



## Novena of Grace 2021

**Readings:** [Isaiah 65: 17-21](#) | [Psalm 30: 2, 4-6, 11-12a, 13b](#) | [John 4: 43-54](#)

**Grace:** We pray for the grace to open our hearts  
to the bountiful possibilities of God's love.

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My best friend in third grade was Chris, who lived right next to the University of Montana golf course. As luck would have it, there was a hole in the golf course fence near the green on hole number three, just big enough for an eight-year-old boy to fit through. One fall day, as we ventured through the fence, I saw the most beautiful sight my eight-year-old eyes could behold: hundreds of monarch butterflies covering the bushes behind the tee box on hole seven. Chris and I chased them using our baseball caps as butterfly nets until the sun went down. Not wanting to harm these beautiful creatures, we had a rule that if you caught one, you would call the other person over and then gently open the cap to marvel at the butterfly together for the few seconds until it flew away.

I have since learned about the spectacular life cycle of the monarch butterfly. Each autumn, millions of monarchs fly from all over North America south to southern California and the mountains of Mexico where they spend winter. There, they roost in trees by the millions, making the eucalyptus trees look like golden-leafed tamaracks, before returning north in the spring. Migration is particularly astounding in monarchs because this all happens over the course of four generations. That means that there are butterflies who leave the only home they have ever known to head for a destination they will never reach. Yet, they migrate anyway. They fly toward a future they cannot see – they've never been there – for their offspring to survive.

My favorite church in Ireland is the Cathedral of St. Colman in Cobh – a port city famous for being the last place where the Titanic docked. As I walked through the cathedral, I marveled at intricate stonework – shamrocks and angels – carved throughout the church. A plaque hangs in the north transept that lists all the stone masons who built the church, starting in 1868 through its completion in 1919. It struck me: there were people who dedicated *decades* of their life to a church in which they would never be able to worship. They worked tirelessly for a future they could not see, so that their children, or even their grandchildren, could have a beautiful place of worship.

As we turn to today's Gospel, I am struck by the actions of the man who approached Jesus. I imagine that as a Roman official, he likely had access to the best healers of his day and the money to pay them. He probably exhausted every course of action up to



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this point and had been told over and over that his son will die, and there is nothing else that can be done for him.

Yet, he puts hope against hope, and doesn't let "impossible" stop him. He shows courage going to Jesus – which was probably risky for him. I can't imagine that the optics would be great for a Roman official to be seen asking help of an itinerant Jewish healer. And we see his passion, because it took him at least two days to get home, indicating he didn't wait for a miracle to come his way, he went out to meet Jesus, and urgently begged for help; "Sir, come before my child dies." His love for his son gave him the courage, the passion, and the urgency to set aside his ego, potentially sacrifice his career and societal good standing, and seek what others would term an "impossible" future.

Like the Roman official's son, the prevailing message that we hear about our home on Earth is dire. Almost daily we read about the consequences of our abusive treatment of Earth, some of which have already arrived: more, stronger, and bigger hurricanes; more, hotter, and faster-burning wildfires; drought in some areas; and flooding in others. And we hear predictions of a future which will only get worse: wars over water, communities swallowed by the sea, climate refugees intensifying international relations, and inadequate food supply.

But we are called by Jesus' words out of our despair and into believing - and acting - even when there are no signs and wonders. Like the Roman official, our faith in Christ means to hope in a future we cannot see. And like the masons of Cobh and the monarch butterflies, this future may not be attained in our lifetimes, but we still tirelessly work for it, in order to provide for the next generation.

To be followers of Christ means to be a people of hope. It means to hold the hope of the resurrection, even in the darkness of the tomb. It means to be co-creators in the "new heavens and earth" that Isaiah prophesies. As Pope Francis said last Easter season, it means to "testify and channel the new life that the Lord wants to generate at *this specific moment in history.*"<sup>1</sup>

To be followers of Christ means to faithfully sow the seeds of trees we will not live to see reach full height. It means to confront a culture that says we need more, more, more; even though we know the impact of our choices may not be visible in our lifetime. It

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, Bishop of Rome. *A Plan for Resurrection*, April 17, 2020.



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means to emulate the courage of the students in Seattle and around the world who walk out of their classrooms to draw attention to the urgent needs of our Earth. It means to make sacrifices – great and small – and act for a future we cannot yet see, with the passion of a father saving the life of his son.

I will finish with a poetic prayer delivered forty-two years ago, which I will read in its entirety because it is the poem of the Roman official, of the monarch butterfly, of the masons of Cobh, of the students striking for climate justice. It is the poem of a people believing in the bountiful possibilities of God's love. As you listen, I invite you to think of the work you are doing or plan to do for our planet, and hold that in your heart.

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.  
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.  
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent  
enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of  
saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us  
No statement says all that could be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings perfection.  
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.  
This is what we are about.  
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.  
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.  
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.  
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an  
opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.  
We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master  
builder and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future not our own.<sup>2</sup>*

Corbin Johnson  
Day 7 | March 15, 2021

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<sup>2</sup> Untener, Fr. Ken. *Prophets of a Future Not Our Own*, presented by John Cardinal Dearden in a homily on the occasion of the Mass for Deceased Priests, October 25, 1979.



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### Reflection Questions:

- *What line or lines from the poem called to you? Why?*
- *What in our world currently feels impossible? What future pulls you into action with urgency and passion?*