

An Invitation

This book is an invitation.

I am inviting you to join me in an ancient Catholic prayer practice called the Angelus. The Angelus is a daily Catholic devotion focused on the Incarnation of Christ. The call to pray the Angelus—still ringing in many church bell towers throughout the world—occurs three times each day, at dawn, midday, and at dusk. At 6:00 a.m., noon, and 6:00 p.m. Catholics around the world stop what they are doing and remind themselves of the presence of God in the world. They remind themselves that our great and all-powerful God became flesh. God became man. We are not alone.

I won't sugarcoat this invitation: praying the Angelus is a discipline. In order to reap the benefits of the devotion, you must commit to regularly praying it day after day. It is in the repetition and the fidelity that we receive the grace that God supplies through the practice. You are not likely to experience some great, awe-inspiring moment of divine revelation each time you come to the prayer. It is

short. You begin reciting the words, and before you know it, you are finished.

Yet the devotion can be a source of tremendous grace. If you accept the invitation and stick with the practice daily, you will look back and find that God was indeed at work through the prayer. You will see that, although you may not have noticed it, he was pouring forth his grace into your heart little by little every day. He was making you worthy of the promises of Christ. In faith I trust that after many years of praying this prayer, we will be brought together through Christ's Passion and Cross to the glory of his Resurrection.

In the pages that follow, we travel into a deep meditation on the practice and contents of the Angelus and the Regina Caeli. These are meant to be communal rather than individual prayers. While you read, know that you and I will be praying together in spirit. And whether you are beginning the practice alone, as a family, or with a group, I encourage you to visit the website *The Angelus Prayer*, where you can connect with a virtual community of thousands of others across the globe who have made these profound and life-changing prayers a cornerstone of their Catholic devotional life.

In both practice and content, the Angelus meets us exactly where we need God's grace the most. Our culture escalates in us a desire to take control of our lives and determine our own destinies. Many of us are so focused

on productivity that almost every hour of every day is scheduled and dedicated to accomplishing something. Work, for many people, is no longer contained within a nine-to-five workday: it follows us home on our devices. Those devices distract us continually, pulling us away from genuine interaction with the people around us at any given moment.

Praying the Angelus, on the other hand, reminds us to dedicate our time, our work, and our lives back to God. Each time we stop what we are doing and pray; we reorient our lives and our time toward God, the source of our lives and the inspiration for our work. In pausing to consecrate time back to God and rededicate our lives to him, we recognize that our life and our work are gifts that he has given to us and that we give back in return.

We do not, however, pray just any prayer three times each day; we pray to remind ourselves of many important truths about how God is present in our world. We repeat the words of the Annunciation and Mary's humble response to God's call; in doing so, we recall the Incarnation, the miraculous presence here on earth of our eternal God in the flesh—and the Incarnation brings irresistibly to mind the Paschal Mystery and the promises of Christ that we are living for today. We focus more intently on these promises during the Easter season, when we shift from praying the Angelus to praying the Regina Caeli,

looking to Mary as Queen of Heaven and to Jesus who won for us eternal life by his Death and Resurrection.

Praying the words of the Angelus and the Regina Caeli can lead us to meditate on our daily lives. We can view our work and our calling through the lens of Mary's response to God's call through the angel Gabriel. We can reflect on our own response to God's call to us each day. We can offer up our lives and increase our awareness of the presence of God's Word in our lives and in our relationships with others. We can remind ourselves each day, as we worry about our time, that indeed our time here is limited and that we are meant for eternity.

In his apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI summarized best the purpose of the Angelus: "This prayer, simple yet profound, allows us 'to commemorate daily the mystery of the Incarnate Word.' It is only right that the People of God, families and communities of consecrated persons, be faithful to this Marian prayer traditionally recited at sunrise, midday and sunset. In the Angelus we ask God to grant that, through Mary's intercession, we may imitate her in doing his will and in welcoming his word into our lives. This practice can help us to grow in an authentic love for the mystery of the Incarnation."¹

Praying the Angelus is an act of openness to God's will. By stopping whatever we are doing and shifting our focus to him, we open our lives to his will and elevate its

importance above our own desires of the moment. We can find great peace in our busy lives when we stop and remember that we are put here on earth to do God's will. Praying the Angelus three times each day reminds us that our lives are not our own. They are gifts, and we ask God for the grace to use them as he wishes—in ways we might never imagine on our own.

So, I invite you to join me and countless others in taking up this devotion each day. I invite you, also, to read and reflect on how the prayer may transform your life as you read the pages that follow. Finally, I invite you to use the meditations in this book to help you reflect more deeply on the words that we will be praying together. Let's begin.

Origins of the Angelus and the Regina Caeli

One of my favorite things about superheroes is their origin stories, which often distill their very essences as heroes. Batman is driven by the murder of his parents when he was a child; a desire for vengeance is often at the core of his heroic deeds. Spider-Man got his powers when he was a nerdy kid on a field trip. His intellectual nerdiness never goes away, and he carefully analyzes situations before jumping into action using his superpowers. Captain America was a scrawny young man before being given his super strength. This kept him humble as a hero.

These origin stories tell us about who the heroes are at their core. Just as the origin stories of comic book heroes reveal something of these characters' core identities, the origin and history of the Angelus reveals part of our core identity as Catholics. The Angelus developed out of our religious ancestors' ardent desire both to honor the role of the Virgin Mary in salvation history and to practice a devotion that made the grace of the Incarnation real.

Devotional practice is habitual, and many today criticize it as mindless and unproductive. Those of us who keep devotional practices, however, find that these

devotions transform our days. The Angelus, which focuses on the Incarnation, orients us toward a deeper experience—not just a deeper understanding—of God’s presence among us. Linking the devotion to fixed times—morning, noon, and evening—transforms daily life.

This is what our Catholic predecessors experienced as far back as the fourteenth century in praying the Angelus. Pausing three times each day to meditate on the Incarnation revealed God’s presence in their daily lives. They were not seeking private revelatory experiences so much as an outward acknowledgment of their unity with Christ and with each other. The church bells would ring, and a community of people, though separated by space, was united through prayer and sacred time. The Word dwelt among them even as they went about the duties of everyday life.

When we pray the Angelus, we are united not only with others who pray this prayer each day, but with countless of the faithful over the centuries who have dedicated short moments of their day in unison with the whole Church to acknowledge and honor God’s presence here on earth even today. The origin and history of the Angelus reveals that the unity and communion of our Church has its foundation in the Incarnation. We find unity in remembering Christ’s presence here on earth today. God became man and dwelt among us during his earthly life not only to inspire us but also to unite

us. Today, we rediscover this unity by meditating on the Incarnation each time we pray the Angelus.

Here are some of the key developments in the history of the Angelus and Regina Caeli devotions:

THE AVE MARIA (OR HAIL MARY)

Christian devotion to the Virgin Mary can be traced back to the earliest history of the Church. There are instances in the gospels that place particular emphasis on the Virgin Mary's importance in salvation: Jesus presents his mother to the beloved disciple from the Cross in the Gospel of John (19:26). Mary is present during Pentecost in the book of Acts (1:14). But it is Luke's account of the Annunciation, of course, that establishes Mary's place in the devotional life of the Church. From this story comes a wellspring of prayers entrusting the lives of the faithful to the aid of the Mother of God.

In the second century, St. Irenaeus took what St. Paul wrote about Christ as the Last (New) Adam (1 Cor 15:45) and showed that we could also look to Mary as the New Eve: "It was the knot of Eve's disobedience that was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the Virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, the Virgin Mary set free through faith."² This quotation shows that early Christians saw for Mary an important place within salvation history.

As time went on, including Mary in prayer became more common. The fourth-century saint Basil the Great is credited with writing, “O sinner, be not discouraged, but have recourse to Mary in all your necessities. Call her to your assistance, for such is the divine will that she should help in every kind of necessity.” What words did Christians use through the ages in their recourse to Mary? They looked to the Gospel of Luke for inspiration for a prayer.

The Ave Maria, known in English as the Hail Mary, took on a devotional formula sometime in the eleventh century. It first echoes the words of the angel Gabriel during the Annunciation. His words praise Mary as “full of grace” and offer assurance that “the Lord is with” her (see Lk 1:28). These words are followed by the words Elizabeth said to Mary at the visitation: “Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus” (see Lk 1:42). The second half of the Hail Mary, our petition for her prayers, was added around the time of the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century and is not drawn directly from scripture.

THE POWER OF THREE

The three Hail Marys form the backbone of the Angelus prayer and also point to its beginning. During the Middle Ages, reciting the Hail Mary became commonplace; what is more, the practice of saying it three times

became more and more prominent. The triple Hail Mary is often traced back to St. Anthony of Padua, who in the thirteenth century, taught his followers to “seek refuge in Mary . . . [who] provides shelter and strength for the sinner.” Later in the thirteenth century, it is said that Our Lady appeared to St. Mechtilde, who called on Mary to assist her in her hour of death. Mary said to her, “I will, certainly, but I also want you to say three special Hail Marys to me every day.”

Around the same time, Our Lady is said to have appeared to St. Gertrude the Great, saying, “To any soul who faithfully prays three Hail Marys, I will appear at the hour of death in splendor so extraordinary that it will fill the soul with heavenly consolation.” The triple Hail Mary continued to be prayed and recommended by many other saints from the Middle Ages down through modern times, including St. Bonaventure, St. Stanislaus Kostka, St. Louis de Montfort, St. Gerard Majella, St. Alphonsus Liguori, and St. Josemaría Escrivá.

In the fourteenth century, the triple Hail Mary became a formal practice following Compline—the final daily prayer of the Divine Office or Liturgy of the Hours—in Rome. This action paved the way for this short devotion to take on a widespread appeal. Historical evidence suggests that the triple Hail Mary was said by the laypeople, who were illiterate and unable to follow along with much of the Office, as well as monks. At first, the recitation of