

What makes a good visit, in your home or someone else's? A good conversation? Recalling the fond memories of the past? A good meal or bottle of wine or simply sitting around and having a good laugh? Perhaps an honest discussion that resolves a lingering grievance?

This **IS** the time of year for visits to family and friends and to receive them in our homes too. Some of you may be preparing for one. With this on your mind, and perhaps the thought of all the things that you may need to do before Christmas it is a good thing to now place yourself in this amazing Gospel scene. Because it goes to the heart of authentic Christian discipleship.

What is happening in this historic Visitation: this scene of the second Joyful Mystery of the Rosary that is recited on Mondays and Saturdays for a good reason? And why is it so important?

Our Blessed Mother, bearing our Lord within her, makes this 80-mile journey to her kin who is also expecting a child. St. Ambrose wrote that "in Mary we find the most outstanding of all the Saints, a mirror of holiness already engaged in the service of charity assisting in her relative's pregnancy". She is literally and physically "full of grace". But she is spiritually too because of her faith: "blessed are you who believed" witnesses St. Elizabeth. Mary believed in God's promise of a Savior, and that faith was the impetus to carry out God's will. And she didn't waste any time in doing it. In this Visitation she writes the first chapter of the textbook for Christian discipleship.

St. Alphonsus said "there are those who conceive but never give birth"—those who think about faith or hear the word but don't respond to it. Why not? For grace to be activated it has to make that sometimes treacherous and seemingly impossible 12-inch journey from our heads to our hearts. If faith just stays in our head it dies and doesn't bear its intended fruit. That fruit is authentic works of corporal and spiritual mercy that overflow from the grace deposited into our hearts and souls. This is how WE conceive and give birth to Christ.

We sometimes are mistaken in our notion about grace and our need for it. Grace isn't given to us because we are faithful or as a reward for fidelity. It is given to us in order that we may BE faithful. "A soul that believes", writes St. Ambrose, "both conceives and brings forth the Word and acknowledges his works". And the most natural way that happens is our interactions with one another.

I have a good friend who recently donated a kidney so a young married woman with two children could live. He is a faithful, prayerful man, and when he heard of the woman's urgent situation he freely offered himself, and it was discovered that he

was the ideal candidate—a perfect match. He then turned to Our Lord for the grace to carry out His will. Knowing this was about God and not himself, he proceeded with nearly complete anonymity. He didn't give permission to reveal his identity until the woman's surgeon begged him to because she desperately wanted to know. This was an act of heroic virtue—of deep love of God and neighbor. One more act of Christian discipleship is now recorded in the book of life.

While I was in the Surgery Waiting Room I encountered tears of gratitude and hearts overflowing with joy from the recipient's husband, children and parents. Her Father, a Catholic, tearfully confided in me that he hasn't been, unlike his devout wife, much of a believer over the years, but now he was and is praying with his wife again. The next day another doctor visited my friend in his room and told him she had lost faith and hope over the years, but it was restored after witnessing what he had done. And my friend's wife, a woman of beautiful faith herself, told me her husband's faith keeps inspiring her to go deeper and deeper too.

When faith like this enters the heart and soul it is impossible for it to stay there. God cannot deny himself! Grace by nature isn't static, but dynamic and once it makes a home in the soul it is magnified! Otherwise Mary would have stayed home with the Lord and neither Elizabeth nor John in her womb would have joyfully received it. And that kidney would have stayed inside my friend's body too but it didn't! It gave the gift of human life to one and the gift of spiritual life to many others.

Do we truly believe in the Feast we are about to celebrate, or is it just in our heads? Are we truly open to receiving the great gift God gives to us in His Son—a gift that is intimate and personal? St. Alphonsus tells us that he gives himself entirely to each one of us as if he had been given to each of us alone so that every one of us may say "Jesus is all mine, his body is mine, his blood is mine, this child is mine!

Has Advent been any different for you? Will this Christmas 2018, Anno Domini, the Year of Our Lord 2018 and beyond be any different? Our New Year has already begun. WHO, who rather than what will we carry to our visits? Who, who, NOT what will we offer to our guests? And why? Is it because of the sentiment of a holiday with lights, presents and Christmas carols?

It has to be because we truly believe! It is only then, in the blessed state of believing do we remove the obstacles preventing faith moving from our heads to our hearts. Only then do we create space for God's grace by prayer and love of neighbor. Only then does goodness truly enter the world. Only then is the Christ-child born in us and only then will the souls that we encounter be touched by the grace we carry with us.

Our Lady of the Visitation, pray for us!