

ORIENS

A Pilgrimage Through Advent and Christmas

November 28, 2021 – February 2, 2022

FR. JOEL SEMBER



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*Dedicated to Saint Joseph,
foster father of Jesus
and father of spiritual fatherhood*

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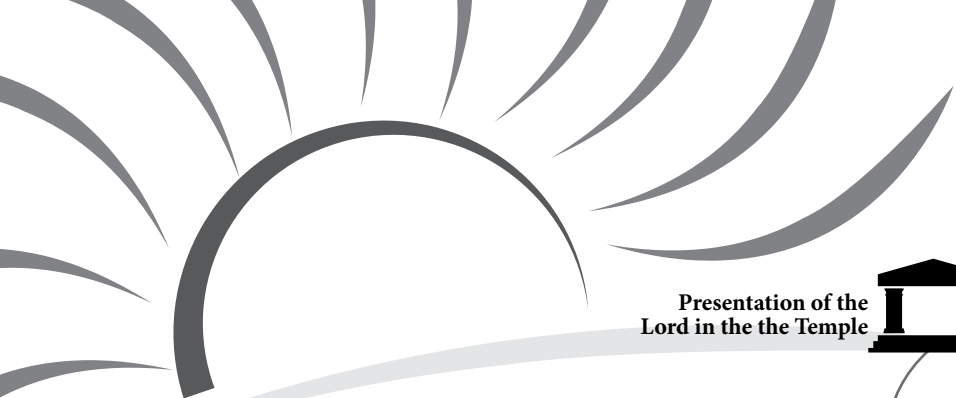
*and to James and Marion Sember
and family who keep me humble*

+

*and to all my fellow pilgrims
who walked with me on
Oriens 2020 last year*

+

¡Buen Camino!



Presentation of the Lord in the Temple



● WEEK 10

St. Thomas Aquinas

Conversion of St. Paul ● WEEK 9

St. Agnes

● WEEK 8

Nativity of Our Lord



Baptism of Our Lord

★ WEEK 5

Mary the Mother of God

Epiphany

Holy Family

WEEK 6

Epiphany observed

December 17:
Christmas countdown begins

● WEEK 4

Our Lady of Guadalupe ● WEEK 3

Immaculate Conception

St. Nicholas ● WEEK 2

St. Francis Xavier

St. Andrew

● WEEK 1

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Introduction

*Give a man a fish, you feed him for a day.
Teach a man to pray and you feed him for a lifetime.*

TEACH A MAN TO PRAY ...

There are many wonderful Advent books full of moving meditations for you to choose from. This isn't one of them. Instead of giving you meditations I came up with, *Oriens* will teach you how to meditate for yourself. If you don't really know how to pray with Scripture, this book will teach you. If you already know how to pray, then it will help you to pray better. I left space each day for you to journal your prayer experiences. When you get to the end of the book, you will find it is full of moving meditations, but they won't be my meditations; they'll be yours. I hope that, as you learn to go deeper in your conversations with God, prayer becomes your favorite part of each day, and this season takes on a whole new meaning.

“DO YOU WANT TO WALK THE CAMINO WITH ME?”

It was my third year of Theology at the North American College in Rome. We had two weeks of Easter vacation to go experience Europe. A classmate and I decided to walk the *Camino Portugués*, a shorter version of the famous medieval pilgrimage route across Spain. (It's so famous that it's called simply *El Camino*, which means “The Way” in Spanish.) I bought some shoes and borrowed a backpack, and we flew to Lisbon. We took a train to the Portuguese border and spent a week walking to the burial place of Saint James the apostle. Something special happened *on the way*. I started to see myself, and the ordinary world, in a whole new way. I discovered the magic of walking pilgrimages.

Three years later I was back in America as a newly ordained priest. “We don't have to fly to Europe to walk down the road,” I thought. I scoped out a walking route to a local shrine, lined up places to stay every

twelve miles or so, and found people to bring us food each night. Twenty-two people joined me on that pilgrimage. Their lives were changed, and I realized that the magic of walking pilgrimages isn't limited to the plains of Spain. Every year for the past ten years, I've led a five-day walking pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help in Champion, Wisconsin. I never cease to come away with some new gift, blessing, or lesson learned on the way.

Walking pilgrimages are a much different experience from a bus pilgrimage. When you ride a bus to a shrine, it's mostly about the destination. Pilgrims look forward to a big "Aha" moment waiting for them when they arrive. Walking pilgrims, on the other hand, learn the joy of the journey. They see familiar roads in a whole new way. They appreciate the beauty around them. They enter into the ebb and flow of nature. They draw closer to the people they walk with. They learn to keep their eyes open for encounters with God along the way. Most of all, they learn to put one foot in front of the other and keep walking no matter what. A walking pilgrimage is about more than the destination; it's a journey of the heart. It changes you in ways you never expected.

THE ADVENT JOURNEY

So, what does this have to do with Advent and Christmas? We all struggle with Advent. The Church is telling us to slow down, but the world is telling us, "Hurry up." We rush around preparing for the birth of Jesus. We look forward to the big "Aha" moment waiting for us at Christmas. And we always seem to miss out somehow. How is it that every year Christmas seems less merry and bright than we were hoping it would be? Too often, Christmas seems to fly by even more quickly than Advent does!

The problem is that we keep treating Advent like the bus on the way to Christmas. We expect to step off at Bethlehem and have some kind of amazing experience. Yet Holy Mother Church designed Advent to be more like a walking pilgrimage. You take a little step every day. You learn to enjoy the journey instead of rushing to Christmas — and then you're better prepared to enjoy the full Christmas season, rather than rushing to get the celebration over with. You connect with the people around you. You enter into a new rhythm. The ordinary things of life start to take

on a new meaning. God meets you on the road. Think of this book as a Camino guidebook. It will show you how to step off the busy Christmas bus and walk the Advent road one day at a time. You will learn that Advent and Christmas are more than a destination; they involve a journey of the heart.

KEEP WALKING

This book lasts nearly ten weeks, from the first Sunday of Advent on November 28 to the feast of the Presentation on February 2. The feast of the Presentation (also called Candlemas) is the traditional final day after which Christmas decorations must be taken down. That way you will get 27 days to prepare for Christmas and forty days to celebrate Christmas (kind of like the forty days of Lent followed by the fifty days of Easter). We need those extra days. None of the people who saw the Christ Child in person understood the true meaning of Christmas. It was only in the days and years afterward that the “dawn from on high” began to rise in their hearts (see Lk 1:78). The same is true for us in our ongoing journey of faith. Praying with this devotional until February 2 will help you continue to see Jesus in the ordinary. Besides, it’s easier to pray in the post-Christmas lull, and we need a little help getting through the low time in January.

You don’t have to walk the whole way with me; it’s your journey and you can quit any time. But let me encourage you to plan for a longer walk. Consider putting up your Christmas tree a little later this year. Put on the lights and ornaments, but don’t plug in the lights until the Light of the World is born on December 25. Then keep your tree lit all through the twelve days until January 6. Plan to keep at least your Advent wreath and Nativity scene up until February 2. It may seem like a long way to go now, but you’ll be surprised at how quickly it passes. And you’ll really enjoy those extra days.

IF YOU MISS A DAY

Even when you are too busy to pray, try to at least open this book and read the Scripture passage each day. If you end up missing a day or two (or even a week), don’t try to go back and do all the meditations you

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missed. Just skip ahead to the current day and pray that one well. It is not important that you do every single meditation. What matters is that you put your heart into your prayer. Prayer is experiencing how our Father looks at you with love. Holiness is learning to live in his long, loving gaze every moment of your life.

You might assume because I wrote this book that I'm great at praying. Far from it! I was trained as a spiritual director through the Institute for Priestly Formation. I have taught countless numbers of people how to pray. I've been on pilgrimages and retreats and even a thirty-day silent retreat. But the truth is, unless I'm actually on a retreat or a pilgrimage, I usually pray badly. Most days I'm too busy, distracted, self-absorbed, or lazy to really pray well. And the problem is compounded during the busy Advent and Christmas season. I wrote this book because I need it too! I will be praying with you and for you this whole season. Please pray for me and for your fellow *Oriens* pilgrims. We each make our own journey, and every journey is unique, but no one walks alone. *¡Buen Camino!*

Fr. Joel Sember
Priest, Pastor, Pilgrim

Suggested Calendar for the Advent and Christmas Season

November 28, 1st Sunday of Advent: Light the first candle on your Advent wreath.

December 5, 2nd Sunday of Advent: Light the second candle on your Advent wreath.

December 6 (Monday): Give some treats for Saint Nicholas Day.

December 8 (Wednesday): Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. Put up your crèche (manger scene).

December 12, 3rd Sunday of Advent: Light the third (rose) candle on your Advent wreath.

December 13 (Monday): Do some research on traditions surrounding the feast of Saint Lucy.

Before December 17: Put up your Christmas tree. Decorate it, but don't plug the lights in. Wait until the Light of the World is born.

December 19, 4th Sunday of Advent: Light the fourth candle on your Advent wreath.

December 24/25: After attending Christmas Mass, put the Baby Jesus in the crèche and light up your Christmas tree. Change the candles in your Advent wreath to white.

January 1 (Saturday): Octave Day of Christmas, solemnity of Mary,

14 *Suggested Calendar for the Advent and Christmas Season*

Mother of God. Start the new year with Mary.

January 6 (Thursday): Epiphany. Have a family party to bless your home with blessed chalk. Afterward you can take down the tree (if you want to) and the decorations, but don't take down the Advent wreath or the crèche.

January 22 (Saturday): A day of penance in the United States in reparation for violations to the dignity of the human person committed through acts of abortion, and prayer for the full restoration of the legal guarantee to the right to life.

February 2 (Wednesday): Feast of the Presentation. Have one last Christmas party! Light the candles on your wreath and have a family Candlemas procession to the crèche. Sing Christmas carols. Then put away any remaining Christmas decorations.

Blessing of an Advent Wreath

The use of the Advent Wreath is a traditional practice which has found its place in the Church as well as in the home. The blessing of an Advent Wreath takes place on the First Sunday of Advent or on the evening before the First Sunday of Advent. When the blessing of the Advent Wreath is celebrated in the home, it is appropriate that it be blessed by a parent or another member of the family.

All make the Sign of the Cross together: + In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Leader: Our help is in the name of the Lord.

Response: Who made heaven and earth.

Leader: A reading from the book of the Prophet Isaiah:
The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
Upon those who lived in a land of gloom a light has shone.
You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing;

They rejoice before you as people rejoice at harvest,
as they exult when dividing the spoils.
For a child is born to us, a son is given to us;
upon his shoulder dominion rests.

They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero,
Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.
His dominion is vast and forever peaceful,
Upon David's throne, and over his kingdom,
which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice,
both now and forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this!

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Leader: The Word of the Lord.

Response: Thanks be to God.

Leader: Let us pray.

Lord our God, we praise you for your Son, Jesus Christ: he is Emmanuel, the hope of the peoples, he is the wisdom that teaches and guides us, he is the Savior of every nation.

Lord God, let your blessing come upon us as we light the candles of this wreath. May the wreath and its light be a sign of Christ's promise to bring us salvation. May he come quickly and not delay. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Response: Amen.

The blessing may conclude with a verse from "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel":

O come, desire of nations, bind
in one the hearts of humankind.
Bid ev'ry sad division cease,
and be thyself our Prince of peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to thee, O Israel.

—From Book of Blessings

Lectio Divina

This first week we will use an ancient prayer form called *lectio divina* (pronounced LEK-si-o di-VEE-na). It has four simple steps, known by their Latin names: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation). Don't worry about each Latin word. The prayer form is as simple as this: Read, Think, Talk, Listen.

We begin with a prayerful reading of a passage from Scripture. We turn over in our minds what we have read: What was the cultural context? What does this particular word mean? What does this mean to me? We chew on the passage for a while. Perhaps a particular word, phrase, or idea speaks to us. But it won't really be prayer if we just stay in our heads. So, we speak to God in our heart or out loud. A conversation takes two, so for the last part of *lectio*, we adopt an attitude of receiving. We are talking, then we are listening. Many people find the *contemplatio* to be a difficult step; they worry about if they are "doing it right" or "if it's really God" whose voice they hear. Don't try too hard. Just be quiet and receive for a little while. Prayer is not so much about getting something from God as it is just being with God. We are using Scripture as a conversation starter, but conversations with God go deeper than words. I'll walk you through it.

Grace of the Week: Each week has a particular theme or focus. The first week will focus on the creation from the perspective of human beings. The simplest things can be the easiest to forget, and the most profound when they are rediscovered. Pray for the grace to wonder anew at the marvel, mystery, and miracle of being God's creation.

November 28 — Sunday

First Sunday of Advent

Happy Advent! Are you ready for this journey? If so, you're already doing better than I am. I'm never quite ready for Advent to begin. Fortunately, Advent is a time of preparation. As we walk together toward Christmas, you'll find yourself slowly becoming more prepared. We must prepare our hearts and our homes for the coming of Christ.

READ TODAY'S SCRIPTURE PASSAGE:

LUKE 21:25–28, 34–36

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.

Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap. For that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth. Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man.

You have twenty-seven days until Christmas. You have to accomplish shopping, decorating, baking, party planning, card sending, Christmas special-watching, quality time with family and friends, an awkward party or two ... and you don't even know what unexpected twists might await you! Now you understand what Jesus means when he says, "*People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world.*" We get nervous just thinking about Advent, much less the end of the world! But

we don't want our hearts to become drowsy from eggnog and Christmas cookies. We want our hearts to be awake to the loving presence of God.

What do you most remember from Christmas last year? Was it the gifts, the decorations, the baked goods, the parties, the cards ... all the things you stress about? Or was it something else? Let your mind drift back to last year and perhaps journal whatever you remember.

Now go back and read the Scripture passage a second time.

The coming of Jesus should excite us. We should *stand erect and raise our heads* knowing that our Lord and Savior is on his way to meet us. We must be vigilant to meet the Lord — in Latin, *vigilate*. The vigils were the night watches; soldiers would stay up and watch to protect the camp from attacks that might happen under cover of darkness. (We will see these words again in Lk 2:8.) But watching for the Lord means not so much sleepless nights, but a watchful heart. A prayerful heart is a watchful heart. So, to do Advent well, we need to be prepared to pray well.

I have found that these two ingredients help me to pray well: place and time.

PLACE FOR PRAYER

Where will you pray? If you don't already have a prayer room or a prayer corner, make one. It can be a whole spare room, or as simple as a prayer chair or one side of a couch. Put distractions, like the remote and the mobile phone, out of reach. Hang some pictures or images or an inspiring Scripture quote. It should be free of distractions and full of things that help you focus on God. Some people like to light a candle while they are praying (but do not leave candles unattended). Plan a *place* for prayer.

TIME FOR PRAYER

When will you pray? I like to pray right when I get up in the morning. Some people like to pray in the quiet of the evening. It may not happen exactly as you planned every day, but if you don't plan it, chances are it won't happen. Plan a *time* for prayer.

Also plan how you will prepare for Christmas this year. Remember, Christmas is not the only stop on our journey. We will stop to enjoy Saint Nicholas Day on December 6. Immaculate Conception is a holy day of

obligation, so plan to attend Mass on Wednesday, December 8. When will you put up your Christmas tree? Try to make it a family event. Whenever you put up your Christmas tree, I encourage you not to light it until after Christmas Mass. When will you put out your Christmas crèche? Take some time to plan these activities in advance.

For now, the only thing you need to do is put out the Advent wreath and light the first candle. Everything else can happen in time. While you're looking at your calendar, you might want to plan a little time for baking, sending cards, present wrapping, and quality family time — whatever makes Christmas special for you. But let's not just plan Christmas; let's also pray through Christmas. You "stand before the Son of Man" every time you pray. Ask God for the strength to pray well this Advent season. Ask God to show you his plans for your Christmas and help you accomplish them. Ask God to help you focus on the things that really matter and to let go of the things that don't matter.

And it starts with a simple question: What do you *really want* for Christmas this year?

Consider this question, then read the Scripture passage a third time and just be open to the nudge of the Holy Spirit.

SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNALING

Every day I will offer a few questions or thoughts to help you journal. Some people find that they already have plenty to journal about and don't need these questions. Other people find the suggestions help them pull more out of their daily prayer. I encourage you to do whatever works for you; it's your journey.

1. My favorite thing about last Christmas was ...
2. I get the most joy from ...
3. Last Christmas I struggled the most with ...
4. What do I want to make sure to do? What do I want to make sure not to do?
5. What is God's desire for my Christmas journey?
6. Where and when will I pray?
7. I most deeply desire ...

Now, just be still for a moment; the Lord is here with you.

The most important part of our Advent journey is an attitude of thanksgiving. So, thank God for today’s prayer time and close with an Our Father.

November 29 — Monday

Monday of the First Week of Advent

Preparation: *Come, Holy Spirit, enlighten the eyes of my heart* (Eph 1:18).

Lectio: Our pilgrimage begins with the creation story, but perhaps not the version you might have been expecting. The Bible tells the story of creation twice. The first story shows how creation unfolds in an orderly way over the course of six “days,” starting with light and ending with the creation of man and woman (Gn 1:1–2:4). The second story tells it from the opposite perspective, beginning with the creation of man. Read through the passage slowly and prayerfully, and try to see it with fresh eyes.

GENESIS 2:4–7

This is the story of the heavens and the earth at their creation. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens — there was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the LORD God had sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the ground, but a stream was welling up out of the earth and watering all the surface of the ground — then the LORD God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Meditatio: The ancients understood that when a human being dies he will turn into dust. So, our ancient authors pictured God starting from dust and ending with a well-formed human being, like a potter molding clay. There is a play here on words between the Hebrew *adam* (man) and *adama* (ground). Picture the care with which God shapes the bones, muscles, eyes, teeth, and hair. Then God bends down and shares some of his own life with this being. The Hebrew word for “breath” (*ruach*) also means “spirit” and “wind.” It is as though the creature lives because

God has shared some of his own life with it. What would it feel like to be created? Think about what it means to be shaped by God, to bear his fingerprints on your body and his warm breath in your lungs. Then read the passage again.

Oratio: The first thing Adam would see when he woke up was the God who had just created him, perhaps beaming proudly at his new creation, like an artist admiring his masterpiece. Look at God, and let him look at you. What words come to your mind? Speak to your Creator. Ask him about yourself or about him, or just thank him for creating you. Take some deep breaths. Then read the passage one more time.

Contemplatio: Open your heart to receive whatever God might want to give you. Don't sweat this step. Think of it like sensing the direction of the wind or basking for a moment in the sun's light. Contemplation is about being, but being in relationship. Just be with the God who has created you and is proud of the work he has done. Receive his love for you in whatever way you can.

SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNALING

1. What was my most noticeable thought, feeling, or desire during prayer time today?
 2. What was on my heart? What did I bring to God?
 3. Did I notice God's presence or his response to me in any particular way? If I did, how would I describe that? If not, how did I feel about that?
 4. Does it feel different to look at my own hands and realize they were shaped by God, and that no one else has my fingerprints?
 5. One day I will take my final breath. What does each breath mean to me? How do my breaths connect me with God? What do my breaths mean to God?
-
-

Spend a few minutes in wonder and awe at the mystery and marvel of creation that is you! Let gratitude rise in your heart. Then close with an Our Father.

November 30 — Tuesday

Tuesday of the First Week of Advent

SAINT ANDREW, APOSTLE

Andrew is less well known than his brother Simon Peter, but he was the one who introduced his brother to Jesus (Jn 1:35–42). Andrew is said to have preached the Gospel in Greece, where he suffered martyrdom at Patras. Bound by ropes to an X-shaped cross, he preached to the crowds for two days until he was overcome by death. He is the patron of Greece, Scotland, and Russia. There is a tradition of beginning a Christmas novena on his feast day. The name Andrew actually comes from a Greek word meaning manly or masculine. What does it mean to be manly? Perhaps today's Scripture passage will enlighten us.

Preparation: *Come, Holy Spirit, enlighten the eyes of my heart.* Flip back and briefly review yesterday's prayer time.

Lectio: Ask God to help you wonder anew at the marvel, mystery, and miracle of his creation. Read the passage below, slowly and prayerfully. Notice what jumps out to you as you read.

GENESIS 2:8–9,15–17

The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made grow every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it. The LORD God gave the man this order: You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. From that tree you shall not eat; when you eat from

it you shall die.

Meditatio: The creation that surrounds man was made for him to feed him and delight him. Some theologians interpret the various trees as symbolizing all the pleasures and delights of life; he lives in a veritable “garden of delight” (one possible meaning for the word “Eden”). The world was made for him, but it does not belong to him; both he and his home belong to the God who made them. This God entrusts man with a specific job, “to cultivate and care for it.” Picture the kind of fancy, cultivated gardens that often surround European mansions. God is the master and man is the gardener or caretaker. He can use everything except for one single tree that is off-limits. What thoughts or feelings arise in your heart? Read the passage again prayerfully.

Oratio: When have you experienced being a steward of God’s creation? What has God entrusted to you — life, land, children to care for, gifts of talents? Have you used them in ways that made the master proud of you? Have you respected the rules he has set for his garden? God is here with you and ready to listen. Speak to him from your heart. Then read the passage one more time.

Contemplatio: Open your heart and let your master speak to you. Receive whatever it is that God wants to give you. You are his steward, his caretaker, his friend. Rest quietly for a minute or two and marvel at all that has been entrusted to you.

SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNALING

1. What most delights me about the creation that surrounds me?
2. How do I see myself as a steward of creation? What has been entrusted to me?
3. How has God set rules or limits for me? What things are “off-limits” to me because I am the steward and not the master?
4. I feel most humbled by ...

After you've journaled, spend a minute in gratitude for the prayer time you've just had. Then close with the Saint Andrew Novena Prayer:

Hail and blessed be the hour and moment in which the Son of God was born of the most pure Virgin Mary, at midnight, in Bethlehem, in the piercing cold. In that hour vouchsafe, I beseech Thee, O my God, to hear my prayer and grant my desires, [here mention your request] through the merits of Our Savior Jesus Christ, and of His blessed Mother. Amen.

December 1 — Wednesday

Wednesday of the First Week of Advent

Preparation: *Come, Holy Spirit, enlighten the eyes of my heart.* Flip back to yesterday's prayer and recall a blessing you experienced. Spend a minute savoring God's loving care for all his creatures and especially his care for you.

Lectio: In your own words ask God to help you wonder anew at the marvel, mystery, and miracle of his creation. Read today's passage slowly and prayerfully.

GENESIS 2:18–25

The LORD God said: It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suited to him. So the LORD God formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each living creature was then its name. The man gave names to all the tame animals, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals; but none proved to be a helper suited to the man. So the LORD God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The LORD God then built the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman. When he brought her to the man, the man said:

"This one, at last, is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
This one shall be called 'woman,'
for out of man this one has been taken."

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body. The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame.

Meditatio: God makes all kinds of living beings, and the man helps by naming each one (in the Bible, naming something is a sign of authority over it). Despite all the delights that surround him, something is missing that the man can't quite name. Only when he wakes up to the woman of his dreams does he realize his desire to have a relationship with someone who can receive his love and love him in return. Man was made by love and for love. The two are perfectly comfortable together. Read the passage again slowly.

Oratio: What is this prayer time stirring up inside of you? Is something missing in your life that you can't quite name? Notice the feelings that are stirring inside of you, then speak to God honestly about them. You can be perfectly comfortable with God. Share your heart with the one who made it. When you are done talking, read the passage one more time, or just the word or phrase that really spoke to you.

Contemplatio: Open your heart to conversation with God. The one who made you knows your deepest desires. He also knows his plans to fulfill them. What is it that God wants to give you, or might be saying back to you? Don't try too hard to "get it." Just be open to receive.

SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNALING

1. Which of the animals God has created most delights me?
2. How have I cooperated with God's work of creation, working alongside God in my own little way?
3. Was there a time in my life when I experienced a longing that I didn't understand or couldn't really name?
4. My life seemed to click when ...
5. I ended prayer wanting ...

After you've journaled, close with a brief conversation giving thanks to God for your prayer experience. Then pray an Our Father.

December 2 — Thursday

Thursday of the First Week of Advent

Preparation: *Come, Holy Spirit, enlighten the eyes of my heart.* Flip back to yesterday's prayer and recall a blessing you experienced. Spend a minute savoring God's loving care for all his creatures and especially his care for you.

Lectio: In your own words ask God to help you wonder anew at the marvel, mystery, and miracle of human and divine love. Some people are scandalized to discover a love poem right in the middle of the Bible. They don't seem to realize that the Bible begins with a wedding (Gn 2:18–25) and ends with a wedding (Rv 19:1–9). Do you think God might be trying to tell us something? Read today's passage slowly and prayerfully.

SONG OF SONGS 2:8–14

The sound of my lover!
Here he comes
springing across the mountains,
leaping across the hills.
My lover is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
See! He is standing behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
peering through the lattices.
My lover speaks and says to me,
"Arise, my friend, my beautiful one,
and come!
For see, the winter is past,
the rains are over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of pruning the vines has come,

and the song of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines, in bloom, give forth fragrance.
Arise, my friend, my beautiful one,
and come!
My dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the secret recesses of the cliff,
Let me see your face,
let me hear your voice,
For your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.”

Meditatio: More than anything, two people who love each other long to be together. This poem is full of the longing between young lovers. When was the first time you fell in love? What did it feel like? How did it change you? We sometimes chuckle when our siblings, friends, or children fall deeply in love. They act like they are the first people in the world to ever be in love, and no one has ever experienced something so amazing as this! And yet, when we reflect on our own experiences, we realize that falling in love always catches us off guard and sweeps us along. Even when you fall in love again with a spouse after twenty or thirty years of marriage, it is like tasting an old wine that surprises us with how good it has gotten. There is something about true love that is always fresh and new. Notice what word or phrase really speaks to you as you read this passage a second time.

Oratio: What thoughts, feelings, or desires are rising in your heart? They may also be fears, failures, or disappointments. Love is the most beautiful, powerful, and poignant experience. And that also means it can be the most difficult, devastating, and heartbreaking experience. But you have never experienced it alone. Because God is love, every experience of real love is an experience of God. Turn to the God who loves you. Share with him what is on your heart. Be completely honest with him. When you have poured out your heart, read the passage a third time slowly and prayerfully.

Contemplatio: God knows the depths of your heart just like he knew the desires in Adam's heart. Now receive what God wants to share with you. Is there some new insight or understanding that emerges? How does your experience look different in the light of God's love? Rest in his love for you for a few minutes before moving on.

SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNALING

1. Falling in love is like ...
2. I am afraid that ...
3. God wanted me to know ...
4. The deepest desire that I have right now is for ...
5. I feel most satisfied, joyful, and peaceful when ...
6. I ended prayer wanting ...

December 3 — Friday

Friday of the First Week of Advent

SAINT FRANCIS XAVIER

A native of Spain, Francis Xavier met St. Ignatius of Loyola while studying at the University of Paris. He became one of the first seven members of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). He was sent to preach the Gospel in the Orient. In ten years of missionary work, he brought more than 30,000 souls to the light of Christ. His travels took him to India and Japan, and he died on the doorstep of China. He is a patron saint of missions. He reminds us that the Gospel is meant for all people, and that every child is a child of God.

Preparation: *Come, Holy Spirit, enlighten the eyes of my heart.* Briefly review yesterday's prayer time (or the last time you prayed with *Oriens*, if you missed yesterday). Spend a minute being grateful for how God has been with you in your prayer time and indeed in all the moments of this week.

Lectio: In your own words ask God to help you wonder anew at the marvel, mystery, and miracle of his creation. The creation around us belongs to God. He has given it to us as a sacred trust. We exercise lordship over all creatures, but we ourselves are servants of the Lord. Read the passage slowly and prayerfully.

PSALM 8:2–10

O LORD, our Lord,
how awesome is your name through all the earth!
I will sing of your majesty above the heavens
with the mouths of babes and infants.
You have established a bulwark against your foes,
to silence enemy and avenger.

When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and stars that you set in place —
What is man that you are mindful of him,
and a son of man that you care for him?
Yet you have made him little less than a god,
crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him rule over the works of your hands,
put all things at his feet:
All sheep and oxen,
even the beasts of the field,
The birds of the air, the fish of the sea,
and whatever swims the paths of the seas.
O LORD, our Lord,
how awesome is your name through all the earth!

Meditatio: There is only one God; how then can human beings be “little less than a god”? We have been made in the image and likeness of God. How has God crowned you with glory and honor? Have you used dominion over all creatures? Was God right to entrust you with his creation or have you proved less than trustworthy? Read the passage again slowly. Notice whatever word or phrase jumps out at you.

Oratio: God has not simply abandoned us or any other part of creation. Though we may not notice his quiet presence, he is always with us. The “babes and infants” do not recognize political correctness and tend to speak truth as they see it. God wants the same from us, his children. Speak to the Lord with child-like honesty. The Lord will listen patiently, so have no fear of not saying quite the right thing. Speak to him from your heart. When you are done, read the passage a third time.

Contemplatio: This time just be open to receive. Picture the heavens, the moon, and the stars, steady reminders of God’s awesome power. How might God respond to what you have shared with him? Maybe it is a thought, word, or feeling. Just spend a few minutes letting God look at you with love, with you gazing back at him. Enjoy the presence of God

After you’ve journaled, close with a brief conversation giving thanks to God for your prayer experience. You may be tempted to skip this as you’ve *already* talked to God. But keep in mind that the goal of prayer is not to have nice notes in a journal, but to have a deeper encounter with the God who loves you. So, after praying, reflecting, and journaling, have one more little chat with God. Think of it like talking to a friend as you walk them out to their car after a nice visit. You thank them for their visit and their friendship, don’t you? Spend a moment saying: “Thank you, God.” Then pray an Our Father.

December 4 — Saturday

Saturday of the First Week of Advent

REVIEW

Preparation: *Come, Holy Spirit, enlighten the eyes of my heart.* Instead of spending time with a new passage, we will pray with the passages that most spoke to you in this past week. Saint Ignatius called this kind of prayer time a “repetition.” The idea behind a repetition is not so much to do a prayer passage all over again, but to go back to the place you most noticed God’s presence and felt loved by God. You return to that place in order to deepen the encounter and the conversation with God. Flip back through your past week’s journal entries. Notice what emerged in the conversations. Here are some questions to help you:

1. The prayer time that I enjoyed most and got the most out of was ...
2. The prayer time I really struggled with was ... What made it hard for me?
3. Where did I notice the presence of God? What did his presence feel like, or how did it affect me?
4. What was God doing, saying, or giving me this week?
5. How did I respond to what God was doing?
6. I’m most grateful for ...

7. Is there one clear image of God’s loving presence that emerged from my prayer during this first week? Or was there a word, phrase, or message that really touched me?

Savor that image of God's loving presence. Rest there for a few minutes. Then thank God for today's prayer time and end with an Our Father.

Week Two

Imaginative Prayer

How did *lectio divina* go? If you found yourself struggling, here are a couple of thoughts.

First, don't try too hard. We often think we have to "do prayer right" in order to get something from God. When we put the burden on ourselves, we really aren't open to receive. And receiving isn't hard work. The work comes when we have to let go of our expectations that prayer happens when "I pray well." In reality, prayer is just noticing and focusing on the presence and action of God in your life. God is present and active all the time. He doesn't talk only during one little part of prayer, and he doesn't stop talking just because you ended your prayer time. Many people find that they receive an answer to their prayer during Mass or before bedtime or at some other moment during the day. The secret is to have an attitude of willingness to receive from God whenever he might be communicating with us.

Secondly, remember that the goal is not to have nice notes in your journal. The goal is quality time with the God who loves you. If you've spent any quality time with God this past week, you've done well. Be careful not to judge your prayer too much. Just be grateful for the first week.

And if you didn't pray at all last week, that's OK. Life gets away from us sometimes. Just pick up with today's prayer and start here.

This week we will learn a new prayer form called imaginative prayer. St. Ignatius of Loyola was the pioneer of this prayer form. He stumbled on it quite by accident. It changed his life, and he went on to use it to help change other people's lives.

Some people are skeptical of this prayer form. They fear it is just creating fantasy air castles. You certainly could do that, but that wouldn't be prayer time. Prayer is about connecting with the God who loves you and is present with you right now. Most of us are only vaguely aware of God's presence. We are much more aware of our current location in space and time, what happened yesterday, and what is on our calendar for today. These are passing things that we need to temporarily unplug from if we

want to connect more deeply with God.

A good book or movie will take you out of the present moment for a while and move you to another place and time. In doing so, it can help you connect with something deeper: your own hopes and dreams, your fears, your potential, and what it means to be part of the human condition. In a similar way, imaginative prayer helps connect you with the deeper reality of God's loving presence that is silently behind and beyond all space and time. The goal is not a great imaginative moment, but simply an encounter with God who was present in the Bible moment and is present right here with you today. The imagination is only a conversation starter. Again, if you spend quality time with God, you have achieved your goal.

Grace of the Week: We are surrounded by God's creation. But we are also creatures, created by God the Father and made for a relationship with him. This week we will explore our fall from a relationship with God and into the deep darkness of sin and death. Pray for the grace to experience the pain of separation from God and a deeper longing for a relationship with God.

December 5 — Sunday

Second Sunday of Advent

Preparation: *Come, Holy Spirit, enlighten the eyes of my heart.* Turn back to yesterday and look at that image of God's loving care for you that emerged in your review time. Use your imagination to picture that moment again. Spend about a minute just resting in that experience and savoring the unconditional love with which God loves you.

Set the Scene: Read the passage below. As you do, set the scene in your mind. Picture the looks on the faces of the captives as they were *led away on foot by their enemies, wrapped in mourning and misery*. Then picture them carried on royal thrones, wrapped in justice and glory.

BARUCH 5:1–9

Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery;
put on forever the splendor of glory from God:

Wrapped in the mantle of justice from God,
place on your head the diadem
of the glory of the Eternal One.

For God will show your splendor to all under the heavens;

you will be named by God forever:
the peace of justice, the glory of God's worship.

Rise up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights;
look to the east and see your children

Gathered from east to west
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that they are remembered by God.

Led away on foot by their enemies they left you:
but God will bring them back to you
carried high in glory as on royal thrones.

For God has commanded
that every lofty mountain

Once a Pilgrim, Always a Pilgrim

Pilgrimages always seem to end abruptly. You strive to reach your destination, you struggle on the road, it seems as though you'll never get there. Then you realize it's the final day, the final miles, and the place of pilgrimage is just over the next hill! You have made it to your destination. You bask in the feeling of success, promise to stay in touch with your fellow pilgrims, and struggle to explain to your family what has happened to you.

Then it is back to your old life. But the old life looks different now; the journey has changed you. How did God meet you on the road? What did he teach you? How have you been changed by the journey? What have you been able to let go of that you were carrying for a long time? What have you picked up that you intend to keep carrying?

I always tell pilgrims that they need to keep walking. Our journey is never done until we “come to the end of our pilgrimage and enter the presence of God.” Here are some suggestions for you to continue the journey:

- Buy a journal. Start by journaling the questions that I gave you above. At the end of each day, write where you saw God that day. Use the ARRR prayer form to pray with your daily experiences.
- On the following pages, I give you outlines for four different forms of prayer. You might even want to tear out those pages and keep them with your journal.
- Start praying with the daily Scripture readings. You can find each day's readings at uscgb.org/bible/readings/ Depending on the reading, you can use *lectio divina* or imaginative prayer (see the Prayer Outlines below) for your prayer each day.
- Subscribe to a monthly missal. I have used Magnificat

for years, and I find it very helpful. It includes prayer for morning and evening, the daily readings, and some reflections and additional prayers. There are many other monthly missals to choose from, and all of them will help you pray daily.

- Need more help journaling? Check out the Monk Manual at monkmanual.com. This resource provides reflection space and prompts for you on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. It helps you live life with more reflection and purpose.
- Subscribe to my homily podcast. Learn more at PilgrimPriest.us/podcast.
- OSV has a number of Bible study resources. Browse their offerings at www.osvcatholicbookstore.com/product-category/bibles-bible-studies. Consider not only participating in a Bible study, but actually leading one at your local church or in your home.
- Lent is coming up soon. Start reflecting and praying about a theme for Lent and how to live Lent more intentionally.
- Consider making a real, honest-to-goodness walking pilgrimage. My diocese hosts the Walk to Mary every year, a one-day walking pilgrimage. Learn more at walktomary.com. Check out my website (PilgrimPriest.us) for the article “A Step-by-Step Guide to Walking Pilgrimages.”

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And to you, my fellow *Oriens* pilgrim. I wrote this book for you. I hope we meet some day, in this life or the next.

The best is yet to come!

About the Author

Fr. Joel Sember was ordained a priest in 2007 for the Diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin. He has extensive experience as a parish priest and two years of service in campus ministry. He made a thirty-day Ignatian silent retreat and later completed the Spiritual Direction Training Program through the Institute for Priestly Formation in Omaha, Nebraska. He holds a BA in philosophy and Catholic studies from the University of St. Thomas, a bachelor's in sacred theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University, and a license in sacred theology from the Pontifical University Santa Croce in Rome. He has completed a dozen walking pilgrimages. He currently serves as pastor of three parishes in rural northeastern Wisconsin. Between ministry and parish meetings, he rides a motorcycle and paddles a kayak around great Wisconsin lakes. You can listen to his homily podcast every Sunday at PilgrimPriest.us.