

INTRODUCTION



TODAY, WE ARE BLESSED WITH A POPE WHO SAYS NEW AND SURPRISING THINGS EVERY DAY. In each new message, he urges us to follow Jesus Christ. Though following Jesus is not easy, he says, when we do so, our lives will be transformed by joy.

Pope Francis himself takes the gospel to heart, especially its call to live as Jesus did and to embrace Jesus' "least ones." Over and over the pope gives witness to this by living simply himself, embracing the sick, humbly washing feet, blessing modern-day "lepers," and ceaselessly preaching the gospel. He lives what he preaches, and he longs to put a fire under the rest of us!

In this booklet, I invite you to spend thirty days with the words of Pope Francis, who here reflects on what it means to believe in and follow Jesus Christ. May his words inspire you to joyfully embrace the gospel way of love, service, and witness.

The quotes from Pope Francis were chosen by Gwen Costello, who also wrote the reflections and the “Ponder” and “Prayer” pieces.

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1 | POPE FRANCIS INVITES

I invite all Christians everywhere to renew their personal relationship with Jesus Christ or at least let him encounter you.

Pope Francis gives witness in his own life that a relationship with Jesus Christ can be life-changing and joyous. He has repeatedly said that the way to renew our relationship with Jesus is by embracing gospel teachings. When we reflect on the gospels daily and pray in response to what we read, we begin to encounter Jesus himself and to form a closer relationship with him. This encounter, Pope Francis says, can fill us with great joy.

PONDER

- In what one way can you renew your personal relationship with Jesus?
- In what ways and places do you now pray?

PRAY

Jesus, may I grow closer to you this day. Please open my heart to encounter you.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

2 | JESUS BREAKS THROUGH

When we describe Jesus in dull categories, we constrain him, but he breaks through and ceaselessly amazes us with his divine creativity.

Pope Francis is so in love with Jesus that he wants all of us to experience him in fresh new ways. We give Jesus titles like Savior, Redeemer, and Lord of Lords, but these are “dull categories” that keep him at a distance rather than at the center of our lives. Jesus “breaks through,” nonetheless, and if we let him into our lives, he will amaze us and change us for the better.

PONDER

- In what ways do you keep Jesus at a distance?
- How might you be more open to his presence in your daily life?

PRAY

Jesus, you are always with me, inviting me to incredible joy. May I let you amaze me this day.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

3 | A SIGN OF GOD'S LOVE

The wounds of the risen Christ never pass away, for they are the enduring sign of God's love for us.

The apostle Thomas doubted the risen Christ, but when Jesus came among the disciples, he invited Thomas to “put your finger here and feel my hands... Do not doubt but believe.” For Pope Francis, these precious wounds are an enduring sign of God's love for us and are thus essential to our faith. The pope says that Jesus the crucified is alive and among us, and his wounds remain to remind us to offer ourselves in loving service.

PONDER

- In what ways are you ever a doubting Thomas?
- What do the wounds of Christ say to you personally?

PRAY

Jesus, even as our risen Lord, your wounds remain. May I ponder this more deeply throughout my day.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

4 | WHY THINGS GO WRONG

We can seek success as much as we want, but if we do not profess Jesus Christ, things go wrong.

Pope Francis profoundly believes that faith in Jesus steers our lives in the right direction. We can be successful in the eyes of the world, but without Jesus we are not able to sustain a relationship with God. When we lose our way for various reasons, “things go wrong.” But professing Jesus Christ means more than reciting the Creed. It is a way of life, Pope Francis says, a way of goodness and compassion.

PONDER

- In what daily ways do you profess your faith in Jesus Christ?
- How does your faith sustain you when “things go wrong”?

PRAY

Jesus, I want to profess my faith more fully, but sometimes I lack the courage to do so. Show me the way.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

5 | CHRIST WORKS THROUGH US

*I ask the risen Jesus, who turns death into life,
to change hatred into love, vengeance into
forgiveness, and war into peace.*

Nothing will change in our society unless the followers of the risen Jesus abolish hatred, practice forgiveness, and work for peace. We can do this only if we let Jesus work through us. The risen Christ, Pope Francis says, empowers us to make changes in our lives and in our society. He helps us become his hands and feet in all we do and say.

PONDER

- In what small ways can you become the hands and feet of Christ?
- How might you be more open to the risen Christ today?

PRAY

Sometimes, O God, I find it so hard to offer love, forgiveness, and peace as Jesus did. Please teach me how to follow him.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with God.

6 | FOOD THAT SUSTAINS US

Jesus gives himself to us in the Eucharist, shares in our journey, and makes himself the true food that sustains our life.

When the road before us is difficult and obstacles slow our steps, Jesus is there for us in the Eucharist. He accompanies us; he leads the way; and he sustains us as our “true food.” We go to Mass each week, perhaps forgetting that Jesus is present in more than just the Communion Bread. If we open ourselves to him, Pope Francis says, Jesus will empower us to give more and to love others more deeply.

PONDER

- What does the Eucharist mean to you in real terms?
- In what ways do you let Jesus sustain and empower you?

PRAY

Jesus, thank you for the gift of the Eucharist. May I never forget that it is my “true food.”

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

7 | STARCHED CHRISTIANS

*We must not become starched Christians,
but rather courageous followers who look for
the very flesh of Christ among his poor.*

“Starched” Christians, the pope says, are those who discuss theological truths but don’t go out into the world to practice them. True believers, he says, go out to seek Christ in the poor and marginalized, the neediest of this world. Pope Francis encourages us to be “a church for the poor,” one that actively works to help those who are the “very flesh of Christ.” This is what “courageous” Christians do, he says.

PONDER

- Have you ever thought of the poor as “the very flesh of Christ”?
- How might you more actively love and serve Jesus’ “least ones”?

PRAY

Jesus, the pope challenges me to see your presence in a totally new light. Help me to believe more deeply.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

8 | WHAT ADORATION MEANS

In adoring Christ, really present in the Eucharist, let yourself be transformed so you can better love him and others.

Pope Francis obviously sees a deep connection between believing and doing. If we believe that Jesus is “really present in the Eucharist,” we will take action in his name. True belief is more than acknowledging something with our minds. It involves letting our hearts be transformed so fully that we feel the need to reach out in loving and compassionate service to others. Adoration, Pope Francis says, involves both belief and action.

PONDER

- How do the pope’s words affect you personally?
- What small step might you take today to act on your beliefs?

PRAY

Jesus, present in the Blessed Sacrament, and here with me now, teach me how to open my heart to others.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

9 | NOT JUST A MULTITUDE

When we listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ and nourish ourselves with his Body and Blood, we move from being a multitude to being a community.

Pope Francis emphasizes here the two prongs of worship, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Both form us into true followers of Jesus. When we listen to the Scriptures with open hearts and fortify ourselves with Christ's Body and Blood, we become part of a true community. When we gather as disciples, Pope Francis says, we are no longer just a group of strangers.

PONDER

- When you go to Mass, what makes you feel connected—or not?
- How might you open your heart more fully to Jesus Christ today?

PRAY

Jesus, you give me spiritual energy in both your word and your presence. Help me to be a true disciple.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

10 | OUR TOP PRIORITY

*If we forge ahead on our own, with beautiful plans
even, but leave Jesus out, it does not work,
Jesus is first!*

Pope Francis is a joy-filled person, and the source of his happiness is his deep faith in the presence of Jesus. In our culture, where constant activity is the norm, it's hard for us to find time to talk with Jesus and invite him into our lives. We're not accustomed to asking "what would Jesus do?" in our daily decisions and activities. But Pope Francis says that leaving Jesus out is not an option for Christians.

PONDER

- In what times during your day might you make more room for Jesus?
- Do you ever ask or wonder, "What would Jesus do?"

PRAY

Jesus, I need help putting you first in my life. May I never intentionally "leave you out."

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

11 | THE GIFT OF FORGIVENESS

Jesus never tires of forgiving. It is we who tire of asking for forgiveness.

Jesus told the prodigal son story (Luke 15:11–32) to reveal the depth of God’s love and forgiveness. Many of us walk around assuming we aren’t worthy of such forgiveness, or we get caught up in a whirlwind of activity and are too “tired” to be open to the mystery of God’s love. Jesus never tires of forgiving—in the sacrament of reconciliation, at Mass, and in our daily prayer. Pope Francis is asking us to pay attention to the grace of God’s absolute forgiveness.

PONDER

- Are you ever “too tired” to ask for forgiveness?
- Can you take time today to meditate on the prodigal son story?

PRAY

Jesus, you offer me the gift of forgiveness. May I have the courage to accept it and pass it on to others.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

12 | A HEARTFELT PLEA

I love everyone, rich and poor alike, but in the name of Christ I must remind the rich to help the poor.

This is a running theme for Pope Francis, and here again he reminds the rich to assist the poor. Though his own role as pope potentially offers him a lifestyle of wealth, he has chosen instead to live simply, through gestures like living in a small space, wearing inexpensive shoes, and driving an old car. He believes that simpler living shows that we follow the poor Christ, who cared deeply for the poor. We must do the same.

PONDER

- In what ways does the pope's lifestyle resonate with you?
- What portion of your "wealth" do you share with the poor?

PRAY

Jesus, help me to open my heart and my wallet to all those in need, especially the very poor.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

13 | UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS

A true disciple is constantly ready to share the love of Jesus with others, and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place.

Pope Francis believes that followers of Jesus feel impelled to offer his love to others, and that opportunities for this abound. He says that we can offer this love when we meet a poor person on the street, or a lonely person on our vacation, or with coworkers in our workplaces. The pope gives us daily examples of how he does this himself: embracing the sick, blessing babies, washing the feet of strangers. He is trying to do what Jesus did.

PONDER

- How open are you to sharing the love of Jesus?
- In what ways does Pope Francis' example change your heart?

PRAY

Jesus, I'm not always sure how to share your love with others. Please show me the way.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

14 | SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

*Proclaiming Christ means showing that to believe
in and follow him is not only right and true
but also something beautiful.*

For many of us, proclaiming Christ is a foreign concept. We believe in the tenets of the Creed, we go to Mass, we receive Communion, and then we go home. But Pope Francis says that if we give ourselves more fully to Christ, we will experience “something beautiful.” Each of us has to discover this in our own way, but we all have to begin by deepening our relationship with Jesus. The pope leads the way in this.

PONDER

- Do you ever experience your faith as “something beautiful”?
- What form might “proclaiming Christ” take in your life?

PRAY

Jesus, I know that your way is right and true, but may I also experience it as something beautiful.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

15 | THE FIRE OF THE SPIRIT

How I long to stir up your enthusiasm for proclaiming Jesus. Yet no words are enough unless the fire of the Holy Spirit burns in your hearts.

Pope Francis says we need the fire of the Holy Spirit to charge us up and get us going. He tenderly longs “to stir up your enthusiasm.” He himself shows the way through his joyful witness to the presence of Jesus Christ in his life, and he wants to spread the joy. The Holy Spirit, he says, will put a fire under us and burn in our hearts.

PONDER

- How might the “fire of the Spirit” feel in your life?
- What would it take for this “fire” to burn in you?

PRAY

Come, Holy Spirit, and fill my heart, that I might learn to proclaim Jesus with true zeal.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with the Holy Spirit.

16 | GO FORTH TO SERVE

Before all else, the gospel of Jesus Christ invites us to respond to God's love and see God in others — and then go forth to serve them.

The good news, the pope says, is that God is with us. That's what Jesus taught first and foremost. He taught us to pray “our Father”; he gave us the story of the prodigal son; he taught that the “kingdom” is among us. In all these ways Jesus invites us into a close personal relationship with God, one that impels us to “go forth” and serve the needs of others.

PONDER

- What do you think Jesus meant by “good news”?
- In what small ways might you “go forth to serve others”?

PRAY

O God, thank you for being with me always. Teach me to share your love in all I say and do.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with God.

17 | CHRIST LIVES IN ME

All of us need to grow in Christ so we can say wholeheartedly: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

Over and over, Pope Francis invites us into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, but here he goes further. He wants us to “be” Christ in our world. If we truly believed that Christ lives in us, imagine the good we might do, beginning with our family members and coworkers. Just look at the pope himself. He is making every effort to have Christ live in and work through him.

PONDER

- Where are you in the process of growing in Christ?
- How might you move closer to Jesus this very day?

PRAY

O Jesus, help me to grow closer to you, that I might actually “be” you in all my words and actions.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

18 | THE POPE'S GREAT WISH

My great wish is that you be filled with fervor, joy, generosity, courage, and boundless love for Jesus and his gospel.

We are very busy people. Where is the time or disposition to fall in love with Jesus and his gospel? Yet the pope calls this his “great wish.” Imagine if our daily routines were imbued with fervor, joy, generosity, courage, and boundless love for Jesus! Our ordinary lives would then be quite extraordinary.

PONDER

- In what ways is Jesus the inspiration for what you do?
- How might you begin to incorporate his spirit in your daily routines?

PRAY

Loving God, I recognize that my life would be fuller and better if Jesus and his gospel were part of it. Help me make this so.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with God.

19 | DAILY WITNESSES

Giving witness to Christ always bears fruit, even if just through our daily activities. But this is especially important in very difficult times.

It's hard for us to understand what Pope Francis is talking about here because it's considered "weird" in our culture to give witness to Christ. We shy away from it even if it "always bears fruit." But note that the pope also says, "even if just through our daily activities." We can "bear fruit" by being faithful spouses, loving parents, caring coworkers, and good neighbors. These ordinary ways give us courage for the "very difficult times."

PONDER

- In what ways do you presently give witness to Christ?
- How might you begin doing so on a daily basis?

PRAY

Jesus, teach me how to live your gospel teachings. Open my heart to hear your message.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

20 | A LIVING FAITH

Christianity is not theology, commandments, beautiful churches, or a collection of lovely art; no, it is a living people who follow Jesus.

This is a “wow” statement from Pope Francis. Many of us believe that our faith is based on doctrine and commandments, but the pope is saying here that Christianity is a “living people” who follow Jesus. It is far more difficult (and rewarding) to base our lives on gospel teachings than on doctrines alone. It is through us and our faithful witness that Christ’s message will be alive and well in our world.

PONDER

- How do you react to this statement from the pope?
- In what ways are you a “living” and active follower of Christ?

PRAY

Jesus, help me to be a sign of your presence in all the situations of my life. Make my faith a living faith.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

21 | OUR TRUE SUPPORT

May the risen Lord, the conqueror of sin and death, be a support to you all, especially to the weakest and neediest.

The pope says here that we do not walk alone as we try to live and give witness to the gospel message. The risen Lord is a support to us and especially to the neediest among us. In fact, we are all weak and needy, for we sometimes fail when it comes to living our faith in daily, concrete ways. We are always in need of the grace and forgiveness of our risen Lord.

PONDER

- In what areas of your life do you especially need grace and forgiveness?
- In what ways do you feel the support of the risen Lord?

PRAY

Jesus, risen Lord and conqueror of sin and death, forgive me when I forget that you are my support.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

22 | JUST A NUMBER?

*Are you a Christian giving witness to Jesus
or are you just a number in a pew?
Let the Holy Spirit drive you forward!*

Imagine yourself standing before Pope Francis and answering this very compelling question. What kind of Christian are you? Most of us would somewhat guiltily admit that we are a “number”; we show up. What the pope is saying here is that it’s not enough to just show up. We have to give witness to Jesus. Otherwise, we are not Christians at all. But here again, we are not alone in our efforts. Pope Francis says the Holy Spirit can and will drive us forward.

PONDER

- How would you personally answer the pope’s question?
- Do you ever feel the push of the Holy Spirit?

PRAY

Come, Holy Spirit, and take rest in my heart. Come with your grace and heavenly aid.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with the Holy Spirit.

23 | SO MUCH JOY!

There is a moment of wonder, of encounter with Jesus Christ, in which there seems to be too much joy to be true.

It's obvious that Pope Francis himself "encounters" Jesus Christ and walks with him, giving witness to the rest of us. He tells us that it's possible for us too to encounter Jesus in this way, and that to do so is a "moment of wonder." Imagine having "too much joy to be true." This is our goal and our challenge: to encounter the living Christ who can change our lives and fill us with peace and joy.

PONDER

- Have you ever experienced deep-down joy in your faith?
- How might you begin today to encounter Christ more deeply?

PRAY

Jesus, please give me your wonder, joy, and love as I try to follow you in all my daily activities.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

24 | JESUS AND PRAYER

Prayer is so important, even prayers we all know from childhood, but also prayers in our own words, to ask Jesus for guidance.

One of the key ways we encounter Christ is through daily prayer. There are many other ways as well, but when prayer is at the heart of all we do, it's much easier to be living witnesses. The pope says here that prayer of any kind, including childhood prayers and prayers in our own words, can draw us to Christ, who guides and sustains us. Prayer is all-important.

PONDER

- Have you found a time and place that works for your prayer?
- What are your favorite ways to encounter Christ through prayer?

PRAY

Jesus, guide me in my efforts to become one with you, and teach me how to encounter you more often through prayer.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

25 | TELL IT ON THE STREETS

Go out to the streets and announce that Jesus Christ has changed your life. And then rejoice that it is so!

We're not very comfortable "going out to the streets" for any message, much less announcing that Jesus has changed our lives. Some of us might even have to admit that he has not changed our lives very much. A steady diet of prayer, spiritual reading (especially of the gospels), and small daily efforts to do the right thing can strengthen us for sharing our faith with others. And then, the pope says, we can rejoice.

PONDER

- How do you feel about announcing your faith to others?
- In what ways has Jesus changed your life so far?

PRAY

Jesus, I am sometimes a coward when it comes to sharing my faith, perhaps because my faith isn't very strong. Help me to begin anew.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

26 | BEING FAITHFUL

All faithful Catholics are called to be heralds and witnesses of Christ and must remain close to Jesus to do this well.

This is a favorite theme for Pope Francis. We are called to give witness. This is more than just verbalizing our beliefs. It is a way of life. Following Jesus in all our daily actions, talking to him in prayer, and reflecting on his life in the gospels all help us to be heralds and witnesses. We begin first and foremost by remaining close to Jesus, who teaches us how to be faithful.

PONDER

- What does it mean to you to be a “faithful Catholic”?
- In what ways are you a herald or witness—or both?

PRAY

O God, strengthen my faith in Jesus that I might truly be a faithful witness in all I say and do.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with God.

27 | OUR LIFE AND OUR JOY

*It is in the encounter with Jesus who is our life
and our joy that our testimony acquires
new meaning and strength.*

The pope truly believes—and gives witness to this belief—that Jesus Christ can change us profoundly, if only we open our hearts to him. But how can we “encounter” and give witness to someone we don’t know very well? By reading the gospels, we can deepen our knowledge of Jesus and his teachings. Begin by revisiting chapters 5, 6, and 7 in the Gospel of Matthew.

PONDER

- Outside of Mass, how often do you ponder the gospels?
- Do you feel that you know Jesus well enough to “encounter” him?

PRAY

O Jesus, I want you to be near me as I walk through my daily life. Please be my life and my joy.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

28 | THE ROAD OF CHRIST

If you allow jealousy and gossip to overtake your life, you are not on the road of Jesus Christ, who is “meek and humble of heart.”

It seems odd that the pope would choose the words “jealousy” and “gossip,” but this choice shows his understanding of human weakness. When we are jealous of others, our relationships deteriorate. We gossip with the intention of hurting and discrediting others. If either vice has a grip on us, we are not following Jesus, who is meek and humble of heart. We are not, says Pope Francis, on the road of Jesus.

PONDER

- In what ways do jealousy or gossip have a grip on you?
- How might you be more meek and humble, beginning today?

PRAY

O Jesus, I want to be on the road with you and to be meek and humble as you are. Please show me the way.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

29 | A HEART FULL OF LOVE

Jesus' own heart loves very deeply. He gives witness to God's love by loving us with such great love.

Here the pope is referring to the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a very popular Catholic devotion. He wants us to remember the love behind this image as very real and as a reflection of God's tender love for us. To truly love another involves selflessness and sacrifice. But our culture says "me first" in all things. The pope is aware of this and is inviting us to revisit what true love means. Jesus shows us the way.

PONDER

- How might you begin anew to love as Jesus loves?
- In what practical ways can you put others first today?

PRAY

O Sacred Heart of Jesus, help me to be unselfish so that I might love as deeply as you do.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with Jesus.

30 | DO YOU BELIEVE?

*Do you really believe that Jesus Christ is risen?
Do you believe this with your heart
and not just your head?*

St. Paul says that if Christ is not risen, our faith is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:14). Pope Francis agrees, but asks us to go one giant step further: to believe in the risen Christ with “your heart.” When the heart gets involved, we can go beyond reciting “on the third day he rose again from the dead,” to living what this means. This is what Pope Francis is asking of us as Christians—and nothing less.

PONDER

- Do you believe in Jesus Christ with your “heart”?
- How might you begin today to truly live your beliefs?

PRAY

O God, who raised Jesus from the dead, help me to embrace this mystery of faith with my whole heart.

Spend ten minutes sitting quietly with God.