

Christmas Novena

Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori



The Nativity (detail) by Raphael Mengs; (1728-1779)

This Novena is translated from the Italian of Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori and was first published in 1758. Although this Novena is intended primarily as a preparation for the Feast of our Lord's Nativity, it can be used with spiritual profit at any time of the year as a devotion in honor of the Infant Jesus.

First Day

God's Love Revealed in His Becoming Man

Because our first parent Adam had rebelled against God, he was driven out of paradise and brought on himself and all his descendants the punishment of eternal death. But the Son of God, seeing man thus lost and wishing to save him from death, offered to take upon Himself our human nature and to suffer death Himself, condemned as a criminal on a cross. "But, My Son," we may imagine the eternal Father saying to Him, "think of what a life of humiliations and sufferings Thou wilt have to lead on earth. Thou wilt have to be born in a cold stable and laid in a manger, the feeding trough of beasts, while still an infant. Thou wilt have to flee into Egypt, to escape the hands of Herod. After Thy return from Egypt, Thou wilt have to live and work in a shop as a lowly servant, poor and despised. And finally, worn out with sufferings, Thou wilt have to give up Thy life on a cross, put to shame and abandoned by everyone." "Father," replies the Son, "all this matters not. I will gladly bear it all, if only I can save man."

What should we say if a prince, out of compassion for a dead worm, were to choose to become a worm himself and give his own life blood in order to restore the worm to life? But the eternal Word has done infinitely more than this for us, though He is the sovereign Lord of the world. He chose to become like us, who are immeasurably more beneath Him than a worm is beneath a prince, and He was willing to die for us, in order to win back for us the life of divine grace that we had lost by sin. When He saw that all the other gifts which He had bestowed on us were not sufficient to induce us to repay His love with love, He became man Himself and gave Himself all to us. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us"; "He loved us and delivered Himself up for us."

Prayer

O Great Son of God, Thou hast become man in order to make Thyself loved by men. But where is the love that men give Thee in return? Thou hast given Thy life blood to

save our souls. Why then are we so unappreciative that, instead of repaying Thee with love, we spurn Thee with ingratitude? And I, Lord, I myself more than others have thus ill-treated Thee. But Thy Passion is my hope. For the sake of that love which led Thee to take upon Thyself human nature and to die for me on the cross, forgive me all the offences I have committed against Thee.

I love Thee, O Word incarnate; I love Thee, O infinite goodness. Out of love for Thee, my God, I am so sorry for all the injuries I have done Thee that I could die of grief for these offences. Give me, O Jesus, Thy love. Let me no longer live in ungrateful forgetfulness of the love Thou bearest me. I wish to love Thee always. Grant that I may always persevere in this holy desire.

O Mary, Mother of God and my Mother, pray for me that Thy Son may give me the grace to love Him always, unto death. Amen.

Second Day

God's Love Revealed in His Being Born an Infant

When the Son of God became man for our sake, He could have come on earth as an adult man from the first moment of His human existence, as Adam did when he was created. But since the sight of little children draws us with an especial attraction to love them, Jesus chose to make His first appearance on earth as a little infant, and indeed as the poorest and most pitiful infant that was ever born. "God wished to be born as a little babe," wrote Saint Peter Chrysologus, "in order that He might teach us to love and not to fear Him." The prophet Isaias had long before foretold that the Son of God was to be born as an infant and thus give Himself to us on account of the love He bore us: "A child is born to us; a son is given to us."

My Jesus, supreme and true God! What has drawn Thee from heaven to be born in a cold stable, if not the love which Thou bearest us men? What has allured Thee from the bosom of Thy Father, to place Thee in a hard manger? What has brought Thee from Thy throne above the stars, to lay Thee down on a little straw? What has led Thee from the midst of the nine choirs of angels, to set Thee between two animals? Thou, who inflamest the seraphim with holy fire, art now shivering with cold in this stable! Thou, who settest the stars in the sky in motion, canst not now move unless others carry Thee in their arms! Thou, who givest men and beasts their food, hast need now of a little milk to sustain Thy life! Thou, who art the joy of heaven, dost now whimper and cry in suffering! Tell me, who has reduced Thee to such misery; "Love has done it," says Saint Bernard. The love which Thou bearest us men has brought all this on Thee.

Prayer

O Dearest Infant! Tell me, what hast Thou come on earth to do? Tell me, whom art Thou seeking? Yes, I already know. Thou hast come to die for me, in order to save me from hell. Thou hast come to seek me, the lost sheep, so that, instead of fleeing

from Thee any more, I may rest in Thy loving arms. Ah my Jesus, my treasure, my life, my love and my all! Whom will I love, if not Thee? Where can I find a father, a friend, a spouse more loving and lovable than Thou art?

I love Thee, my dear God; I love Thee, my only good. I regret the many years when I have not loved Thee, but rather spurned and offended Thee. Forgive me, O my beloved Redeemer; for I am sorry that I have thus treated Thee, and I regret it with all my heart. Pardon me, and give me the grace never more to withdraw from Thee, but constantly to love Thee in all the years that still lie before me in this life. My love, I give myself entirely to Thee; accept me, and do not reject me as I deserve.

O Mary, thou art my advocate. By thy prayers thou dost obtain whatever thou wilt from thy Son. Pray Him then to forgive me, and to grant me holy perseverance until death. Amen.

Third Day

The Life of Poverty which Jesus Led from His Birth

God so ordained that, at the time when His Son was to be born on this earth, the Roman emperor should issue a decree ordering everyone to go to the place of his origin and there be registered in the census. Thus it came about that, in obedience to this decree, Joseph went to Bethlehem together with his virgin wife when she was soon to have her Child. Finding no lodging either in the poor inn or in the other houses of the town, they were forced to spend the night in a cave that was used as a stable for animals, and it was here that Mary gave birth to the King of heaven. If Jesus had been born in Nazareth, He would also, it is true, have been born in poverty; but there He would at least have had a dry room, a little fire, warm clothes and a more comfortable cradle. Yet He chose to be born in this cold, damp cave, and to have a manger for a cradle, with prickly straw for a mattress, in order that He might suffer for us.

Let us enter in spirit into this cave of Bethlehem, but let us enter in a spirit of lively faith. If we go there without faith, we shall see nothing but a poor infant, and the sight of this lovely child shivering and crying on his rough bed of straw may indeed move us to pity. But if we enter with faith and consider that this Babe is the very Son, God, who for love of us has come down on earth and suffers so much to pay the penalty for our sins, how can we help thanking and loving Him in return?

Prayer

O dear Infant Jesus, how could I be so ungrateful and offend Thee so often, if I realized how much Thou hast suffered for me? But these tears which Thou sheddest, this poverty which Thou embraces! For love of me, make me hope for the pardon of all the offences I have committed against Thee.

My Jesus, I am sorry for having so often turned my back on Thee. But now I love

Thee above all else. "My God and my all!" From now on Thou, O my God, shalt be my only treasure and my only good. With Saint Ignatius of Loyola I will say to Thee, "Give me the grace to love Thee; that is enough for me." I long for nothing else; I want nothing else. Thou alone art enough for me, my Jesus, my life, my love.

O Mary, my Mother, obtain for me the grace that I may always love Jesus and always be loved by Him. Amen.

Fourth Day

The Life of Humiliation which Jesus Led from His Birth

The Sign which the angel gave the shepherds to help them find the new-born Savior, points to His lowliness: "This shall be a sign to you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." No other new-born baby who was wrapped in poor swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, a feeding trough for animals, could be found anywhere else but in a stable. Thus in lowliness the King of heaven, the Son of God, chose to be born, because he came to destroy the pride that had been the cause of man's ruin.

The prophets had already foretold that our Redeemer was to be treated as the vilest of men on earth and that He was to be overwhelmed with insults. How much contempt had not Jesus indeed to suffer from men! He was called a drunkard, a trickster, a blasphemer and a heretic. What ignominies He endured in His Passion! His own disciples abandoned Him; one of them sold Him for thirty pieces of silver, and another denied having ever known Him. He was led in bonds through the streets like a criminal; He was scourged like a slave, ridiculed as a fool, crowned with thorns as a mock king, buffeted and spit upon, and finally left to die, hanging on a cross between two thieves, as the worst criminal in the world. "The noblest of all," says Saint Bernard, "is treated as the vilest of all." But the Saint adds, "The viler Thou art treated, the dearer Thou art to me." The more I see Thee, my Jesus, despised and put to shame, the more dear and worthy of my love dost Thou become to me.

Prayer

O Dearest Savior, Thou hast embraced so many outrages for love of me, yet I have not been able to bear one word of insult without at once being filled with resentful thought--I who have so often deserved to be trodden under foot by the demons in hell! I am ashamed to appear before Thee, sinful and proud as I am. Yet do not drive me from Thy presence, O Lord, even though that is what I deserve. Thou hast said

that Thou wilt not spurn a contrite and humbled heart. I am sorry for the offences I have committed against Thee. Forgive me, O Jesus. I will not offend Thee again.

*F*or love of me Thou hast borne so many injuries; for love of Thee I will bear all the injuries that art done to me. I love Thee, Jesus, who wast despised for love of me. I love Thee above every other good. Give me the grace to love Thee always and to bear every insult for love of Thee.

O Mary, recommend me to Thy Son; pray to Jesus for me. Amen.

Fifth Day

The Life of Sorrow which Jesus Led from His Birth

*J*esus Christ could have saved mankind without suffering and dying. Yet, in order to prove to us how much He loved us, He chose for Himself a life full of tribulations. Therefore the prophet Isaias called Him "a man of sorrows," His whole life was filled with suffering. His Passion began, not merely a few hours before His death, but from the first moment of His birth. He was born in a stable where everything served to torment Him. His sense of sight was hurt by seeing nothing but the rough, black walls of the cave; His sense of smell was hurt by the stench of the dung from the beasts in the stable; His sense of touch was hurt by the prickling straw on which He lay. Shortly after His birth He was forced to flee into Egypt, where He spent several years of His childhood in poverty and misery. His boyhood and early manhood in Nazareth were passed in hard work and obscurity. And finally, in Jerusalem, He died on a cross, exhausted with pain and anguish.

*T*hus, then, was the life of Jesus but one unbroken series of sufferings, which were doubly painful because He had ever before His eyes all the sufferings He would have to endure till His death. Yet, since our Lord had voluntarily chosen to bear these tribulations for our sake, they did not afflict Him as much as did the sight of our sins, by which we have so ungratefully repaid Him for His love towards us. When the confessor of Saint Margaret of Cortona saw that she never seemed satisfied with all the tears she had already shed for her past sins, he said to her, "Margaret, stop crying and cease your lamenting, for God has surely forgiven you your offences against Him." But she replied, "Father, how can I cease to weep, since I know that my sins kept my Lord Jesus in pain and suffering during all His life?"

Prayer

O Jesus, my sweet Love! I too have kept Thee suffering through all Thy life. Tell me, then, what I must do in order to win Thy forgiveness. I am ready to do all Thou askest

of me. I am sorry, O sovereign Good, for all the offences I have committed against Thee. I love Thee more than myself, or at least I feel a great desire to love Thee. Since it is Thou who hast given me this desire, do Thou also give me the strength to love Thee exceedingly.

*I*t is only right that I, who have offended Thee so much, should love Thee very much. Always remind me of the love Thou hast borne me, in order that my soul may ever burn with love of Thee and long to please Thee alone. O God of love, I, who was once a slave of hell, now give myself all to Thee. Graciously accept me and bind me to Thee with the bonds of Thy love. My Jesus, from this day and forever in loving Thee will I live, and in loving Thee will I die.

O Mary, my Mother and my hope, help me to love Thy dear God and mine. This is the only favor I ask of thee, and through thee I hope to receive it. Amen.

Sixth Day

God's Mercy revealed in His Coming Down from Heaven to Save us

Saint Paul says, "The goodness and kindness of God, our Savior, has appeared." When the Son of God made Man appeared on earth, then was it seen how great is God's goodness towards us. Saint Bernard says that first God's power was manifested in the creation of the world and His wisdom in its conservation, but His merciful goodness was especially manifested later in His taking human nature on Himself, in order to save fallen mankind by His sufferings and death. For what greater proof of His kindness towards us could the Son of God show us than in taking on Himself the punishment we had deserved?

See Him as a weak, newborn infant, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Unable to move or feed Himself, He has need of Mary to give Him a little milk to sustain His life. Or see Him again in Pilate's courtyard, tied with fast bonds to a column and there scourged from head to foot. Behold Him on the way to Calvary, falling down from weakness under weight of the cross that He must carry. Finally behold Him nailed to this tree of shame, on which He breathes His last amid pain and anguish. Because Jesus Christ wished that His love for us should win all the love of our hearts for Himself, He would not send an angel to redeem us, but chose to come Himself, to save us by His Passion and death. Had an angel been our redeemer, men would have had to divide their hearts in loving God as their Creator and an angel as their redeemer; but God, who desires men's whole hearts, as He was already their Creator, wished also to be their Redeemer.

Prayer

O my dear Redeemer! Where should I be now, if Thou hadst not borne with me so patiently, but hadst called me from life while I was in the state of sin? Since Thou hast waited for me till now, forgive me quickly, O my Jesus, before death finds me still guilty of so many offences that I have committed against Thee. I am so sorry for

having vilely despised Thee, my sovereign Good that I could die of grief. But Thou canst not abandon a soul that seeks Thee.

If hitherto I have forsaken Thee, I now seek Thee and love Thee. Yes, my God, I love Thee above all else; I love Thee more than myself. Help me, Lord, to love Thee always during the rest of my life. Nothing else do I seek of Thee. But this I beg of Thee, this I hope to receive from Thee.

Mary, my hope, do thou pray for me. If thou prayest for me, I am sure of grace. Amen.

Seventh Day

The Flight of the Infant Jesus into Egypt

Although the Son of God came from heaven to save men, scarcely was He born when men began to persecute Him to death. Herod, fearing that this Child would deprive Him of his kingdom, seeks to destroy His life. But St. Joseph is warned by an angel in a dream to take the Infant and His Mother and flee into Egypt. Joseph obeys at once, and tells Mary about it. He takes the few tools of his trade, that he may use them to gain a livelihood in Egypt for himself and his poor family. Mary wraps up a small bundle of clothes for the use of her little Son, and then, going to the crib, she says with tears in her eyes to her sleeping Child, "O my Son and my God! Thou hast come from heaven to save men; but hardly art Thou born when they seek to take Thy life." Lifting Him meanwhile in her arms and continuing to weep, she sets out that same night with Joseph on the road to Egypt.

Let us consider how much these holy wanderers must have suffered in making so long a journey, deprived of every comfort. The divine Child was not yet able to walk, and so Mary and Joseph had to take turns in carrying Him in their arms. During their journey through the desert towards Egypt they had to spend several nights in the open air, with the bare ground for their bed. The cold makes the Infant cry, and Mary and Joseph weep in pity for Him. And who would not weep at thus seeing the Son of God poor and persecuted, a fugitive on earth, that He might not be killed by His enemies!

Prayer

Dear Infant Jesus, crying so bitterly! Well hast Thou reason to weep in seeing Thyself persecuted by men whom Thou lovest so much. I, too, O God, have once persecuted Thee by my sins. But Thou knowest that now I love Thee more than myself, and that nothing pains me more than the thought that I have so often spurned Thee, my sovereign Good.

*F*orgive me, O Jesus, and let me bear Thee with me, in my heart, on all the rest of the journey that I have still to make through life, so that together with Thee I may enter into eternity. So often have I driven Thee from my soul by my sins. But now I love Thee above all things, and I regret above other misfortunes that I have offended Thee. I wish to leave Thee no more, my beloved Lord. But do Thou give me the strength to resist temptations. Never permit me to be separated from Thee again. Let me rather die than ever again lose Thy good grace.

O Mary, my hope, make me always to live in God's love and then die in loving Him.
Amen.

Eighth Day

The Life of the Child Jesus in Egypt and in Nazareth

Our Blessed Redeemer spent the first part of His childhood in Egypt, leading there for several years a life of poverty and humiliation. In that land Joseph and Mary were foreigners and strangers, having there neither relatives nor friends. Only with difficulty could they earn their daily bread by the labor of their hands. Their home was poor, their bed was poor, and their food was poor. Here Mary weaned Jesus; dipping a piece of bread in water, she would put it in the sacred mouth of her Son. Here she made His first little garments and clothed Him with them. Here the Child Jesus took His first steps, stumbling and falling as other children first do. Here too He spoke His first words, but stammering, O wonder of wonders! To what has not God lowered Himself for love of us! A God stumbling and falling as He walks! A God stammering in His speech!

Not unlike this was the poor and humble life that Jesus led in Nazareth after His return from Egypt. There, until He was thirty years old, He lived as a simple servant or workman in a carpenter shop, taking orders from Joseph and Mary. "And He was subject to them." Jesus went to fetch the water; He opened and closed the shop; He swept the house, gathered the fragments of wood for the fire, and toiled all day long, helping Joseph in his work. Yet who is this? God Himself, serving as an apprentice! The omnipotent God, who with less than a flick of His finger created the whole universe, here sweating at the task of planning a piece of work! Should not the mere thought of this move us to love Him?

Prayer

O Jesus, my Savior! When I consider how, for love of me, Thou didst spend thirty years of Thy life hidden and unknown in a poor workshop, how can I desire the pleasures and honors and riches of the world? Gladly do I renounce all these things, since I wish to be Thy companion on this earth, poor as Thou wast, mortified and

humble as Thou wast, so that I may hope to be able one day to enjoy Thy companionship in heaven. What are all the treasures and kingdoms of this world? Thou, O Jesus, art my only treasure, my only Good!

I keenly regret the many times in the past when I spurned Thy friendship in order to satisfy my foolish whims. I am sorry for them with all my heart. For the future I would rather lose my life a thousand times than lose Thy grace by sin. I wish never to offend Thee again, but always to love Thee. Help me to remain faithful to Thee until death.

O Mary, thou art the refuge of sinners, thou art my hope. Amen.

Ninth Day

The Birth of Jesus in the Stable of Bethlehem

When the edict was issued by the emperor of Rome that everyone should go to his own, Joseph and Mary went to be enrolled in Bethlehem. How much the holy Virgin must have suffered on this journey of four days, over mountainous road and in the wintertime, with its cold rain and wind! When they arrived in Bethlehem, the time of Mary's delivery was near. Joseph, therefore, sought some lodging where she might give birth to her Child. But because they were so poor, they were driven away from the houses and even from the public inn, where other poor people had found shelter. So in that night they went a short way out of the town and there found a cave that was used as a stable, and here Mary entered. But Joseph said to his virgin wife, "Mary, how can you spend the night in this cold, damp cave and here give birth to your Child?" Mary however replied, "Dear Joseph, this cave is the royal palace in which the King of kings, the Son of God, wishes to be born."

When the hour of her delivery had arrived, the holy Virgin, as she knelt in prayer, all at once saw the cave illumined with a dazzling light. She lowered her eyes to the ground and there saw before her the Son of God now born on earth, a poor little Babe, crying and shivering in the cold. Adoring Him as her God, she took Him to her breast and fondled Him. Then she wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him on the straw of the manger that stood in the cave. Thus did the Son of God choose to be born among us to prove His infinite love for us.

Prayer

O Adorable Infant Jesus! I should not have the boldness to cast myself at Thy feet, if I did not know that Thou Thyself invitest me to draw near Thee. It is I who by my sins have made Thee shed so many tears in the stable of Bethlehem. But since Thou hast come on earth to pardon repentant sinners, forgive me also, now that I am heartily sorry for having spurned Thee, my Savior and my God, who art so good and who hast

loved me so much.

In this night, in which Thou bestowest great graces on so many souls, grant Thy heavenly consolation to this poor soul of mine also. All that I ask of Thee is the grace to love Thee always, from this day forward, with all my heart. Set me all on fire with Thy holy love. I love Thee, O my God, who hast become a Babe for love of me. Never let me cease from loving Thee evermore.

O Mary, Mother of Jesus and my Mother, thou canst obtain everything from thy Son by thy prayers. This is the only favor I ask of Thee. Do thou pray to Jesus for me. Amen.

