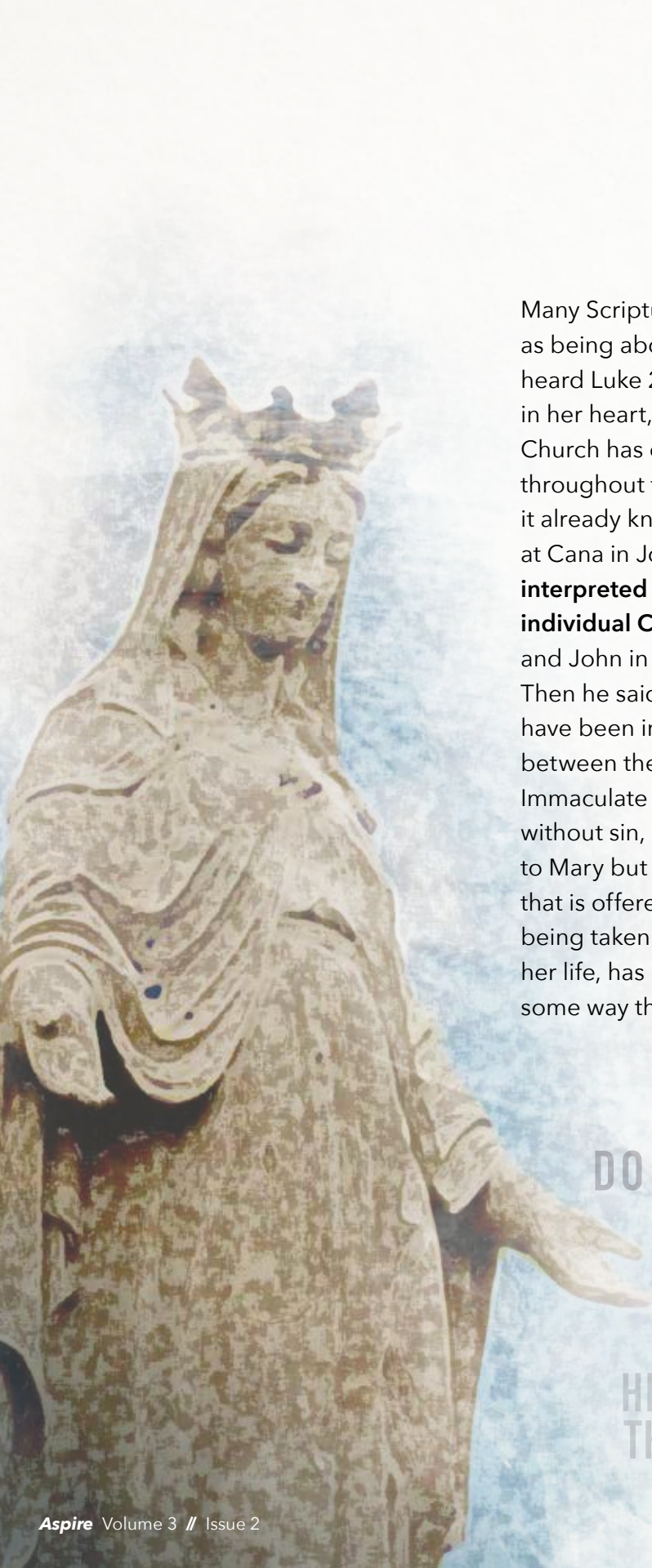
what is said about **MARY** is said about the **CHURCH**

BY DENNIS M. DOYLE

Mary has been so closely associated with the Church throughout the history of Christianity that many scriptural sayings and traditional teachings about her can also be understood as sayings and teachings about the Church. Many regard Mary as “the first Christian.” She gave birth to Jesus and raised him. She was with him during his public ministry, and she was there at the foot of the cross. Mary was with the Apostles on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended. Mary played an important role in each moment of the Church’s birth.

The Catholic Marian scholar and feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson has investigated the symbolic nature of speech about Mary.¹ She begins with the premise that Marian statements refer to both Mary and the Church. Throughout the Christian tradition, Mary has served as a vehicle for the Church to express its ideal self-realization. This is appropriate because of who Mary is as the mother of Jesus and because of how Mary is remembered for her role in the earliest of Christian communities. Thus, in the Christian tradition, memories of Mary and beliefs about the ideal Christian community are mixed; this is not a bad thing, however, because what can be said about one can also be said about the other.





Many Scripture passages about Mary are interpreted as being about the Church as well. For example, I have heard Luke 2:51, “his mother treasured all these things in her heart,” interpreted as foreshadowing the way the Church has developed and enlarged its body of teachings throughout the centuries. The Church is pondering what it already knows in its heart. Mary’s order to the servants at Cana in John 2:5, **“Do whatever he tells you,” has been interpreted also as the advice of the Church to each individual Christian.** Jesus’ words from the cross to Mary and John in John 19:26-27—“‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’”— have been interpreted as referring to the relationship between the Church and each Christian disciple. Mary’s Immaculate Conception, that she herself was conceived without sin, has been interpreted as referring not only to Mary but also in an ideal sense to the graced life that is offered to every person. Mary’s Assumption, her being taken bodily into Heaven at the completion of her life, has likewise been interpreted as signaling in some way the fate that awaits all redeemed persons.

DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU.

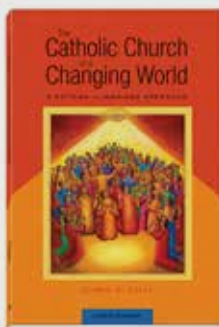
WOMAN, HERE IS YOUR SON.
HERE IS YOUR MOTHER.

HIS MOTHER TREASURED ALL
THESE THINGS IN HER HEART.

In the Catholic Tradition, the belief in Mary's Immaculate Conception and Assumption refers to her "privileges" that recognize her unique role in the plan of salvation as the Mother of God. At the same time, however, Mary's privileges are not intended to isolate her by cutting her off from the body of Christians; rather, these privileges signify things for which Christians and people of good will have reason to hope. Elizabeth Johnson has argued that in a Church community that acknowledges the fundamental equality in spiritual dignity of all Christians, **Mary and the saints ought to be understood as companions in hope**, from whom all can learn valuable lessons about Christian discipleship.²

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1. Elizabeth A. Johnson, "The Symbolic Character of Theological Statements about Mary," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22 (1985), 312-335.
 2. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

Dennis M. Doyle received his doctorate in religious studies from the Catholic University of America. He has taught at the University of Dayton for thirty-two years. In recent years, he has been a guest professor at the University of Augsburg and the University of Regensburg.



This article is an excerpt from *The Catholic Church in a Changing World: A Vatican II-Inspired Approach*, by Dennis M. Doyle (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2019), pages 234–235. Copyright © 2019 by Anselm Academic. All rights reserved. www.anselmacademic.org.



MARY, OUR MOTHER

Mary is the spiritual mother of all Christians. Explore what this means for Jesus, the Church, and you by completing the sections on this page and the next.

MOTHER OF GOD

Read John 2:1-11.

Identify two things Mary does for Jesus in this story.

How do these things help Jesus?



MOTHER OF THE CHURCH

Read John 19:25-27.

What does Jesus tell Mary? What does Jesus tell the disciple?

How could Mary and the disciple help each other after Jesus died on the cross?

SPIRITUAL MOTHER

How does Mary help us as our spiritual mother? How can she help us as she helped Jesus? How can we come to know Jesus better through her?



This activity is adapted from the *Catholic Connections Handbook Teacher Guide: The New Testament and the Church*, by Pat Finan and Laurie Ziliak (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2015).
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Advent:

LET GOD BE GOD

During this season of Advent, we are reminded that God often takes us by surprise. In this poem, we hear how God is not bound by our concepts and demands but frequently reveals himself in unexpected ways.

Being in the wilderness reminds me to let God be God.

When I'm at home
In the day to day
I forget.

Sometimes I try to make God mine
To make God do things the way I think they should be done.

Sometimes I forget that it's not my job to be God
I think that every problem in the world is mine to solve

And that I'm not allowed to make mistakes.

But being in the wilderness reminds me to let God be God.



Could I imagine such beauty? Could I picture it in my mind?

Could I paint it on a canvas? Could I even capture its glory with a camera?
I couldn't do any of those.

But God has done them all, and more.

God has imagined it all, painted it, and given it *life*.

I couldn't do that. But I do have the chance to see it.

I hear it, the sounds of the river that never stops changing.

I smell it, the freshness of the air after a rain.

I feel it, cold dirt in my hands and warm sun on my skin.

And being in the wilderness reminds me to let God be God

So that I can be grateful for this gift, the life that surrounds me.

And I can cherish it, and protect it

From those who forget that God is God.

So that I can be grateful for this gift, the life within me.

Because God, who has given life to the wilderness

Has breathed that *life* into me.

And though I'll soon forget...

BEING IN THE WILDERNESS REMINDS ME TO LET GOD BE GOD.

This activity is reprinted from www.smp.org/resourcecenter/resource/2920

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Five Ways to Jump-Start Your Faith This Advent

1. Be intentional about paying attention!

Consider and become aware of what pops up in your day. How might God be getting your attention? What affirmations, blessings, and graces come into your day? What inner nudging, or movement, is the Spirit within initiating? Here are some ways God may get your attention:

- Someone says something to you that soothes your soul or provides the direction you need, as if they know your situation.
- A cool breeze rustles the leaves along your walk.
- A kindness is shown to you that was unexpected.
- An opportunity presents itself to respond in kindness or to help another.
- Any one of the fruits of the Spirit that show up in the moments of your day, in a given situation: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.



2. Be grateful!

Start your day by identifying three things for which you are grateful and share that with God in prayer. Lather, rinse, and repeat at day's end! Do this for each day of Advent, committing to an Advent calendar of gratefulness.

3. Review and reflect on your day.

You started your day by identifying three things for which you were grateful and shared that with God in prayer. Lather, rinse, and repeat at day's end! Do this for each day of Advent, committing to an Advent calendar of gratefulness.

- Become aware that you are in the presence of God. Ask God to accompany you in a reflective walk through your day.
- Review the day with gratitude. For what are you thankful? What did you receive? What did you give?
- Pay attention to your emotions. What did you feel today? Saint Ignatius reminds us that our emotions help us detect the presence of God. What might God be trying to tell you through your emotions? What might God be asking you to do because of what you've felt? God may show you ways you fell short. Where is forgiveness needed? How might you choose to grow?
- Is there an area in your life or a relationship that needs attention? Is there a situation at school, work, within your family, or within yourself that could use some care?
- Ask God for the grace to respond to it in love and commit to a plan. Allow for a free-flowing prayer—whatever bubbles up—of praise or gratitude, bringing another's need before God, or asking for forgiveness and the grace to do and be better.
- Look toward tomorrow. Ask for what you need. How are you feeling about tomorrow? Talk with God openly and honestly. Don't hold back. Ask God to light your way, giving you understanding and hope!



4. Select a moment of your day and commit to living it by seeing through the eyes of Christ, loving through the heart of Christ, responding through the hands of Christ.

Saint Teresa of Ávila reminds us that “Christ has no body, now, but yours.” Make room in your life to reflect and do God’s work by forgiving and loving. God depends on each of us, to whom his Spirit has been given, and within whom the Spirit lives. Start small. Maybe it’s while you’re getting things (and little ones) ready to go in the morning or before bed in the evening, or while out getting groceries or running errands, when you connect with your spouse during the day, or during a meeting. Maybe it’s during some time for yourself.

5. Allow yourself to enter the experience of prayer—with your whole self—whether you pray at the start of the day, during mealtimes, in your own personal prayer time, or at Mass.

How do you do that? Take all your worries, hurt, joys, hope, broken relationships, gratitude, anger—all of it—and pray with it and through it. Find a good posture for prayer. Feel yourself in that posture. Sing. Pray aloud. Pray within. Surrender it all to God and pay attention to how God responds! God gives his whole self for us in Jesus. Let us give our whole selves back, in gratitude and love.

This reflection is excerpted from www.smp.org/resourcecenter/resource/14023

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Prayers for Advent

Scripture Focus: Zephaniah 3:14-18

Opening Prayer

Leader: Let us begin our prayer with the Sign of the Cross.

All: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Leader: This passage is read at Mass on the Wednesday before Christmas. In this passage, we, God's people, the Church, are Jerusalem. The prophet Zephaniah prepares us to greet Jesus, the King of Israel, when he comes to us as at Christmas. We can prepare to welcome Jesus with joy and gladness!

Reader: A reading from the Book of the Prophet Zephaniah. [Zephaniah 3:14-18]

Leader: As we ask Jesus for what we need, let us pray together: "We rejoice and are glad!"

All: We rejoice and are glad!

Leader: Lord Jesus, with thankful hearts we ask for your peace during this Advent season.

All: We rejoice and are glad!

Leader: Lord Jesus, we ask to have a gentle attitude toward everyone as we prepare for your coming at Christmas.

All: We rejoice and are glad!

Leader: Lord Jesus, we pray for our needs, and for the needs of those we know and love, especially for . . . [Invite the students to name people or situations they wish to pray for.]

All: We rejoice and are glad!

Closing Prayer

Leader: Today we realize that Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, all the time, and we are preparing to celebrate his coming among us. Because the Lord is in our midst, as the prophet Zephaniah told us, let us pray for the needs of all God's people, especially those who feel lonely and forgotten. Let us pray together:

All: Lord Jesus,

As we prepare to celebrate your coming to the world at Christmas, we pray for the needs of all people.

Give peace to the world. Give food to the hungry. Give shelter to those who are homeless. Help mothers, fathers, and newborn children. Help all children everywhere, especially those most in need.

Help us find ways to help others.

We ask this in your name, Lord Jesus, who came to us as a little child.

Amen.

This reflection is excerpted from www.smp.org/resourcecenter/resource/12829

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An Examination of Conscience

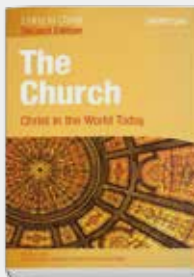
An examination of conscience invites us to prayerfully look into our hearts and reflect on how we have hurt our relationships with God and neighbor. The season of Advent is an ideal time to reflect honestly upon our thoughts, words, and actions and look for ways to live with greater integrity. This examination will prepare Catholic students for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. For non-Catholic students, it is an invitation to take an honest look at life's choices. For us all, it readies our hearts for the coming of the Christ. Allow approximately 15 minutes for quiet reflections and journaling.

Love of God

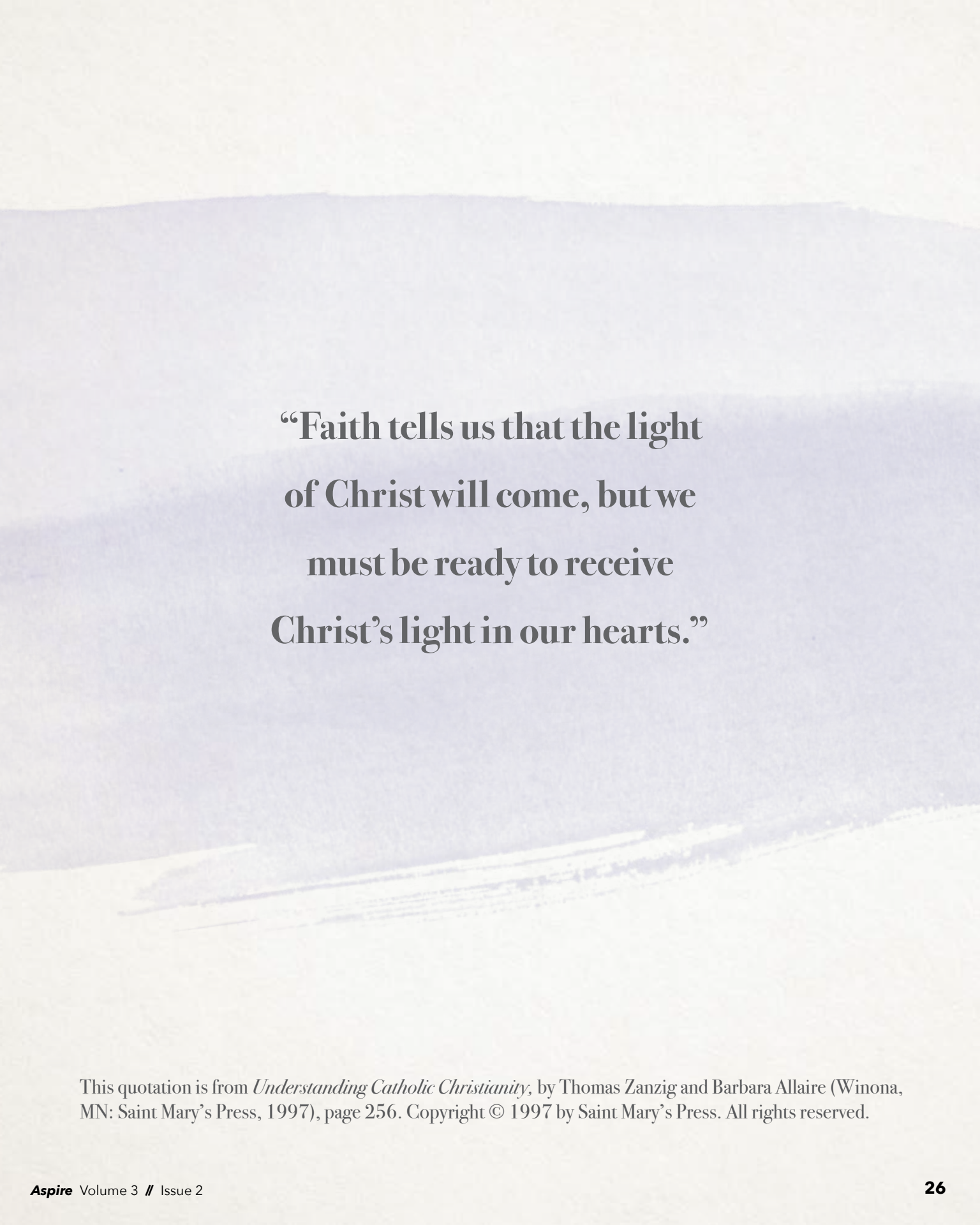
- Is there anything that I am allowing to take God's place in my life?
- Do I pray regularly, and when I do pray, do I give my full attention to my prayer?
- Do I attend Mass and receive the Eucharist every week? Do I keep Sunday holy?
- Am I making a good effort to grow in my relationship with God by receiving the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, by doing spiritual reading, and by going on retreats and participating in other spiritual practices?
- Am I always reverent to God in my words and actions?

Love of Neighbor

- Have I treated anyone with disrespect, especially my parents, brothers and sisters, teachers, and other people in authority?
- Have I obeyed the rules and laws of my school, state, and country?
- Have I harmed another person intentionally or through my careless actions? Have I been unkind or cruel to others in thought, word, or deed?
- Have I harmed another person's dignity by engaging in gossip or spreading demeaning stories about the person?
- Have I protected my chastity at all times? Have I viewed pornography, engaged in lustful thoughts, or been sexually active in any way outside of marriage?
- Have I been truthful in all situations calling for the truth? Have I cheated or been dishonest in any way?
- Have I been envious of someone else in any way?
- Have I participated in or supported another person's sinful actions?
- Have I been of service to others whom I was in a position to help? Have I reached out in some way to people in need?



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**“Faith tells us that the light
of Christ will come, but we
must be ready to receive
Christ’s light in our hearts.”**

This quotation is from *Understanding Catholic Christianity*, by Thomas Zanzig and Barbara Allaire (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 1997), page 256. Copyright © 1997 by Saint Mary’s Press. All rights reserved.