



# GIFTS OF THE VISITATION RETREAT

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based on the book of "Gifts of the Visitation" by Denise Bossert

**NCCW Spirituality Commission**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

For many Catholic women, our Blessed Mother is important and we feel very close to her. She has gone through trials, love, daily struggles, and a sheer anguish that we cannot imagine, but through it all, she kept her faith. She is a true believer in God and inspires us to know not to give up.

We hope that through your listening and participation in this retreat, you will grow closer to Mary, understand more about Elizabeth, and that your faith will grow ever more so to bring you closer to Christ than you already are.

This retreat is based on the book *Gifts of the Visitation* by Denise Bossert. She has granted us permission to use excerpts from the book for this retreat material.

*2018 NCCW Spirituality Commission Committee*

## FORWARD

Welcome to the divine visitation! Catholic women were made for this encounter. It is an encounter with other women of faith, but it is also an encounter with the Lord. God brings us together, and then He shows up right there in our midst.

In the Old Testament, we see the divine visitation in the story of Ruth and Naomi. Ruth declares that she will stay with her mother-in-law Naomi. She will lodge where Naomi lodges. Naomi's people will be Ruth's people. And Naomi's God will be Ruth's God. Though they are both widows, their time of sorrow is turned to joy when God shows up and inclines the heart of the Kinsman Redeemer (Boaz) toward them. They become part of the great lineage of Jesus Christ.

The divine visitation always brings healing and restoration that far surpasses what once was. It elevates us to a place of dignity and honor, removing our shame and redeeming our sorrow. It becomes an invitation to take our place in God's redemption story.

In the New Testament, we see another divine visitation in the story of Elizabeth and Mary. Roles are reversed here. The matriarch turns to the young woman, for Mary's womb holds the eternal Kinsman Redeemer (Jesus Christ). The long-awaited One has come, and each woman has a calling. Each is invited to say yes to her mission. While the Old Testament is replete with friendships that are God-centered, this is the first Christ-centered friendship of all time. It is the first time the good news, the Gospel story, the Kerygma, is passed from the lips of one person to another – and the evangelizer and the evangelized are both women.

Each time we gather together as Catholic women, we become a venue for the divine visitation. Ladies, when we gather and share our gifts with one another, Jesus Christ shows up. We are healed and restored. We are elevated to a place of dignity and honor. And there is joy.

Come, Lord Jesus. We are ready for your divine visitation and to take our places in God's redemption story.<sup>1</sup>

***-Denise Bossert, author of "Gifts of the Visitation" (Nine Spiritual Encounters with Mary and Elizabeth)***

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<sup>1</sup> Denise Bossert, author "Gifts of the Visitation" (Nine Spiritual Encounters with Mary and Elizabeth), Ave Maria Press

### **GIFT #1 SPONTANEITY**

We all know the story in the Gospel of Luke when the angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her she was the favored one.<sup>2</sup> It was unexpected for Mary—she was confused by what the angel meant. As Gabriel explained what would happen to her, Scripture tells us that Mary wonders how this can be, since she had not been with a man; so the angel explains.

Does Mary ask Gabriel to wait so she can make a decision and talk to someone? Does she worry about what her family or Joseph will say? NO! She immediately says, “I am the handmaid of the Lord, may it be done to me according to your word.”

Mary was spontaneous; she trusted God. She had shown no fear or doubts to saying Yes, even though she knew that unwed pregnant women were stoned to death.

Now Zechariah and Elizabeth were married and in their older years. They had wanted children throughout their marriage, but were never able to have any. In those days, it was believed that if someone didn’t receive blessings, such as children, then it must be because they had sinned or their family had sinned against God. Zechariah and Elizabeth both had a very strong faith and trusted God, but when Zechariah was told Elizabeth was to conceive and bear a son, Zechariah questioned it so he became mute (unable to speak) until the baby was born. This was spontaneous! In the strength of her faith, Elizabeth was thrilled beyond words that she would have this child. She did not say “come on Lord, I’m too old” or “why now?” She simply believed and accepted.

***“Are these the things Mary pondered? No. Mary voiced none of these fears, though she certainly had reason to fear. Instead, Mary responded freely and spontaneously, with a faith and acceptance of divine will unmatched by any other human.”***

***“Gifts of the Visitation” by Denise Bossert, p.15***

#### **Questions:**

1. What is God asking of me? Am I listening?
2. Will my response be spontaneous?
3. Am I willing to say YES without question or reservation with the same spirit that Mary did?

Optional hymn: Here I am, Lord.

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<sup>2</sup> Lk 1:28 NABRE

## **GIFT #2 COURAGE**

Our Blessed Mother was courageous. Mary's family and ancestors had a long history of strong faith in God and trusting Him. This generates bravery and courage. We need to remember that Mary was a real girl. Yes, she was chosen from God, but she was still only around 14-years-old, when she said YES to God. This takes enormous courage.

***“How does one get the gift of courage? Where is the door to this gift? Does one need to pray the Shema or meditate on some scripture?”***

***“Gifts of the Visitation” by Denise Bossert, p 29***

No, you already have the gift of courage.

***“From the moment the bishop sealed you with the Holy Spirit at your Confirmation, you have been the beneficiary of the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, right judgment, courage, and so on. It does not matter if you are naturally brave. It has nothing to do with your DNA, In the Sacrament of Confirmation you were given the gift of courage. You have only to pray and ask the Holy Spirit for the manifestation of this gift.”***

***“Gifts of the Visitation” by Denise Bossert, p 29***

Once she was told of her cousin, Elizabeth's pregnancy, she knew immediately that she needed to go to be with her. Mary walked from Nazareth to Judea. This journey of 80 miles took 4 days - what emotions do you think Mary had? - do you think she wondered what raising the Messiah would be like? Would He be like any other baby or would He walk and talk right away? What would Joseph say? Mary had courage, and she knew God would protect her.

As mentioned before, with Elizabeth well into her non-child bearing years, she and Zechariah were probably settled into their life. Once she realized she was pregnant, she accepted it without question. This too took courage because how hard would it be for her to deliver this child at her age? Think about having a child when you are 60, 70 or older.

### **Questions:**

1. Do you have the courage to trust God?
2. Do you pray for the gift of courage?
3. What are you facing at this time that requires the gift of courage?

Optional hymns: On Eagles Wings - Be Not Afraid

**GIFT #3 JOY**

*“Generation after generation, women have shared the joys of pregnancy with one another, but surely, there has never been more joy over new life than the joy shared between Mary and Elizabeth in the hills of Judea.”*      *“Gifts of the Visitation”, by Denise Bossert, p. 41*

When news comes about a friend or family member having a baby, it generally brings a smile and happiness. There is something so special about a new life coming into the world.

This next gift is Joy. Joy is a gift that, hopefully, we partake in frequently.

For Elizabeth, she was unable to converse with Zechariah about all of the things going on with the pregnancy, because he was mute. But when Mary came to see Elizabeth, she embraced Mary and said, “Blessed art you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth’s baby leapt in her womb with joy. He knew this was the Christ child with Mary.

**Sharing:**

*Leader should share a personal story of Joy that has happened to her and then ask for volunteers to share a short personal story.*

**Questions:**

1. Is my life marked by the Spirit of joy?
2. How can I share this joy with others? (Example: writing cards, shopping for others, etc.)

Optional hymn: Hail Mary Gentle Women

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:42 NABRE

### **GIFT #4 READINESS**

*“Like Mary, we learn to listen to the Spirit’s call, discern what is in accordance with God’s will, and then act with haste. What is God calling you to now? Maybe you have heard his voice in the past, but lately, you haven’t thought about what might be next in your journey.”  
“Gifts of the Visitation”, by Denise Bossert, p. 54*

After Mary learned about Elizabeth’s pregnancy from the angel Gabriel,—she believed the angel told her this for a reason. She knew she needed to go see Elizabeth, help her, and take care of her. Both women had something in common and they would need each other.

The Spirit of readiness is the fourth gift. So, as Mary ponders the words of Gabriel—Joy fills, and then it sends. The joy of our Lord looks to go further and share with someone else. Joy fills, God sends, and we act.

As we are on our own faith journey, God is preparing us for the next step. He is readying us to say yes to His call. Do we have the Spirit of readiness? How do we hear God’s call? We learn to hear by ways and signs—prayer with God.

#### **Sharing:**

Talk about your prayer life—do you have a story where you were asked to trust?

#### **Questions:**

1. What is God asking me to embrace right now?
2. Is this the time to say yes to what God has planned?

Optional hymn: Will You Let Me Be Your Servant

**GIFT #5 HUMILITY**

***“Mary’s humility made her fully aware of the great work that God had done and was doing within her. It did not cross her mind that she merited this favor, even though we know that God found her ‘full of grace.’ Neither did she cling to her own plans, but she submitted to the plan of God. In short, she emptied herself of her own thoughts and desires about the future, contemplating only God’s abundant mercy. That’s humility.”***

***“Gifts of the Visitation”, by Denise Bossert, p. 62)***

If we look at Mary’s life and think about everything she did and went through, her humility should be obvious. If we are unable to see the humility, we can miss some things Mary wants to teach us. The gift of humility is at the center of all the gifts. Humility keeps us grounded. It is essential for those wanting to share Christ.

God has a way of always bringing us back to Him when we stray too far. Humility is a gift only when we are able to empty ourselves of self-love and pride and surrender to God’s grace producing holiness.

“Elizabeth does not focus on her own righteousness, but declares, ‘So has the Lord done for me at a time when he has seen fit to take away my disgrace before others.’” (Lk. 1:25) This is a miracle that surprises and delights the people of Ein Kerem. The community is able to recognize God’s hand in the miracle, and they are able to comprehend the gift because it came in the manner they understand - by way of the marital embrace. In the moment Mary visits Elizabeth, Elizabeth is at the zenith of her status in the community. And yet, what does Elizabeth say when Mary arrives? What does Elizabeth do when she sees Mary? She shouts, “Blessed are you among women!” Immediately Elizabeth recognizes the one who has received the greatest gift from God – Mary who carries the Messiah.” ***“Gifts of the Visitation”, p. 64, by Denise Bossert***

**Questions:**

1. Am I confused about God’s riches and blessings considering them as a result of my holiness rather than the gift of grace they really are?
2. Am I ready to let go of attachments and embrace God’s gifts in my life?

Optional hymn: *We Are Called*



### **GIFT #6 ADVENTURE**

This next gift is the gift of Adventure. Adventure sounds intriguing, even mysterious. We do not know what is to come, whether good or bad, but our faith life can help us to be strong. God helps us get through things when we least expect it.

*“Like Mary, our job is to ‘Christify’ the world. And we can’t do that - we can’t even encounter Christ, let alone share him - if we stay in the familiar ‘bedroom’ of our ‘Nazareth’ home.”*  
*“Gifts of the Visitation” by Denise Bossert, p. 76*

Our Blessed Mother took the journey, the adventure herself when she left to visit Elizabeth. She listened to the Word and received Christ. She was Christ’s first disciple.

Whatever the paths we have followed in our lives, God has given us the people we need to help us get through. This happens at the right time in our lives to overcome things.

Do you ever think back to when people have come across your path that normally would not? How did that work? Was it a good experience? Many times people are in our path for us to share Christ with them. It is an invitation. Do we take the time to see it, or are we in such a hurry that we miss the opportunity? Being Christ-like to everyone we meet should become as natural as breathing. It should be something we automatically do.

#### **Sharing:**

Leader should share a story of something you did where someone crossed your path that normally would not have.

#### **Questions:**

1. What adventure waits for me?
2. Would I share Christ even with people I know aren’t receptive?

Optional hymn: *They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love*

### **GIFT #7 HOSPITALITY**

Hospitality is known as entertaining and welcoming in guests or visitors. It is a genuine way to show love for others! As women and members of the Council of Catholic Women we all have experience with this gift. We help make others feel welcome at gatherings by offering food, beverages, and conversation.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Mary, after hearing about her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy, leaves the comfort and safety of her home and family, in haste, to visit Zechariah and Elizabeth.

We look at this as a divine visitation from God. Remember when we hear about how Elizabeth's baby leapt for joy at the sound of Mary's voice?

God visits and God receives—also God visits the unborn (John the Baptist). By welcoming Mary and inviting her into their home, Zechariah and Elizabeth also invited the Sacred Heart of Jesus to take up residence with them.

The spirit of hospitality is a spirit of giving and receiving, a spirit of release, and a spirit of welcome.

God invites us to learn from Mary. We, too, are called to pour ourselves out for one another.

#### **Questions:**

1. How do I respond when God makes a surprise visit to me? With joy? With gratitude?
2. Do I share Christ with others in what I do and not merely in what I say?
3. Do I receive others as though receiving Christ himself?

Prayer:

***Lord give me a spirit of hospitality. Help me to see the temporal needs of others and to generously meet those needs in whatever way I can. Give me a servant's heart. A willingness to serve that was so clearly present in Mary's life. Help me to remember that you visit others by way of my feet and by the work of my hands. For your glory. Amen.***

***"Gifts of the Visitation", by Denise Bossert, p. 100***

Optional hymns: *Whatsoever You Do or All are Welcome*

**GIFT #8 WONDER & AWE**

***“When we encounter divine mystery, the gift of wonder and awe rises within us and our heart responds. It is the “amen” of the soul. And yes, it is a gift given to us from the moment of our Confirmation.” “Gifts of the Visitation”, by Denise Bossert, p. 102***

Envision Mary, and how she felt knowing that in her womb she was carrying the Christ Child, the Holy One of Israel. Think of her traveling alone to Ein Kerem, contemplating the visit she will have with her elderly cousin now pregnant with the forerunner of the Messiah, the final prophet. Elizabeth’s baby was the first visible sign that God was fulfilling his promise to Israel. Most likely Mary recited over and over the words the angel had said: “For nothing will be impossible for God.”<sup>4</sup>

Imagine the awe and wonder Elizabeth must have felt seeing Mary, greeting her knowing the Prince of Peace was in her womb. In that moment, Elizabeth encounters the Lord’s magnifier. And Elizabeth’s soul is set ablaze.

***“The spirit of wonder and awe dwells here. It is present in moments like this, moments when the rhythm of our humanity invites the divine mystery to dwell with us. It’s present in moments when we invite Christ to join us as we drive to work, or to the church for a once-in-a-lifetime sacrament. It’s present in moments when we pick up groceries and buy flowers for our wives, or for a parent’s grave, or for the Mary garden. It’s present in moments when a grandchild spends the night, or we visit an aging relative who once meant everything to us. It’s present in moments when we take our grief to the adoration chapel, or perhaps we take the grief of another there and intercede. It’s present in moments when we receive the Eucharist and deliberately set aside the random thoughts in order to clear our head as we receive him, or we deliberately take the more serious life events to the Lord as we receive him. The spirit of wonder and awe is where God visits us and where our humanity embraces God.”***  
***“Gifts of the Visitation”, by Denise Bossert, p. 108***

**SHARING:**

Leader please share a story where you felt Awe and Wonder and felt the presence of God.

**QUESTIONS:**

1. Do I look for God’s presence in the day-to-day moments of my life?
2. What time of day do I set aside to be with God for moments of contemplation?

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:37 NABRE

**PRAYER:**

*Lord, help me to recognize your presence and to open myself up to the gifts I received at my Confirmation, especially the gift of wonder and awe. Remind me that Jesus Christ is the source of divine mystery, and that the easiest way to enter into that mystery is to sit at Mary's feet and learn from the one within whom the Word was made flesh. Give me a spirit of wonder and awe like that of Mary and Elizabeth. For your glory. Amen.*

*"Gifts of the Visitation", Denise Bossert, p. 113*

Optional hymn: *How Great Thou Art*

**GIFT #9 THANKSGIVING**

***“You have experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit - as you studied the gifts, and now God is calling you to action. Mary received him - and you have received him. She was filled with joy, a joy that propelled her to go and share the Good News. Let the joy of the Lord fill you, strengthen you, and send you out. Yes, you have received—for he is the Eucharist. Can you guess what the word Eucharist means? Thanksgiving. It means thanksgiving! Let us go out and share—with a spirit of thanksgiving.”***

***“Gifts of the Visitation, by Denise Bossert, p. 123***

It is unclear whether Mary stayed with Elizabeth until the birth of John. If she did, Mary could have assisted Elizabeth during labor and birth. Imagine them all rejoicing upon seeing the prophet John. After his birth, we can imagine Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary gathered around giving praise and thanksgiving to God for this great blessing. For God had heard their prayers.

Mary understood the great blessing and promise of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s son, John. Just as we know the Magnificat, imagine Mary singing it. Let us close our eyes and listen to what she knows is to come:

*“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;  
my spirit rejoices in God my savior.  
For He has looked upon His handmaid’s lowliness;  
behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed.  
The Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is His name.  
His mercy is from age to age  
to those who fear Him.  
He has shown might with His arm,  
dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.  
He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly.  
The hungry He has filled with good things;  
the rich He has sent away empty.  
He has helped Israel His servant,  
remembering His mercy,  
according to his promise to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:46-55 NABRE

Now, let us listen to the Canticle of Zechariah. Imagine how he has been silent for so many months, unable to speak, and this is what comes out after John is born and named.

*“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,  
for he has visited and brought redemption to his people.  
He has raised up a horn for our salvation  
within the house of David his servant,  
even as he promised through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old:  
salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us,  
to show mercy to our fathers  
and to be mindful of his holy covenant  
and of the oath he swore to Abraham our father,  
and to grant us that, rescued from the hand of enemies,  
without fear we might worship him in holiness and righteousness  
before him all our days.  
And you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High,  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
to give his people knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins,  
because of the tender mercy of our God  
by which the daybreak from on high will visit us  
to shine on those who sit in darkness and death’s shadow,  
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”<sup>6</sup>*

We have all received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and now we are called to take part. Mary received Him—we receive Him. We should be full of God and be strengthened by Him to go out and be disciples. The Eucharist helps us in these ways.

Mary shows us two doors that lead to a Spirit of thanksgiving:

1. We meditate on the One we have received: God, Lord, Creator
2. We meditate on what the Lord has done for us. Think of the crucifixion and our hope for eternal life. Thanksgiving is filling and something to be shared.

### **Questions:**

1. What gifts have I been given?

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 1:68-79 NABRE

2. Do I receive the Eucharist with a Spirit of thanksgiving?
3. Am I the Christ-bearer that Mary and Elizabeth want me to be?



### **SENDING**

The message of Jesus is to be shared—by what we do, how we act, who we meet.

Our Blessed Mother tells us we are ready—she is with us on the journey. You will need spontaneity and courage to feel and share joy. Take on humility, but lean on Mary and Elizabeth as you carry the message of Christ to others. You will be ready for the adventure with the gifts the Holy Spirit brings you. During your journey you will share your hospitality and be full of thanksgiving. You will be prepared and ready when the time is upon you, and you have that divine mystery of wonder and awe in your life.

As we come to a close I hope you have gotten closer to Mary and Elizabeth and come to know how close God is to us and how much He loves us.

Behind me is a crucifix with a red cloth to signify His blood—I invite you to come up, hold on to the cloth and ask God to help you release something that you are holding on to. Multiple people can do this at a time. If you don't have anything heavy on your heart, then just please come up and say a prayer of thanksgiving. When you are done, please dip your hand in the Holy Water and return to your seat. I ask that you please be quiet while everyone is doing this.

I want to make sure you understand that this is not a form of confession. It is a time to let go, a time to renew, a time to begin a fresh start.

Play some appropriate music

### ***Closing:***

Let's all thank Mary, Our Blessed Mother for her fiat, for saying YES!

If she had not, we would not have had Jesus on the cross for our sins.

### ***Pray a Hail Mary.***

You are ready to share Jesus with others. Make a phone call, write a letter, bring someone to Mass, whatever you decide to do to bring Christ to someone make sure to keep Mary as your model.

Pope Francis helps us with this by sharing a prayer from him:

*Mary, Virgin and Mother, you who, moved by the Holy Spirit, welcomed the word of life in the depths of your humble faith: as you gave yourself completely to the Eternal One, help us to say our own “yes” to the urgent call, as pressing as ever, to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. Filled with Christ’s presence, you brought joy to John the Baptist, making him exult in the womb of his mother...Mother of the living Gospel, wellspring of happiness for God’s little one, pray for us. Amen.<sup>7</sup>*

-Pope Francis

*It is suggested to have Confession, Adoration, Pray the Rosary or end with Mass if possible.*

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelium Gaudium” November 24, 2013