

February 4: St. Joan of Valois (1464-1505)

Joan, or Jane, the physically deformed daughter of King Louis XI of France, was endowed with wonderful gifts of mind and heart. Although she suffered much throughout her life, she accepted her disabilities with patience and spent many of her days in prayer and meditation.

Under the guidance of her spiritual director, a Franciscan priest from whom she received the habit of the Third Order of St. Francis, young Joan prepared to give her life in service to God as a member of a religious community.

But her father had other plans. He announced that Joan would marry the Duke of Orleans, and no objections were to be voiced. Joan dutifully obliged, though her marriage was not a happy one. When the duke ascended the throne as King Louis XII, his first act was to divorce the queen on the grounds that he had only agreed to the marriage to escape the anger of the king, his predecessor. The pope agreed that compulsion had been involved, and declared the marriage null and void.

Joan felt an immediate sense of relief and made her way to Bourges. There she lived a secluded life of prayer and, in 1501, founded a contemplative order of nuns—the Sisters of the Annunciation. God called Joan home only a few years later.

She was canonized in 1950.

Life dealt Joan a bad hand from the beginning. Born with deformities, she yearned to seek the arms of the only Lover who could see her real beauty, but her royal father had other plans for her. Only when she was at last freed from her unhappy marriage was she able to devote herself to conversation with God. Life doesn't always deal us the cards we want either, but like Joan, we can play them with grace.

FEBRUARY 2021

Prayer from Taizé

Christ Jesus, by your coming you call us to simplicity of life. This opens our eyes to the needs of others. Give us the courage to leave behind whatever weighs us down as we go forward. And then we will be able to welcome every moment as a gift of God.

Prayers of Intercession for our parish

- Let us pray that we begin this New Year with God in our hearts, living each day with hope, joy and love as we use our gifts in the service of the Lord.
- Let us pray that we can make our homes, and parish home, havens of support, encouragement and patience in these hard times. Let us pray too for the courage to say sorry and the grace to forgive.
- Let us pray that we are able to hear God's call to follow Him, and to show others the hope and joy that Christ brings.

Some tweets by Pope Francis

- Hunger is not only a tragedy for humanity. It is shameful. Faced with this reality, we cannot remain insensitive or paralysed. We are all responsible.
- Prayer is the centre of life. If there is prayer, even a brother, a sister, becomes important. Those who adore God love His children. Those who respect God respect human beings.
- Kindness frees us from the cruelty that at times infects human relationships, from the anxiety that prevents us from thinking of others, from the frantic flurry of activity that forgets that others also have a right to be happy.
- Lord, Father of our human family, you created all human beings equal in dignity; pour forth into our hearts a fraternal spirit. Move us to create healthier societies and a more dignified world, a world without hunger, poverty, violence and war.

February 25: Blessed Sebastian of Aparicio (1502-1600)

Sebastian's roads and bridges connected many distant places. His final bridge-building was to help men and women recognize their God-given dignity and destiny.

Sebastian's parents were Spanish peasants. At the age of 31 he sailed to Mexico, where he began working in the fields. Eventually he built roads to facilitate agricultural trading and other commerce. His 466-mile road from Mexico City to Zacatecas took 10 years to build and required careful negotiations with the indigenous peoples along the way.

In time Sebastian was a wealthy farmer and rancher. At the age of 60 he entered a virginal marriage. His wife's motivation may have been a large inheritance; his was to provide a respectable life for a girl without even a modest marriage dowry. When his first wife died, he entered another virginal marriage for the same reason; his second wife also died young.

At the age of 72 Sebastian distributed his goods among the poor and entered the Franciscans as a brother. Assigned to the large (100-member) friary at Puebla de los Angeles south of Mexico City, Sebastian went out collecting alms for the friars for the next 25 years. His charity to all earned him the nickname "Angel of Mexico."

Sebastian was beatified in 1787 and is known as a patron of travellers.

According to the Rule of St. Francis, the friars were to work for their daily bread. Sometimes, however, their work would not provide for their needs; for example, working with people suffering from leprosy brought little or no pay. In cases such as these, the friars were allowed to beg, always keeping in mind the admonition of Francis to let their good example commend them to the people. The life of the prayerful Sebastian, still hard at work in his 90's, certainly drew many closer to God.

Looking back on my journey so far, dear Lord, I see how your love and goodness have been with me, through many failings and dangers, in many joys and adventures. I have received much love from friends, been guided and inspired by the wisdom and encouragement of many teachers and writers. Often I have felt your presence near and sometimes I have had to walk by faith. Forgive my slowness, my failures in faith, the smallness of my love, my poor use of your grace. Accept my heart's thanks for growing knowledge of you, for increasing assurance of your loving purpose and deepening understanding of the things that are eternal. As I turn again to the journey ahead, it is bright with the remembrances of past mercies, O dear and gracious Father and Saviour.

(George Appleton)

Come Lord,

do not smile and say you are already with us.
Millions do not know you,
and to us who do, what is the difference?
What is the point of your presence,
if our lives do not alter?
Change our lives,
shatter our complacency,
make your word our life's purpose.
Take away the quietness of a clear conscience,
press us uncomfortably,
for only thus that other peace is made,
your peace.

(Dom Helder Camara)

Lord, you are with me now and always.
Help me to meditate on your unswerving love -
in how you taught
and how you healed,
how you challenged others
and how you went to Jerusalem to die for us
to liberate us in the way you loved.

(Mark Gibbard)