



Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

Building a Culture of Peace



Advent Reflection Guide 2020

“[I ask God to] prepare our hearts to **encounter our brothers and sisters**, so that we may overcome our differences rooted in political thinking, language, culture and religion. Let us ask him to anoint our whole being with the **balm of his mercy**, which heals the injuries caused by mistakes, misunderstandings and disputes. And let us ask him for the grace to send us forth, in humility and meekness, along the demanding but enriching **path of seeking peace.**”

- Pope Francis

About this resource

The Season of Advent offers us a time to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ, the Prince of Peace. This Advent, we invite you to reflect on what it would look like to build a culture of peace – a journey that begins with peace in our hearts and leads to peace in our local communities, nation, and world. In our work we understand peace as not merely the absence of war or violence, but the presence of just social systems and right relationships between different members of society.

This guide includes reflection on the weekly Scripture readings during Advent, as well as prayers and examples of Maryknoll missionary experiences and suggested steps for “faith in action.” We hope this guide helps individuals and communities reflect on how they can welcome the Prince of Peace this Advent.

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Photo of Larry Parr, MKLM, sent to us by Larry Parr.

About us

The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns (MOGC) represents Maryknoll missionaries, who are Catholic men and women serving in impoverished communities around the world. The MOGC provides analysis and advocacy on issues of justice, peace, and integrity of creation that affect the countries and communities where Maryknoll missionaries serve.

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First Week in Advent: Disarmament of the Heart

“...[We] are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands.”
- Isaiah 64: 7

“Be watchful! Be alert!” The words of Jesus in the Gospel for this first week of Advent are jarring, particularly so in this time when we are already on constant alert for the impacts of an unseen virus. How can we understand these words of Jesus in this Season of Advent in 2020, when the whole world seems to be on edge, when we are surrounded by so much uncertainty?

We need to be reminded that the call of Jesus for the Season of Advent is not a call to anxiety and fear, but to attentiveness, peace, and faith in the nearness of God and God’s action in the world.

The first reading today hints at what living that call would look like: “Would that you might meet us doing right, that we were mindful of you in our ways!” With God’s help, we are invited to take careful, mindful steps to sow the seeds of the Kingdom of God in our lives and world. How are we taking steps to prepare for God’s Kingdom in our individual lives, and how do we do this as a society?

The COVID-19 crisis revealed that our world and our country were woefully unprepared to handle a global pandemic, despite all the investment in global “security” built through military power and cooperation. The crisis has revealed all the weaknesses of our economic and social systems, asking us to re-imagine what it means to be secure and prepared.

In the United States, we prepare for war and for military defense far more than we do for peace. Our budget for diplomacy and peacebuilding is a miniscule fraction of our defense budget, which is estimated to be about 1 trillion dollars annually. Likewise, we invest in prisons

and police forces far more than in quality education and social services for at-risk communities. How can we shift our focus to preventing violence around the world and preparing for peace, rather than merely reacting to violence?

Pope Francis has called the world to pursue “integral disarmament” to prepare for peace, a disarmament that means the laying down of weapons but also the disarmament of our hearts, of the grip of fear in our lives and our enmity with one another.

In 1963, in *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XIII wrote, “Unless this process of disarmament be thoroughgoing and complete, and reach [our] very souls, it is impossible to stop the arms race, or to reduce armaments, or – and this is the main thing – ultimately to abolish them entirely” (*Pacem in Terris*, 11 April 1963).”

Similarly, Sr. Jean Fallon, MM, reflects, “Here we are today in this violent, destructive age of endless wars against nations and peoples! Jesus as the Chosen One is teaching us today that power is not to be used just because we have it! We are to use our power as Jesus was called to, to free others nonviolently and to heal them.”

Questions for Reflection:

This Advent, how can you prepare for God by disarming your own heart? Despite the hardship of these times, where is the gentle voice of God calling you to sow the seeds of God’s reign of peace?

Prayer

Lord God of peace, hear our prayer!

We have tried so many times and over so many years to resolve our conflicts by our own powers and by the force of our arms. How many moments of hostility and darkness have we experienced; how much blood has been shed; how many lives have been shattered; how many hopes have been buried... But our efforts have been in vain.

Now, Lord, come to our aid! Grant us peace, teach us peace; guide our steps in the way of peace. Open our eyes and our hearts, and give us the courage to say: “Never again war!”; “With war everything is lost”. Instill in our hearts the courage to take concrete steps to achieve peace.

Lord, God of Abraham, God of the Prophets, God of Love, you created us and you call us to live as brothers and sisters. Give us the strength daily to be instruments of peace; enable us to see everyone who crosses our path as our brother or sister. Make us sensitive to the plea of our citizens who entreat us to turn our weapons of war into implements of peace, our trepidation into confident trust, and our quarreling into forgiveness.

Keep alive within us the flame of hope, so that with patience and perseverance we may opt for dialogue and reconciliation. In this way may peace triumph at last, and may the words “division, “hatred” and “war” be banished from the heart of every man and woman. Lord, defuse the violence of our tongues and our hands. Renew our hearts and minds, so that the word which always brings us together will be “brother”, and our way of life will always be that of: Shalom, Peace, Salaam!

Amen.

– Pope Francis, Prayer for Peace, 2014

Maryknoll Missioner Experience



“One day, after a session at the United Nations, I found myself eating lunch with an officer of the UN Peacekeeping Force. At one point in the conversation I said to him, ‘Wouldn’t it be a breakthrough if all the armies of the world were transformed to help those overwhelmed by natural disasters, rescuing people, re-building destroyed areas and towns?’ To my surprise, he agreed with me. Let’s imagine a world in which nonviolent armies are taught not to kill and destroy, but to restore life and assist in new ways of living.”

- Sr. Jean Fallon, MM

Faith in Action:

- Read our [two-page brief](#) on rethinking global security.
- Learn about the [Global Fragility Act](#), an effort to shift towards preventing violence in fragile nations.



Second Week in Advent: Healing our Soul Sickness

*“Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*

- Isaiah 40: 5

“Comfort, give comfort to my people.” These words of the prophet Isaiah are thought to have been written to the Israelites in exile in Babylon – a people forced from their home, mistreated and weary in a foreign land.

The first two readings are filled with imagery depicting God’s action of fulfillment of his promises: “Kindness and truth shall meet; Justice and peace shall kiss.”

“The glory of the Lord shall be revealed; all people shall see it together.” It is a vision we all long for, of unity, peace, justice, and righteousness. It is an image that is a balm to people of all ages who are weary and downtrodden.

Yet the Gospel strikes a different tone: John the Baptist calls us to “prepare the way of the Lord” and undergo baptism “of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” We are once again reminded that God calls and strengthens us to take part in the realization of the vision of fulfillment. God offers us comfort, especially when we are downtrodden, but God also calls us out of complacency.

Our country – and our world – is in the midst of a deep reckoning with the injustice caused by the sin of racism. The pervasiveness of racism and all ways in which our society values some lives more than others are great impediments to peace. We have seen the ways in which they result directly in the unjust, violent deaths of people of color.

Father Bryan Massingale, SJ, a prominent African-American theologian and professor at Fordham

University, [writes](#), “Yes, racism is a political issue and a social divide. But at its deepest level, racism is a soul sickness. It is a profound warping of the human spirit that enables human beings to create communities of callous indifference toward their darker sisters and brothers.”

Likewise, the leadership of the branches of the Maryknoll family wrote in a statement in June 2020, “We abhor the violation of life that racism represents... Seeing the [violence afflicted on] black and brown people by police and others who benefit from white privilege has made us all witnesses to the persistent sin of racism that resides within hearts and distorts social structures in the United States.

We stand in solidarity with our suffering black and brown brothers and sisters who live in fear due to systemic violence, and with all those expressing grief and outrage, who feel their voices are not heard.”

Questions for Reflection:

How are you affected by the “soul sickness,” of racism? How can you be part the effort to prepare the way for God’s fulfillment, which “all people shall see together?”

Prayer

Prayer for the Elimination of Racism

Good and gracious God, you invite us to recognize and reverence your divine image and likeness in our neighbor. Enable us to see the reality of racism and free us to challenge and uproot it from our society, our world and ourselves.

This we pray. Amen.

- Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

A Prayer to Overcome Racism

Mary, friend and mother to all,
through your Son, God has found a way
to unite himself to every human being,
called to be one people,
sisters and brothers to each other.
We ask for your help in calling on
your Son,
seeking forgiveness for the times when
we have failed to love and respect
one another.
We ask for your help in obtaining from
your Son
the grace we need to overcome the evil
of racism
and to build a just society.
We ask for your help in following your Son,
so that prejudice and animosity
will no longer infect our minds or hearts
but will be replaced with a love
that respects
the dignity of each person.
Mother of the Church,
the Spirit of your Son Jesus
warms our hearts:
pray for us.
Amen.

- U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops


Maryknoll Missioner Experience



Maryknoll missioners also witness racism in the societies in which they work, a legacy of colonialism. **Fr. Bill Donnelly, MM**, explains, "...when the Spanish arrived in Guatemala, it was then that racism took root and set the tone for centuries of government-sponsored prejudice, oppression and injustice perpetrated against the Mayan indigenous majority. ... unresolved racial tension, dynamics of inequality and violence continue today - now in the form of drug trafficking, gang activity, a criminalization of social protest, and extreme poverty, most apparent in the Mayan indigenous communities."

Faith in Action:

- Read [an article](#) by Fr. Bryan Massingale in the National Catholic Reporter, "The assumptions of white privilege and what we can do about it."
- Explore our page of resources on [anti-racism](#).



Third Week in Advent: Ecological Conversion

“As the earth brings forth its plants, and a garden makes its growth spring up, so will the Lord God make justice and praise spring up before all the nations.”

- Isaiah 61: 11

The readings this week continue to provide a vision of God’s fulfilment of his promises in the Kingdom of God, initiated by the coming of Christ as preached by John the Baptist.

In the first reading from Isaiah, we hear, “The Lord has anointed me...to bring glad tidings to the poor... As the earth brings forth its plants, and a garden makes its growth spring up, so will the Lord God make justice and praise spring up before all the nations.” In the Gospel, John the Baptist calls himself a “voice crying out in the desert, ‘make straight the way of the Lord,’” referencing another passage from Isaiah depicting the flourishing of the earth in the Kingdom of God.

In the imagery from Isaiah referenced in this Gospel and first reading, the health of the earth is likened to spiritual health and union with God. Holiness and wholeness are represented by abundance, beauty, and natural flourishing, in contrast to dryness and decay.

In his apostolic teaching, Pope Francis has been showing how this is not only a metaphor, but increasingly a reality. In *Laudato Si’* he explained how our sick, “throwaway culture” has resulted in a destruction of the earth that is the result of social sin, the sin that is perpetuated by structures of society, and personal sin, the choices we make which deliberately harm the earth.

The overconsumption of those in wealthy countries leads to entrenched poverty in developing countries, which in turn leads to conflict over resources and violence. This cycle of violence – violence toward the

earth leading to violence toward one another, and vice versa – is an enormous impediment to peace.

Building a culture of peace requires an “ecological conversion,” Pope Francis says. In his 2020 World Day of Peace Message, he says, “Faced with the consequences of our hostility towards others, our lack of respect for our common home or our abusive exploitation of natural resources – seen only as a source of immediate profit, regardless of local communities, the common good and nature itself – we are in need of an ecological conversion.”

This type of conversion entails personal change of habits, but also working toward structural change, so that our systems allow us to care for the earth more easily and affordably. Building a culture of peace through care for the earth requires both personal and social action.

Questions for Reflection:

Have you ever had experiences that nudged you toward “ecological conversion” – a transcendent moment in nature, a learning experience about climate change, a moment in prayer, etc.? How do you understand peace as related to ecological justice?

Prayer

Father, we praise you with all your creatures.
They came forth from your all-powerful hand;
they are yours, filled with your presence and your tender
love.

Praise be to you!

Son of God, Jesus,
through you all things were made.
You were formed in the womb of Mary our Mother,
you became part of this earth,
and you gazed upon this world with human eyes.
Today you are alive in every creature in your risen glory.
Praise be to you!

Holy Spirit, by your light
you guide this world towards the Father's love
and accompany creation as it groans in travail.
You also dwell in our hearts
and you inspire us to do what is good.
Praise be to you!

Triune Lord, wondrous community of infinite love,
teach us to contemplate you in the beauty of the uni-
verse, for all things speak of you.
Awaken our praise and thankfulness
for every being that you have made.
Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined
to everything that is.

God of love, show us our place in this world
as channels of your love
for all the creatures of this earth,
for not one of them is forgotten in your sight.
Enlighten those who possess power and money
that they may avoid the sin of indifference,
that they may love the common good, advance the
weak, and care for this world in which we live.
The poor and the earth are crying out.

O Lord, seize us with your power and light,
help us to protect all life,
to prepare for a better future,
for the coming of your Kingdom
of justice, peace, love and beauty.
Praise be to you!
Amen.

- Pope Francis, Christian Prayer in Union with Creation

Maryknoll Missioner Experience



"Small farmers' struggle to survive in today's world is playing out on the world stage of agro-industry, inherent poverty, technological consumerism, and dying cultural myths. Some of these operative cultural myths are the supremacy of the human community to use and exploit the Earth's resources for our own convenience because it is inherently our right; that quality of life is determined primarily by material progress and by financial success; the strongest and the smartest have the right to exploit those who are poor or weak – children, women, the elderly – simply because they have the power to do so.

In light of all of these Jesus offers another way to live, to create the new cultures that are part of our mission today. Jesus ascended and leaves us our mission: our mission to all of creation, which is to preach and to heal with an all-inclusive integrity and wisdom that flow through our trust in God's Spirit: *Presente!*"

- Sr. Melinda Roper, MM, Panama

Faith in Action:

- [Watch](#) our 30-minute webinar on climate change and U.S. policy.
- [Sign](#) this petition to the World Bank urging them to stop investing in the fossil fuel industry.



Fourth Week in Advent: Openness of Heart

“Let it be done to me according to your word.”

- Luke 1: 38

In Pope Francis’s new encyclical on social friendship and dialogue, *Fratelli Tutti*, he speaks of the need for an open heart, explaining that such an interior disposition is key for building peace in our world. Mary’s response to the angel in today’s Gospel demonstrates the kind of openness that Pope Francis speaks of and that God desires of us.

Mary declares that she is open to welcoming Jesus; open to walking the hard path of discipleship that will lead to the death and resurrection of her Son; open to becoming the mother of all peoples.

What would it look like for us to have such a radical openness of heart towards God’s will and toward love of neighbor? In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis writes, “the guarantee of an authentic openness to God, on the other hand, is a way of practicing the faith that helps open our hearts to our brothers and sisters.”

Our world and our country today are fraught with division. Hateful language, mean-spiritedness, and belittlement of others abound. It is these kinds of breakdown in human relationships that Pope Francis is addressing in his new encyclical. These patterns lead to violence and a culture of indifference.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis highlights the Good Samaritan story from the Gospel of Luke as means for understanding how we can arrive at the kind of “openness of heart” needed in today’s fractured world. He understands the encounter in the story between the injured Jewish man and the Samaritan as not merely a single moment of charity but an encounter of mercy which leaves both individuals transformed. At the time of Luke’s writing, Jews and Samaritans hated each other; such an encounter could

only have left a deep mark on each of them and their understanding of the other’s people.

Fr. Michael Bassano, MM, gives an example of the power of encounter in his ministry in a refugee camp in South Sudan: “The church isn’t a place; it’s a way of being together. So even though we’re in a Nuer tribe area of the UN camp, we intentionally invited Shilluk and Dinka tribes from other areas of the camp, especially the youth, to come here. It’s a place where diverse people come to become one people, worshipping God together. Every time we gather on Sunday for worship, we are a family of God, not divided by tribe, at peace with each other.”

Today’s Gospel reminds us that “Nothing is impossible for God.” The barriers that divide people today sometimes seem unsurmountable. When we live in a world of alternative facts, of starkly different visions of reality and for the future, it can seem impossible to find common ground.

But as we leave the Season of Advent and celebrate Christmas next week, we are reminded that God enters through the smallest foothold: a baby born to a poor teenage girl in an obscure part of the world. God can create in us an open heart if we offer up the smallest bit of room.

Questions for Reflection:

Are there broken relationships in your life that seem impossible? Have you ever experienced an “encounter of mercy” that transformed a situation?

Prayer

A Prayer to the Creator

Lord, Father of our human family,
you created all human beings equal in dignity:
pour forth into our hearts a fraternal spirit
and inspire in us a dream of renewed encounter,
dialogue, justice and peace.
Move us to create healthier societies
and a more dignified world,
a world without hunger, poverty, violence and war.

May our hearts be open
to all the peoples and nations of the earth.
May we recognize the goodness and beauty
that you have sown in each of us,
and thus forge bonds of unity, common projects,
and shared dreams. Amen.

An Ecumenical Christian Prayer

O God, Trinity of love,
from the profound communion of your divine life,
pour out upon us a torrent of fraternal love.
Grant us the love reflected in the actions of Jesus,
in his family of Nazareth,
and in the early Christian community.

Grant that we Christians may live the Gospel,
discovering Christ in each human being,
recognizing him crucified
in the sufferings of the abandoned
and forgotten of our world,
and risen in each brother or sister
who makes a new start.

Come, Holy Spirit, show us your beauty,
reflected in all the peoples of the earth,
so that we may discover anew
that all are important and all are necessary,
different faces of the one humanity
that God so loves. Amen.

- Pope Francis, prayers from *Fratelli Tutti*

Maryknoll Missioner Experience



“In El Salvador, the answer to sin and injustice is not the violent tactics of the military nor the dehumanizing of the gang members. We need to see everyone as a child of God. Only then can we work together to denounce violence and injustice and create a better world.

We all are called to be missioners in our own ways, proclaiming the Kingdom of God. A couple of years ago I started calling a gang member in the community my ‘missioner.’ At first, the kids laughed that I was calling a gang member ‘missioner,’ but the name started to stick. He started to see himself more than just a gang member, but a child of God that does have mission to help create a better world. Conversion is the way to confront sin, and we cannot continue to fight violence with violence. A more compassionate and just world is possible.”

- Larry Parr
Maryknoll Lay Missioner

Faith in Action:

[Explore](#) our 6-page study guide on Pope Francis’ *Fratelli Tutti*, an encyclical on dialogue and social friendship.