**A Novena Meditating on the Nine Months of Jesus in the Womb**

Edited from a series of 9 Facebook posts written throughout the year 2022.

# **March 25**

Today is arguably more important than Christmas, which is in exactly 9 months. Today is when the Word became flesh.

You can’t see it. No one looking at Mary right after the Angel Gabriel delivered the news to her would be able to tell that she was now the dwelling place of God—unless, of course, she already radiated the glow of an expectant mother, which I imagine would have been stronger in the woman who had been overshadowed by the Glory Cloud.

Still, the Incarnation was invisible before it was visible, and that reminds us that the divinity of Christ is no more visible in a baby or an adult than it is in a zygote hidden in Mary’s womb. Or in all the tabernacles throughout the world, including all the faithful who have just received Him in the Eucharist.

Today is the day He came down from Heaven and took on our human nature, which begins with a single cell, in the dark and the warmth and the safety of a mother’s belly.

Today we should meditate on what St. Thomas Aquinas says in the hymn “Tantum Ergo:”

*Praestet fides supplementum*

*Sensuum defectui.*

“Faith for all defects supplying where the feeble senses fail.”

# **April 25**

End of month 1. Baby Jesus is ¼ of an inch long, smaller than a grain of rice. His Sacred Heart is still developing, but it is already beating, pumping the Precious Blood that will flow with water from His pierced side in the image of Divine Mercy that we celebrated this past Sunday. At just 1 month, Mother Mary already had the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ living inside her: a type of the Eucharist. As it was crucial that Jesus enter the world through a pure vessel, it’s crucial that we let God purify us before we receive Him.

# **May 25**

End of month 2. Baby Jesus is now 2 months along. He has graduated from embryo to fetus.

He’s just 1 inch long, but His central nervus system has already developed, and little buds have formed that will grow into His arms, legs, fingers, toes, and eyes. His senses are coming. The first taste buds have already appeared on His itty-bitty tongue.

Thinking about those buds makes me think of the first disciples. No one who saw them would see them as anything but a little knot of nobodies—uneducated fishermen, reformed prostitutes, former disabled beggars—hardly what you’d expect the nascent Body of Christ to look like. But that’s what they were: His hands and feet beginning to grow.

With today’s technology, the beating of the Sacred Heart would have been detectable for 2 weeks now. But even with such advancements, do we hear it now?

It still beats, 2000 years later. Somewhere beyond human understanding, His resurrected heart is still beating at the right hand of God the Father. But it’s also much nearer, in every vein and temple of the world: formed in the secret of darkness for love of the world, pierced with a spear to give us the blood and water of life, the Sacred Heart beats with love for those made in His image. And those images are how He reaches out: through those hands, wounded as they are.

Pray for all the broken hearts in this valley of tears, and for those who have had their chance stolen to grow into His hands on Earth. He holds us all in the palms of His wounded but glorified hands, even if we cannot see them for what they are.

# **June 25**

End of month 3. We’ve just entered Mary’s second trimester. Baby Jesus is 4 inches long and fully formed. He has all His organs, all His fingers and toes. It will still be a while before He can hold a hammer (could we get Him a tiny one?), but for now He can open and close His little fists. He can also open and close His mouth, even though He’s not breathing air yet and is still receiving nutrients through the umbilical cord.

The cord is what connects Him to Mary, yet shows Him to be distinct, since it has His DNA, which is only half Mary’s. Where did the other half come from? If God can create the entire heavens and earth from nothing, the missing half of a single complete genome, including the Y-chromosome that Mary certainly doesn’t have, surely doesn’t pose a challenge.

In the past few days, we’ve celebrated the Feasts of the Sacred Heart and the Nativity of John the Baptist. The latter puts us only 6 months from Christmas. Baby John leapt in the womb of his mother, Elizabeth, when Mary brought baby Jesus into the house. In the womb himself, he recognized the humanity and divinity of Jesus in the womb.

Ladies, while Elizabeth speaks these words to Mary, and they apply to her in a truly unique way, they are also true for all women who find, whether to joy or pain or fear, that they carry images of God inside them. Always remember: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

# **July 25**

End of month 4. Assuming Jesus was the same size as an average baby nowadays (even though we know people were smaller 2000 years ago), He is just 6 inches long. And yet we’re almost halfway to Christmas.

The Holy Face has all its features, though not of course in the form He will one day leave on Veronica’s veil. It will be decades before His hands and feet carry the marks of nails, but there are already nails on His tiny fingers and toes. If we took an ultrasound, we might not be able to see whether He has a cleft lip, as He might be sucking His little thumb.

Mary can’t get an ultrasound, of course. She can’t even feel Him kicking inside her, as He’s still too little. All she has is faith, and the peace and courage it gives her in a time of both uncertainty and anticipation.

But if she could see Him, she would now be able to see what has been encoded on every cell of His body since His miraculous conception: that He is not only her child, but her son. He did not begin as female or pass through an intermediate female stage, any more than He is transitioning from nonliving tissue into humanity. He has only just developed male primary sex characteristics, but He has no more become male now than He will upon puberty.

From all eternity Jesus has been the Son of God, and from March 25 He has been the Son of Mary. The latter is visible only now; the former will not be for many years. But visibility has little to do with truth.

# **August 25**

End of month 5. Mary feels the first flutter of God inside her as baby Jesus begins to exercise His tiny muscles.

He is 10 inches long and covered in peach-fuzzy lanugo. Hair is starting to grow on His little head. We don’t know how much He will be born with; He might be close to bald, or He could have a full head of hair as thick and soft as a little sheep. Regardless, a lot of it will fall out soon after Christmas, as he turns His little head this way and that against His blankets.

He is also now covered in Vernix caseosa, which translates “cheese varnish.” This white goo protects His fragile skin from long exposure to Mary’s amniotic fluid, and when He is born, it will protect His skin from the cold outside air until it is absorbed.

We tend to be grossed out by vernix; we think of it as one of those unfortunate substances babies are born covered in and need cleaned off. Some, citing the painless and miraculous nature of Jesus’s birth, even say He couldn’t have been born covered in vernix or amniotic fluid. Disgusting things must be a result of original sin; no way they could have been part of God’s original design.

But God made the spider and the slime mold, the fruit fly and the fungus, and called them good. And surely, vernix is nowhere near as disgusting as these things? Our disgust at natural things is an example of what Tolkien writes in his poem “Mythopoeia:”

…evil lies

not in God’s picture but in crooked eyes.

Our disgust misses the beauty of the design. Vernix is God’s swaddle, in two senses: God designed it to wrap around all little children to keep them safe and healthy; and He chose to be wrapped up in it Himself.

# **September 25**

End of month 6, and baby Jesus is 12 inches long. All the fingerprints of God have now developed. It will be decades before He opens the eyes of the blind, but His eyes now open for the first time.

Mary has been feeling little kicks and wiggles for some time—Jesus might even be leaping for joy like His cousin John did at this age, the first time the two of them were together. He certainly has reason to be happy. He can’t laugh yet—He won’t learn how to do that for another 7 months—but He can hiccup, and Mary feels it. And when she tells Joseph, Jesus moves in response to her voice.

The voices of ima and abba (mama and daddy): He can already hear them and will be born knowing them, will turn His soft little head toward them while lying in the manger. But the most constant sound in that warm, safe place, the dark and secret place where God knits God together, is the first one He ever hears with human ears: the slow, steady thumping of Mary’s Immaculate Heart.

# **October 25**

End of month 7, and the beginning of Mary’s third trimester.

Baby Jesus is 14 inches long and weighs between 2 and 4 pounds. He’s getting chunky, and His skin is getting its color.

It has been weeks since He became able to feel the pain He came to share with us, but I’m sure He doesn’t mind being scrunched up inside His mama’s belly—he’s getting so big now; it’s starting to get cramped in there. It’s amazing that God could be contained at all, much less in a space so small that His kicking and rolling over keeps His mama up at night. He can respond to dark and light now, and He might be wondering where the lights have gone and why mama has stopped moving around.

In His humanity, that is. His divinity, in some mysterious harmony that doesn’t diminish His sweet unborn babyhood, remembers speaking light into being and dividing the day from the night. The Eternal Word that set off the Big Bang, that placed the stars in the sky and calls them each by name, opens little peepers and kicks at the change of light. Wait till He sees the star that guides the magi to Him!

# **November 25**

End of month 8, and baby Jesus is just about in the clear to be born now, though He’ll be rather fuzzy if He decides to come out and play before Gaudete Sunday. He’s got 2 weeks to lose His fur, which He won’t need much longer.

He has the hearing and sight He will give to the deaf and blind—with a qualification: even some weeks after Christmas, He still won’t be able to see much past Mary’s face when she holds Him.

His lungs aren’t quite ready for air yet. They’re one of the very last things, since He hasn’t needed them in all this time. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, and He spends His first 9 months without breathing air!

Will there be a need to slap Him in the stable? Will that be His first pain outside the womb? Or will He be born knowing how to breathe?

Nurses and even parents sometimes let newborns cry. It seems heartless, but it’s exercise: it strengthens those new muscles that haven’t yet had much work to do. They’ve been breathing water, so to speak, for so long. Maybe that’s all suffering is. Our Father wants to hold us and comfort us, but He knows crying is good for our weak muscles.

Bishops used to slap confirmandi as a symbol of the persecution they would face as Christians. There may be more to that than “Get used to offering it up.” Confirmation is the completion of baptism, the stirring up of the Holy Spirit we have already received. At baptism, we are born again of water and the Spirit. But we aren’t born again knowing how to breathe. The slap may signify the pain that opens our spiritual lungs, forces us to inhale the air that hovered over the water before the Word spoke light into darkness.

# **December 25**

End of month 9, and Christ is born!

If there’s anything these 9 months have shown me, it’s that though the King is born today, the King was here, hidden, for a long time before being revealed to the world—or, in a sense, revealing the world to Himself. The Word spoke the Sun into being millennia ago, but now, for the first time, He sees it as we do.

Advent as a liturgical season lasts 4 Sundays, but for Mary and Joseph it lasted 9 months; for Israel, thousands of years; and for Creation, thousands of millennia. The Son of God was Emmanuel, God With Us, before the first Christmas, before the Annunciation, before His coming was whispered through laws and prophets and myths and philosophies; but at each step in His coming, He becomes God With Us in a way at once more overt and more subtle. Which is why our whole lives should be a kind of Advent, preparing ourselves for His coming, because at no point does God With Us look the way we expect Him to—not hidden as a baby in a manger, not hidden under the appearance of bread and wine, and not hidden as a single cell nestled in a woman’s womb.

He will continue to reveal Himself to the world as He grows into first a sweet little boy, then a hardworking man covered in sawdust, then a rabbi traveling the dusty streets of a backwater province, then a prisoner condemned to horrific execution, and at last to the Head of a worldwide Church both splendid and strong and the bridegroom of every human soul. And at every turn and every further unveiling, our fallen eyes will be perplexed and fail to see what He is trying to show us. It’s a strange fact about humanity that, though we ourselves are images of God, we never seem to recognize Him when we see Him.

Which is why I’ll end by returning to the words of St. Thomas Aquinas that I quoted back in March:

*Praestet fides supplementum*

*Sensuum defectui.*

“Faith for all defects supplying where the feeble senses fail.”

Merry Christmas!