

The Invitation: Advent Begins!

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him.”
Mark 1:3

REFLECTION

The four weeks leading up to Christmas are often well-filled, if not over-filled, with preparations for the celebration of the Christmas feast: card-writing, carol-singing, present-choosing, larder-filling, house-decorating, party-going etcetera.

Yet the season of Advent itself is about becoming empty, making room, giving up space – for the birth of a child who arrives almost unnoticed into our world to fill us with the immensity of the peace, mercy, joy and hope that are of God.

The challenge for us is whether amidst the din going on around us in our lives and in our world – not just of shopping and festivity but also of warfare and weeping – we can surrender the closely defended territory of our own interests and concerns in order to make room for the one who is other than us, who comes to disturb our comfortable certainties and to disrupt our false securities.

An icon of Mary bearing Jesus has around it the words ‘Spacious for God’. Advent invites us all to share Mary’s spaciousness.’

BROTHER SAM SSF

REFLECTIVE ACTION

ADVENT WREATH

Set up an Advent wreath or light a candle each day as a reminder of Christ’s light growing in your heart.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

“In this lies the overflowing reason for joy: the God who is infinitely great has become small; the eternal Word has become a fragile infant; the Lord of majesty has become a lowly servant.”

ST. BONAVENTURE (*Tree of Life*, 1.3)

PRAYER

*Creator God,
help me create space
for You in the midst
of my busyness.*

*May this Advent season
draw me closer to You.
Amen.*

JOURNALING PROMPT

Think of someone you find difficult to love- perhaps someone close to you, or someone you’ve encountered recently. Without judgement, write about what it is that you find challenging. Now gently ask: What might this person be revealing to me about myself?



SWEDEN

CULTURAL INSIGHT

In Sweden we use a wreath with four candles. Most often white, but sometimes you see them red. The wreath is most traditionally decorated with green moss or grey lichen.

I remember my first Advents in school; I am seven years old. As I have walked to school in the dark, but brightened up by the snow, it is good to be indoors again. Ten past nine the day begins.

I light my own candle, standing in a candle holder I made of clay. With 25 candles lit we listen to our teacher as she read from the book, we each morning hear a bit from.

Some of the days we also sing an Advent Carol accompanied by my teacher on a pedal organ.

BROTHER MICAEL SSF

Is there a mirror here, a hidden insecurity, a fear, a longing? Think about drawing the outline of a mirror in your journal and then write a short prayer for this person. Then write one for yourself. How might grace, God’s gift of love beyond deserving, invite you both into deeper healing?

AWAITING THE FIRST SPARK

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.”

JEREMIAH 1:5

Advent begins, not with fanfare, but with readiness.

Like Mary in the moment before her “yes,” we stand on the Advent threshold- nothing visibly changed, and yet everything already beginning.

This is the sacred space of waiting: the in-between. The darkness before dawn. The silence before the heartbeat.

Physically, nothing may seem to have taken hold yet, but already the body is making room. Spiritually, too, something stirs—something unseen, but deeply real.

Our Advent journey starts here: in hope, not certainty; in preparation, not proof. We begin to find our rhythm, to attune ourselves to a quieter pace, trusting that the God who knit us together in the womb is already moving within and among us.

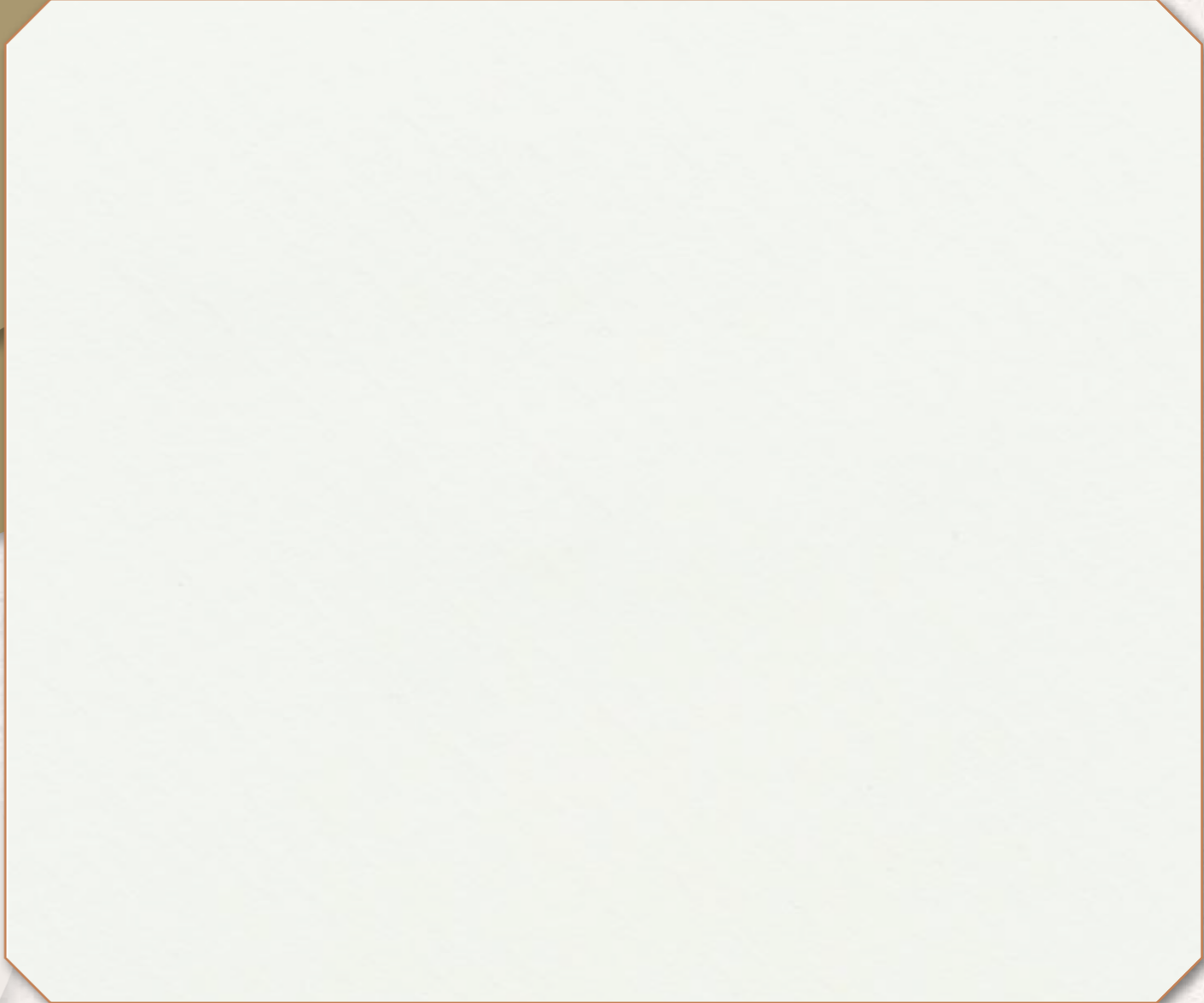
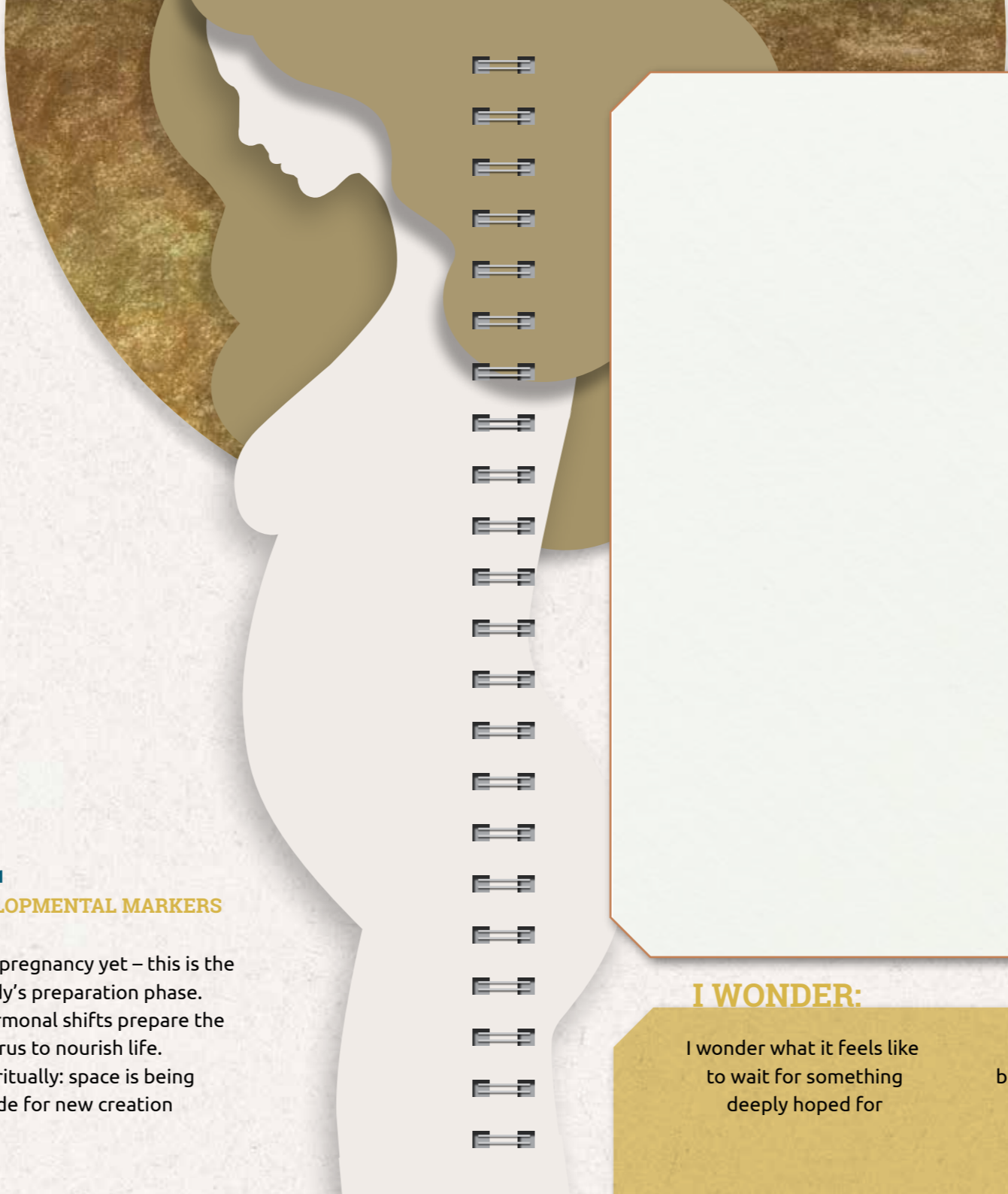
This is a time of holy potential. Even when we cannot feel it, see it, or name it, God is preparing new life in us, in our communities, and in the world.

Like Mary, we are invited to wait with openness and courage.

WEEK 1

DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

- No pregnancy yet – this is the body’s preparation phase.
- Hormonal shifts prepare the uterus to nourish life.
- Spiritually: space is being made for new creation



I WONDER:

I wonder what it feels like to wait for something deeply hoped for

I wonder how God might be preparing something in me - even if I cannot yet see it

I wonder what it means to say “yes” before anything is certain

Mary's Yes: Trusting God's Plan

“Let it be to me according to your word.”
Luke 1:38

Mary's "yes" has always moved me. It wasn't cautious or calculated. It was wholehearted. She didn't ask for guarantees. She didn't cling to a plan. She simply trusted, and let her heart open wide to God.

It reminds me that the question isn't whether Christ is coming, but whether there's room for him in me, in my community and in my country to help those in need.

I think of Francis too, stepping away from comfort and certainty, embracing poverty not for its own sake but to follow Christ with nothing in the way. That kind of trust still challenges me because it means giving up control. It means saying yes without knowing what comes next. But deep down I know that's the shape of real faith. Not seeing the whole path, just taking the next step, believing God's love is already there waiting.

This Advent, I wonder what God is asking of me. Of you. Maybe it's something small and quiet. Maybe it's life-changing. Whatever it is, like Mary and Francis, we are being invited to say yes. And to say yes to God means letting go of fear and embracing what he has asked of me. And in the end that yes is the doorway to peace.

So today I whisper, as Mary did:
Yes...Let it be.

For many years I have valued the tradition of Las Posadas - the re enacting Mary and Joseph searching for shelter and going from house to house and humbly knocking on the doors asking for help.

SIAN YATES TSSF
European Province

REFLECTIVE ACTION

DECLUTTERING WITH PURPOSE:

Choose one physical space (a shelf, a bag, a drawer) to declutter today – not just as a task, but as a spiritual symbol of making space.
As you do, pray: “Make room in me, Lord.”
Donate what you don't need to a local charity.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

“Let us desire nothing else, let us wish for nothing else, let nothing else please us and cause us delight, except our Creator and Redeemer.”

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

PRAYER Señor Jesús,
Como María y José, tú llamas a la puerta silencioso, humilde, necesitado de acogida.
Ayúdame a quitar el miedo y la prisa.
Haz espacio en mí para tu luz, tu paz, tu amor.
Que mi corazón se vuelva pesebre, abierto y listo para tu venida. Amen

*Lord Jesus,
You come quietly, seeking welcome.
Clear away my fear and hurry.
Make space in me for your light and love.
May my heart be a manger
for your coming. Amen*

JOURNALING PROMPT

Mary said yes without a map. Francis stepped into the unknown. What does trust look like for you, today? Write a few lines as if you were praying these words from your own heart. “yes, let it be...” What are you offering? What are you surrendering? Where is God gently asking me to trust more fully – perhaps in a situation, a relationship, or a calling?



MEXICO

CULTURAL INSIGHT

Each year during Advent, I take part in Las Posadas. It is beautiful tradition where we remember Mary and Joseph's search for shelter. We walk from house to house, singing and asking for a place to stay, just like they did in Bethlehem.

At first, we're turned away, but eventually on Christmas Eve the door of the Church is opened, and we're welcomed in with warmth, food, and celebration.

It's more than a reenactment. It's a reminder to make room in our hearts for Christ, especially in the form of the stranger, the weary, and those in need. Las Posadas teaches me that God is always arriving.

If I said a wholehearted "yes" like Mary or Francis, what small step might that look like today? What might I need to release to make space for that yes? Control? Fear? The need to have it all figured out? Draw a simple open door in your journal. Inside it, write one word or phrase that symbolises your "yes" to God this Advent.

AWAITING THE FIRST SPARK

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
let it be with me according to your word."
Then the angel departed from her.
Luke 1:38



Reflection for the Journey:
This stage invites us to sit with mystery.
Life begins in the shadows, in faith,
before we see its form.

Mary may not have noticed any physical
signs yet. There might be a deeper sense
of intuition or awareness, an opening of
the heart before anything can be seen
or confirmed.

Spiritually, this mirrors the posture of
availability:

Mary's "yes", "Let it be with me
according to your word", sets
everything in motion, even before she
knows the full implications.

The womb is not yet occupied, but the
conditions are being made ready.

So too at the beginning of Advent, we
prepare room in our hearts before we
know what Christ will ask of us.

**WEEK 2
DEVELOPMENTAL
MARKERS**

IN THE WOMB

Technically, in medical terms, week 2
is still part of the pre-embryonic phase.
Conception typically occurs toward the
end of this week, following ovulation.
Though there is no baby yet in the
traditional sense, the body is preparing
the perfect conditions for new life.
This week, the egg is released from the
ovary and begins its journey down the
fallopian tube. If fertilisation occurs,
the zygote will begin forming almost
immediately — the very beginning of
Christ's earthly life in Mary.

MARY

Hormonal changes are beginning subtly —
oestrogen and progesterone are preparing the
uterine lining for implantation.

A large, blank white rectangular area with rounded corners and a thin brown border, intended for handwritten notes or reflections.

I WONDER:

I wonder what it feels like to
say "yes" before knowing
where it will lead.

I wonder how we can
prepare for something we cannot
yet see.

I wonder where in our lives
God might already be at
work in hidden ways.

Letting Go: Making Room for Christ

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”
Psalm 51:10

REFLECTION

An advantage of old age is to know what our own distractions and attachments are. Jane Austen-esque, Mary and Joseph are right on the threshold of their married lives together, but the critical part of their relationship is only just beginning. Both show an amazing ability to imagine outside themselves and their culture, to take a risk for the benefit of everyone except themselves, all based on their trust in God and – we may judge – in each other, in contravention of the social norms of the time.

mobile family and community. So, for Francis his reversal of his attachment to fixed address, money and possessions liberated him and his communities to “follow naked, the naked Christ.” This enabled Francis to found communities “without boundaries” of wealth, of social status, of education, or – eventually in the Third Order – of gender. These communities were instead based on love – for God, for each other to a remarkable degree and for the poor and the outcast. Having no possessions to defend Francis and the Franciscans were accepted as heralds of peace.

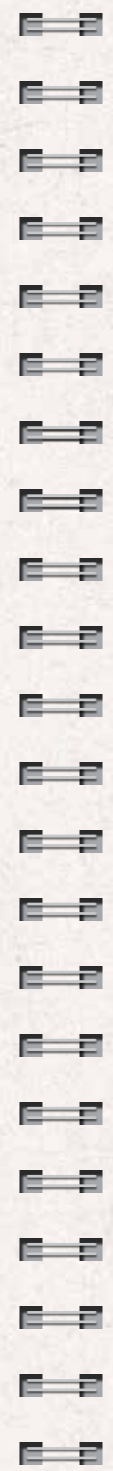
Francis likewise, rather later and after many reversals and missteps performed a total turnaround which set him at odds with his upwardly

PAT MOSSOFF TSSF
European Province

REFLECTIVE ACTION

SILENT SWEEP A SPACE WHERE YOU ARE LIVING.

As you clean or tidy a space today, do it in silence.
Let each movement – folding, sweeping, dusting – become a breath of prayer.
With each item you release or return to its place, whisper inwardly: “Prepare the way of the Lord.”
Notice what inner clutter surfaces, old regrets, fears, or attachments, and gently offer them to God.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

“Holy hope, in you the soul will persevere and reach the joy of eternal life.”

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI
(Salutation of the Virtues)

PRAYER

*Lord of Light,
As I make space around me,
make space within me.
Clear away fear and heaviness,
and prepare my heart for your joy.*

JOURNALING PROMPT

Take time today to reflect prayerfully and write:
What am I holding onto that God may be inviting me to release—status, comfort, possessions, control, or old narratives?

What would it mean for me to live with fewer boundaries—between me and others, between me and God?
Where might letting go create new space for love, for peace, for freedom?



JAPAN

CULTURAL INSIGHT

At the end of each year, I join my family in Oosouji – the Big Clean-Up. It’s more than sweeping floors or sorting drawers.

As we dust corners and air out closets, I feel something shift inside me.

I let go of what no longer serves: grudges, clutter, even worn-out dreams.

Each act of cleaning becomes a quiet prayer for renewal.

The scent of fresh tatami, the sound of brooms—these mark the turning of the year.

By the time we finish, the house feels lighter, and so do I.

Oosouji prepares not just our home, but my heart, for a fresh beginning.

FORMING IN THE SILENCE

“For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.”

PSALM 139:13

In week five of pregnancy, the embryo is just the size of a sesame seed. The heart is beginning to form: soft, hidden, and miraculous. Most mothers don’t even know they are carrying life yet. But already, transformation is underway.

In the same way, Advent calls us into the mystery of hidden beginnings. We may not feel ready, not feeling Christmasy some would say! But through our Advent Preparation of creating space something sacred is being formed.

The Christ-child comes to us not in full light, but in the quiet shadows: woven in hope, vulnerability, and grace.

St Francis understood this. He saw Christ not in power, but in the fragile: the leper, the manger, the overlooked. The Franciscan charism in Advent is to make space for the unnoticed work of God, especially where the world sees nothing of value.

WEEK 5
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

About 1.0–1.5 mm in size (a sesame seed);
Beginning to curve into a “C” shape;
the head and tail ends start to form;
The neural tube (which becomes the brain and spinal cord) begins forming;
The heart starts to form and may begin to beat toward the end of this week;
Small buds appear that will later become arms and legs; early eyes and ears are starting to develop;
The placenta and yolk sac are developing to nourish and protect the embryo.

IN THE MOTHER

Rising levels of HCG (human chorionic gonadotropin) confirm pregnancy;
Fatigue, breast tenderness, nausea, emotional sensitivity may begin or intensify;
There is likely no outward sign of pregnancy, but inwardly, the body is rapidly adjusting;
Spiritually and emotionally, this may be a time of awe, uncertainty, or quiet anticipation.



I WONDER:

I wonder what it feels like to carry something holy without knowing it

I wonder where God might be growing in your life, even if you can’t see it yet

I wonder how we can help others feel safe enough to grow



Receiving, Not Achieving: Resting in God's Love

“For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”
Ephesians 2:8

REFLECTION

We are surrounded by God's shield of love. Having faith in God that He will protect us and gives us the rest that we need. So many things are out of our control, but God is in control of everything.

This indicates to us that we receive God's gift of salvation, not by our own merit or works, but by placing our trust in Jesus Christ and his atoning sacrifice.

Even though we at times may experience storms in our lives, we can rest in God's perfect love. Because He not only holds us, but he holds it all. Ephesians 2:8 pinpoints the central Christian belief in salvation by grace through faith, shifting the focus from human effort to divine love and mercy.

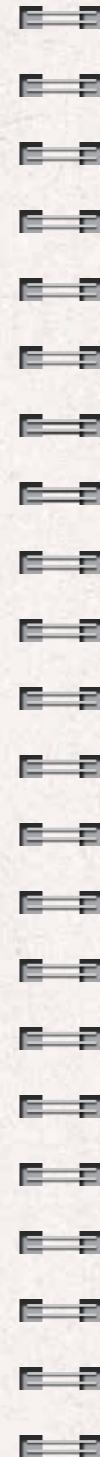
This understanding adopts a sense of rest and peace, as we are freed from the burden of trying to earn our salvation and can instead rest in God's love and grace.

MILLCENT DEWS
TSSF European province

REFLECTIVE ACTION

LIGHT A CANDLE IN SILENCE

Light a single candle and sit with it in stillness. As the flame flickers, let it become a sign of Christ's quiet presence. Breathe deeply and whisper in your heart: "My hope is in You, Creator God." Stay with the silence for a few moments longer than feels comfortable.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

“And so it is clear that the whole world is like a single mirror full of lights presenting the divine wisdom, and like a glowing coal emitting light.”

ST. BONAVENTURE

Collations on the Hexaemeron, Franciscan Institute Publications, 2018, p. 104)

PRAYER

God of quiet hope,
In the stillness, meet me.
In the waiting, hold me.
In the silence, shine your light.

Amen.

JOURNALING PROMPT

Today, pause and consider:
Where in your life are you striving to earn what can only be received?

What would it look like to rest, truly rest, in the knowledge that you are already loved – before you've achieved a single thing today?

You may try a visual response to the questions.



FRANCE

CULTURAL INSIGHT

In Taizé, France, Advent and Christmas are marked by a gentle, contemplative rhythm of prayer, silence, and community.

The hilltop ecumenical community embraces the waiting of Advent with simple candlelit services, meditative chants, and scripture that draws hearts into stillness and hope.

Pilgrims, usually young pilgrims, from around the world join in daily prayers, often sung in many languages, reflecting the unity of the global Church.

Christmas is celebrated not with extravagance but with quiet joy, centred on the incarnation of Christ among the poor.

The season invites all to rest in God's presence, to listen deeply, and to welcome the light.

AWAITING THE FIRST SPARK

“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you.”
Isaiah 49:1

What astonishing changes are happening in the darkness of the womb.

Now about the size of a raspberry, yet tiny fingers and toes are now forming.

Facial features begin to emerge: eyelids, ears and upper lip.

There is a development of muscles and beginning to make slight movements - though still too small for the mother to feel.

Today we wait not passively but attentively. We trust that God is shaping life in the hidden places of our lives : bringing into focus the faces we often don't see, weaving our stories with his.

Whatever age we are, God sees us becoming the person we are called to be.

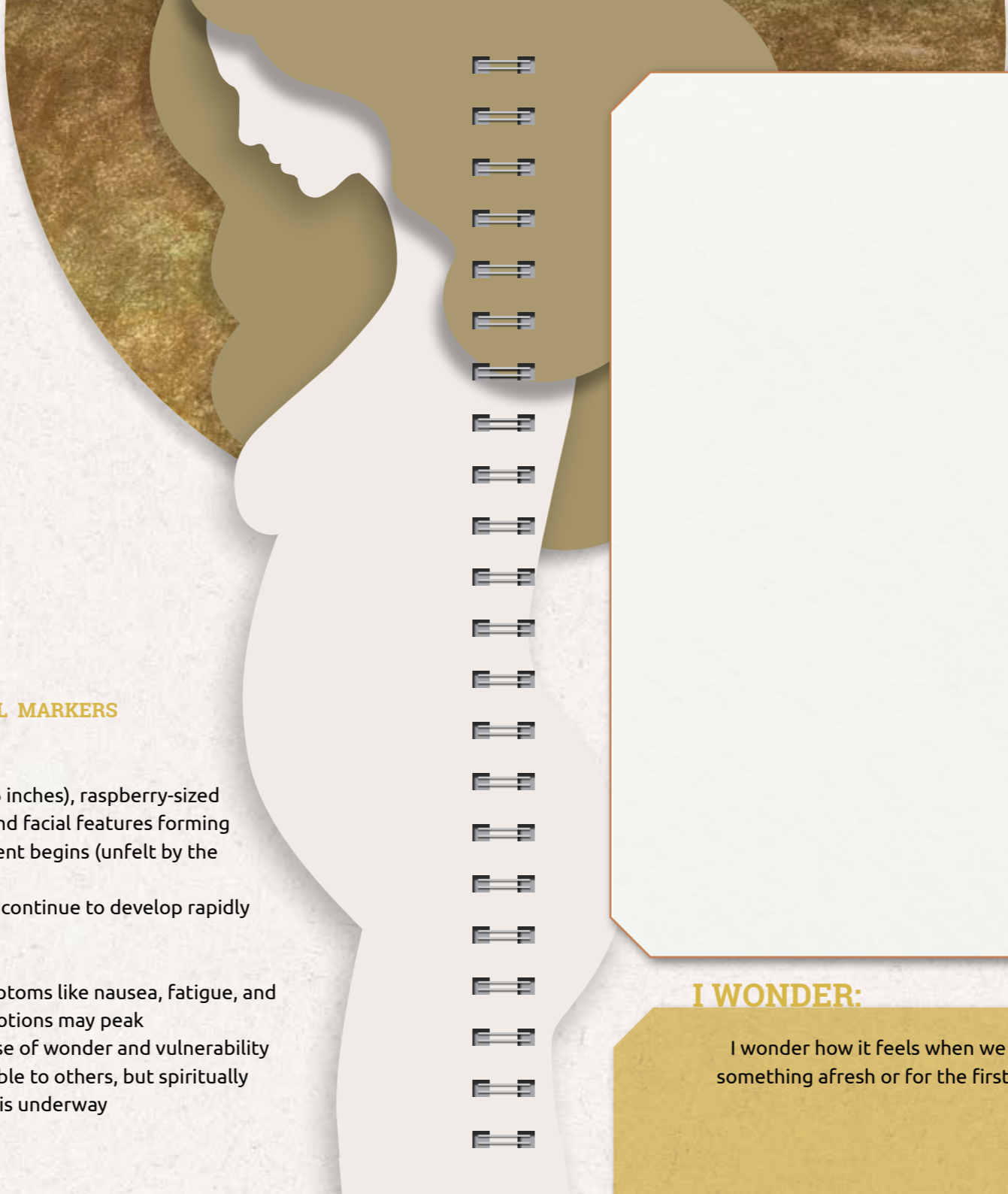
WEEK 8
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- Size: 1.6 cm (0.6 inches), raspberry-sized
- Fingers, toes, and facial features forming
- Muscle movement begins (unfelt by the mother)
- Internal organs continue to develop rapidly

MARY

- Pregnancy symptoms like nausea, fatigue, and heightened emotions may peak
- Deepening sense of wonder and vulnerability
- Physically invisible to others, but spiritually profound work is underway



Large blank white area with a thin brown border, intended for reflection or journaling.

I WONDER:

I wonder how it feels when we see something afresh or for the first time

I wonder what hidden parts of ourselves God is still forming

Clearing the Clutter : Simplifying for Christ

“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things,
but one thing is necessary.”
Luke 10:41-42

REFLECTION

In the quiet of Advent, I am reminded how easily I allow distractions to crowd out the stillness needed to welcome Christ. Even in the friary, I find myself occupied with tasks that, while good, become noise when done without prayerful intention. Welcoming guests, cleaning rooms and doing admin; even pious busyness can cloud my heart.

Yet Advent calls not me to slow down, to wait in hope, to watch in silence. I see how my attachment to being productive, or to scrolling through news can dull my awareness of Emmanuel, God-with-us. The manger is quiet. The stable is poor. Christ comes not to the distracted but to the waiting heart.

The world urges haste, consumption, and noise – especially in these weeks leading to Christmas.

I pray for the grace to turn from these unnecessary distractions and dwell more deeply with Mary in holy expectancy, preparing room for the Saviour to be born anew in me.

AN ALNMOUTH
brother SSF

REFLECTIVE ACTION

LET GO

Choose one unnecessary commitment, habit, or item to let go of today.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

“In the infant Christ we see the fullness of divine mercy. Here, even in the poverty of the crib, is the pledge of our hope. God with us, not in power, but in tenderness.”

ST. BONAVENTURE (*Sermon on the Nativity*)

PRAYER

Jesus,
teach me
what is truly necessary.

Help me
simplify my life
so I can
focus on You.

Amen.

JOURNALING PROMPT

“If My Soul Were a Room...”
Imagine your soul as a room preparing to welcome Christ. What does it look like right now? Is it full of to-do lists, old furniture you meant to give away, things you thought were essential but now just take up space?



KOREA

CULTURAL INSIGHT

As Christmas approaches, I find myself drawn to the quiet witness of many Korean Christians who embrace simplicity over excess.

Inspired by their minimalist approach, I begin to pare back: less rushing, fewer decorations, no pressure for perfect gifts.

Instead, I make space: in my calendar, my home, my heart.

In that stillness, I sense Christ more clearly, not in the sparkle of things, but in the hush of waiting.

Advent invites me to live lightly, to let go of what distracts, and to attend to the One who comes gently.

This year, I long not for more, but for deeper presence.

A QUIET DANCE

“I have called you by name, you are mine.”
Isaiah 43:1



A large, empty rectangular area with rounded corners and a thin orange border, intended for writing reflections or thoughts.

Organs are forming. The face begins to take shape. Tiny fingers and nails appear. And though the mother cannot feel it yet, moving, stretching, dancing is happening in the womb.

Perhaps this reminds us of the hidden joy of the Advent season when we give space for God. In that quiet time we may indeed witness God stir before we are ready, when Christ begins to move and we don't yet perceive it. Like Mary, we may carry this promise in mystery. Like Elizabeth, we may not feel the leap of new life just yet. But already, something is happening.

Already, a name is being spoken in love.

Francis of Assisi recognised Christ in every creature by name. He didn't wait for power or proof. He noticed the holiness in smallness, the pulse of God in birdsong and breath. Today we are invited into that Franciscan gaze - where the forming face of Christ begins to appear in the hidden corners of our world.

WEEK 10

DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- Size: Approximately 3.5–4 cm (1.4–1.6 inches), about the size of a prune or kumquat
- Weight: Around 4–5 grams
- New Status: Now officially called a foetus (Latin for “young one”)
- Development: Facial features are more clearly defined: eyes are formed (though eyelids are fused shut), ears continue to develop. Tooth buds are forming under the gums. Limbs are longer; fingers and toes are distinct and separated. Nails begin to develop. Joints (elbows, knees) are functional, allowing limited movement. Vital organs such as the brain, liver, and kidneys are developing rapidly. The heart is fully formed and beating strongly (about 160–170 bpm). Genitals are beginning to form but are not yet distinguishable on ultrasound

I WONDER:

I wonder how you feel about the name you were given

I wonder if you are ever aware of the Spirit of God is moving in you

I wonder how you might make space to listen for the quiet dance of joy in your life

A Heart That Listens: Hearing God's Voice

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”
1 Samuel 3:10

How many close relationships do you have in which you do all the talking? None, right? Because that’s not how close relationships work. Yet I saw a woman recently for spiritual direction—a deeply committed Christian, dedicated to prayer—but when I asked about her prayer life I was surprised. Her day started with intercessions, then she met in a small prayer group, said the daily offices, and prayed three rosaries a day. When she finished, I said, “That’s a lot of words.” She instantly got it. “Oh; I need to spend some time listening!”

So we talked about one way to do that: Think of a place that means something to you. You’re there, and begin to sense Jesus’ presence. Then you see him. What is his expression? What are you feeling? What do you want to say to him? Say it, and then get quiet and listen for his response. When words cease, stay with the silence. You may worry that it isn’t real, just what you’re hoping to hear. Tell him, and ask him to protect you and teach you. Jesus’ sheep know his voice: and that voice will teach you to know yourself as God’s Beloved.

SUSAN PITCHFORD TSSF
Americas Province

REFLECTIVE ACTION

WALK IN SILENCE WITH CREATION

Take a short walk outdoors, if possible.
With each step, listen, not just with your ears, but with your whole being.
Hear the rustle of leaves, the cry of birds, the hush of wind. As you walk, repeat gently:
“Speak, Creator God, I am listening.”
Let the natural world become your chapel of attentiveness.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

Let everyone be struck with fear,
Let the whole world tremble,
And let the heavens exult
When Christ the Son of the Living God,
Is present on the altar in the hands of a priest!
O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity!
O sublime humility!
O humble sublimity!

(From the letter to the Entire Order 27)

PRAYER *Whispering God,
In the hush of winter,
in the breath of stars,
in the deep places of the earth—
may I hear Your voice.*

*Draw me close in silence
and teach me to listen with love.*

Amen.

JOURNALING PROMPT

“Come, Sit With Me”
Imagine a place where you feel safe and still –real or imagined.
Picture Jesus approaching you there.
Now complete these short reflections in your journal:

Where am I with Jesus?
What is his expression? How do I feel?
What do I want to say to him?
What do I sense him saying back?
Write just one phrase or word you feel invited to hold onto today.



NAVAJO NATION

CULTURAL INSIGHT

One Christmas Eve, long ago when I was young, I was driving in my old car to do services on the Standing Rock reservation. I was going to Wakpala, the very place where I was ordained to the priesthood. The very place where I was given my name by a medicine man of the Lakota people. Driving through the cold moonlit night, winding my way like a ribbon across the treeless landscape, I breathed in the silence like a blessing. I have sat without speaking among Navajo elders in Monument Valley, watching the hot eye of the sun move across the desert floor in ripples of heat and light. Beauty surrounded us, there was no need to speak. I have been in Alaska cabins through the long darkness, listening to the wind as if it were calling me by name. I have slept in villages where indigenous people have been sleeping for 10,000 years. Christmas is timeless among our people, a reminder of how all of creation gathers around the source, all creatures together in kinship as Mother Earth calls us to the center of the circle of life. We see our Advent written in the stars. We sing the birth of many births, the great family of love

LEAPING WITH JOY

“You shall go out with joy and
be led forth in peace.”
Isaiah 55

Now there is full of movement - stretching, kicking, somersaulting inside the womb!

Although still too small to be felt, this activity is a secret dance of life.

The face is distinctly human: ears are in place, the mouth can open and close, and tooth buds are forming under the gums.

This hidden dance mirrors John the Baptist leaping in Elizabeth’s womb at the sound of Mary’s voice.

Joy is already embodied, even before it is seen or celebrated.

Advent reminds us: even before fulfilment, joy stirs.

Life leaps toward love.

WEEK 11

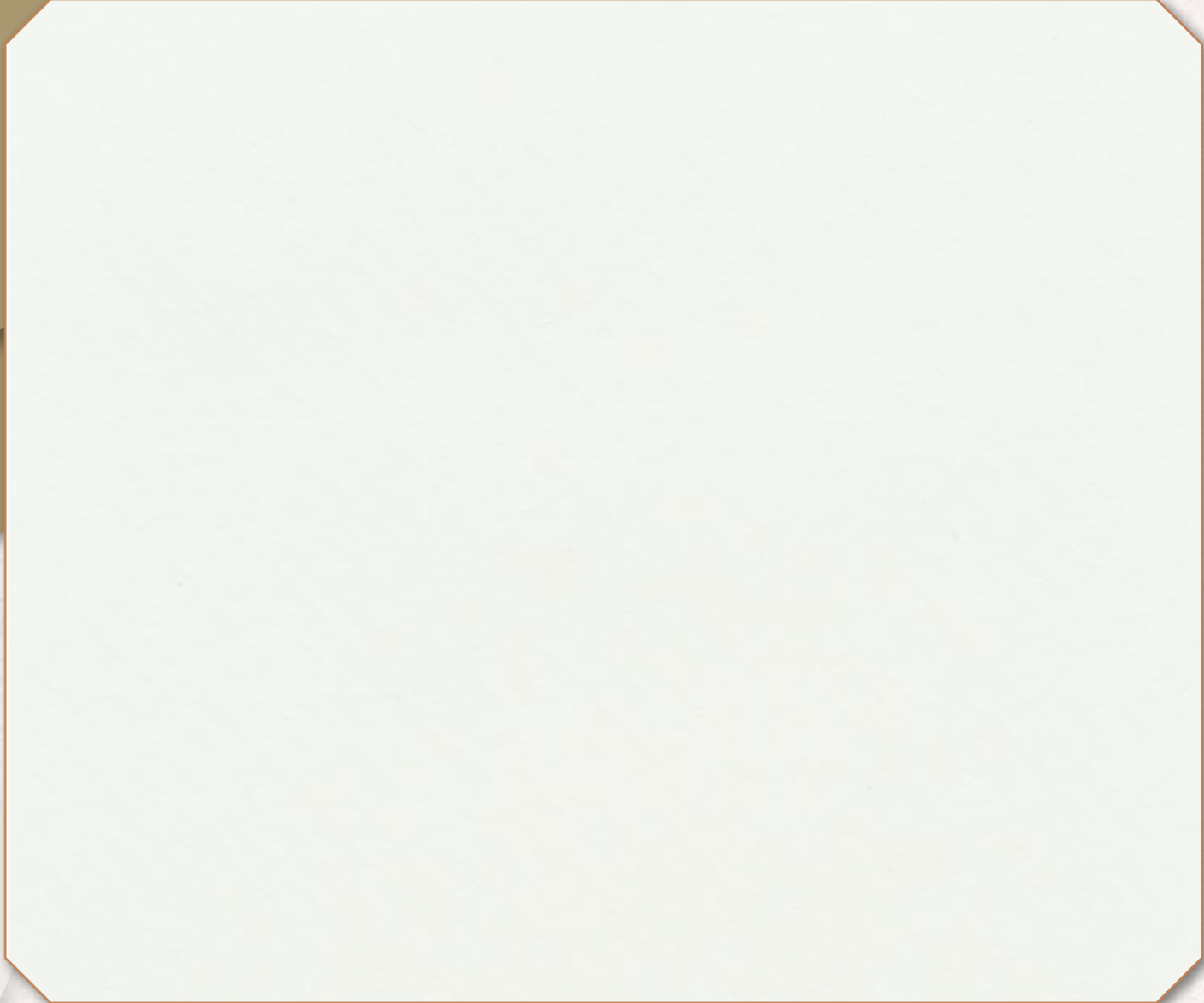
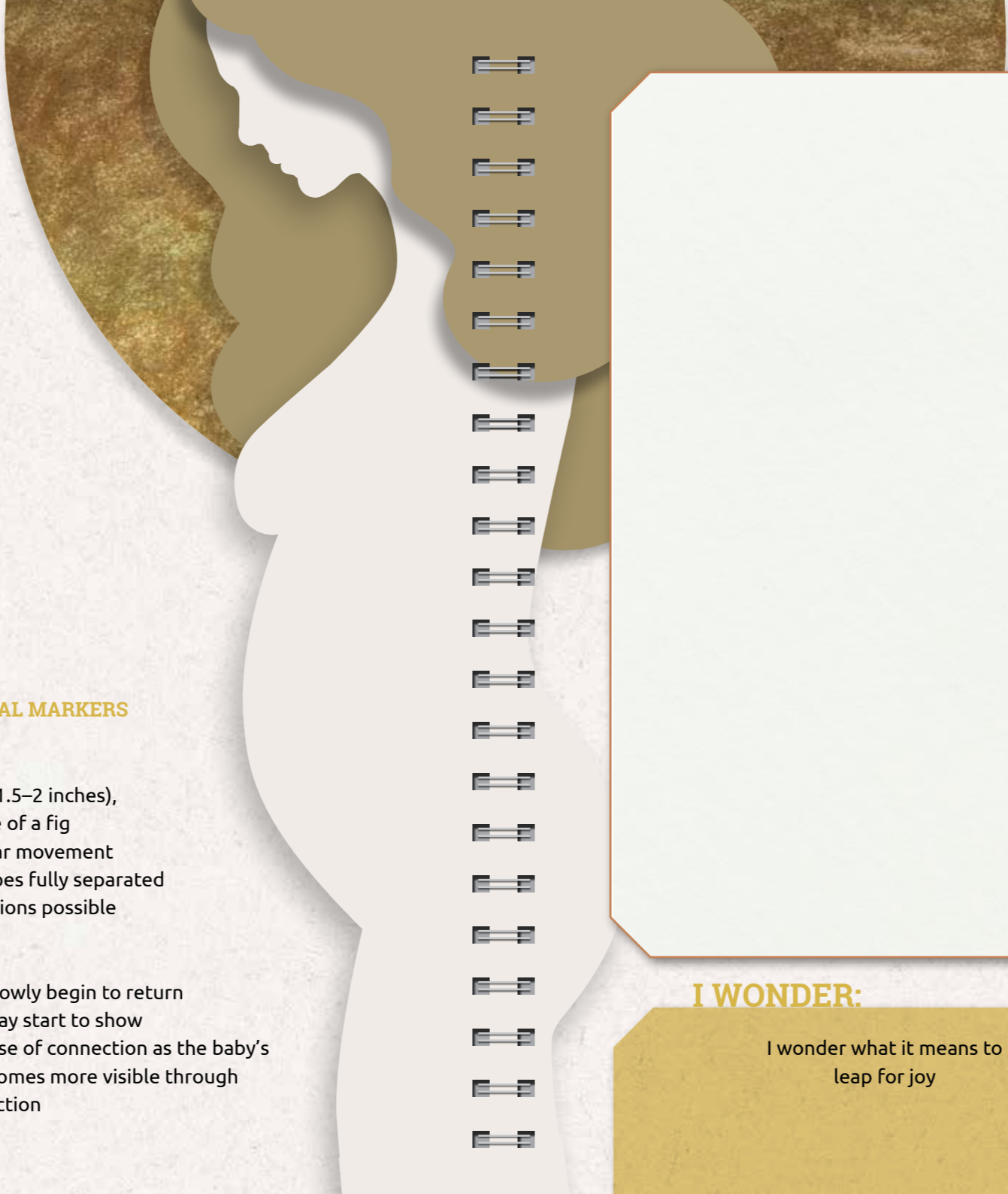
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- Size: 4–5 cm (1.5–2 inches), about the size of a fig
- Strong, regular movement
- Fingers and toes fully separated
- Facial expressions possible

MARY

- Energy may slowly begin to return
- Early bump may start to show
- Increased sense of connection as the baby’s humanity becomes more visible through scans or reflection



I WONDER:

I wonder what it means to leap for joy

I wonder where we can see the dance of life happening around us

Waiting with Hope: Advent as Expectation

“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word, I put my hope.”
Psalm 130:5

It seems a cold, silent place where I stand. My old philosopher chums say the Word is in everything – in every fallen stone, dead leaf, encounter with hooded passers-by. The lights are out, though. Is the Word in me? Have I forgotten it’s light? That’s my fault.

I need to remember Christmas. Mary held God in little space, as the old song says. In those months of waiting she was Creation bearing the word – everything – stones, leaves, wanderers, journeys.

If I remember the light of that birth I know that everything is reborn– was reborn and will be if we remember – this place where I stand will be the gateway to heaven – everything that is this place and myself (or you) as part of it – not waiting for a gift but giving the gift of the remembered light within us.

We’ll hear the angels. The oxen will speak.

ANDREW BAKER
TSSF European Province

REFLECTIVE ACTION

RISE EARLY AND OFFER YOUR DAY

Wake up just a little earlier than usual today.

In the quiet of the morning, light a candle and sit in God’s presence.

Offer the day ahead as a gift to Christ. Ask: “How can my life prepare a way for the Lord today?”

Let this early moment be your own Simbang Gabi.

Your step toward the manger, sanctifying your ordinary life through intention and love.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

“Let us make a dwelling place within ourselves where he may stay, he who is the Lord God almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI,
(Letter to the Entire Order)

PRAYER Emmanuel,
God-with-us,
Awaken my heart
in the quiet morning.
Make me ready to welcome you
in every task, every person,
every breath.
Let my life be a candle
lit with hope,
shining even in the waiting.
Amen.

JOURNALING PROMPT

“Remembering the Light”
When the world feels dim or silent, hope can feel like a memory we’ve misplaced. Take a moment to reflect: Where in my life does it feel like “the lights are out”?

What helps me remember the light – within myself, in others, in creation? What would it mean to wait not for a gift, but to become one? Now write:
“Today, I choose to remember the light by...”
Let this be an act of hope - a way of carrying the Word within you, as Mary did.



PHILIPPINES

CULTURAL INSIGHT

Simbang Gabi, a cherished Filipino tradition, is a nine-day spiritual journey of early morning Masses leading up to Christmas.

As dawn breaks, communities gather in candlelit churches, their breath visible in the cool air, voices lifted in song and prayer.

This novena of devotion expresses deep longing and joyful expectation for Christ’s coming.

Rooted in agricultural rhythms and communal faith, it blends sacrifice with celebration, drawing people closer to God and one another.

Each Mass becomes a step toward the manger—an invitation to prepare the heart, awaken the soul, and make room for Emmanuel, God with us, in daily life.

NESTING IN HOPE

And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” – John 1:14

The second trimester begins and a new season for the God carrier and child. Now about the size of a peach, a face with distinct features, growing vocal cords, and even the beginning of fingerprints. Bones are hardening, ribs are forming, and tiny movements—sucking, swallowing, flexing—are already underway, even if not yet felt.

This sacred becoming unfolds in secret. Hidden from view, life takes shape in a womb of shelter, silence, and love.

So too, Mary carries Christ quietly. Her womb becomes a waiting room of holy flesh. Love is not only a feeling but the space we make. A shelter. A choice to trust, to hold, to protect—even in the dark.

The Word becomes flesh, not in public triumph, but in the stillness of a mother’s waiting

WEEK 13

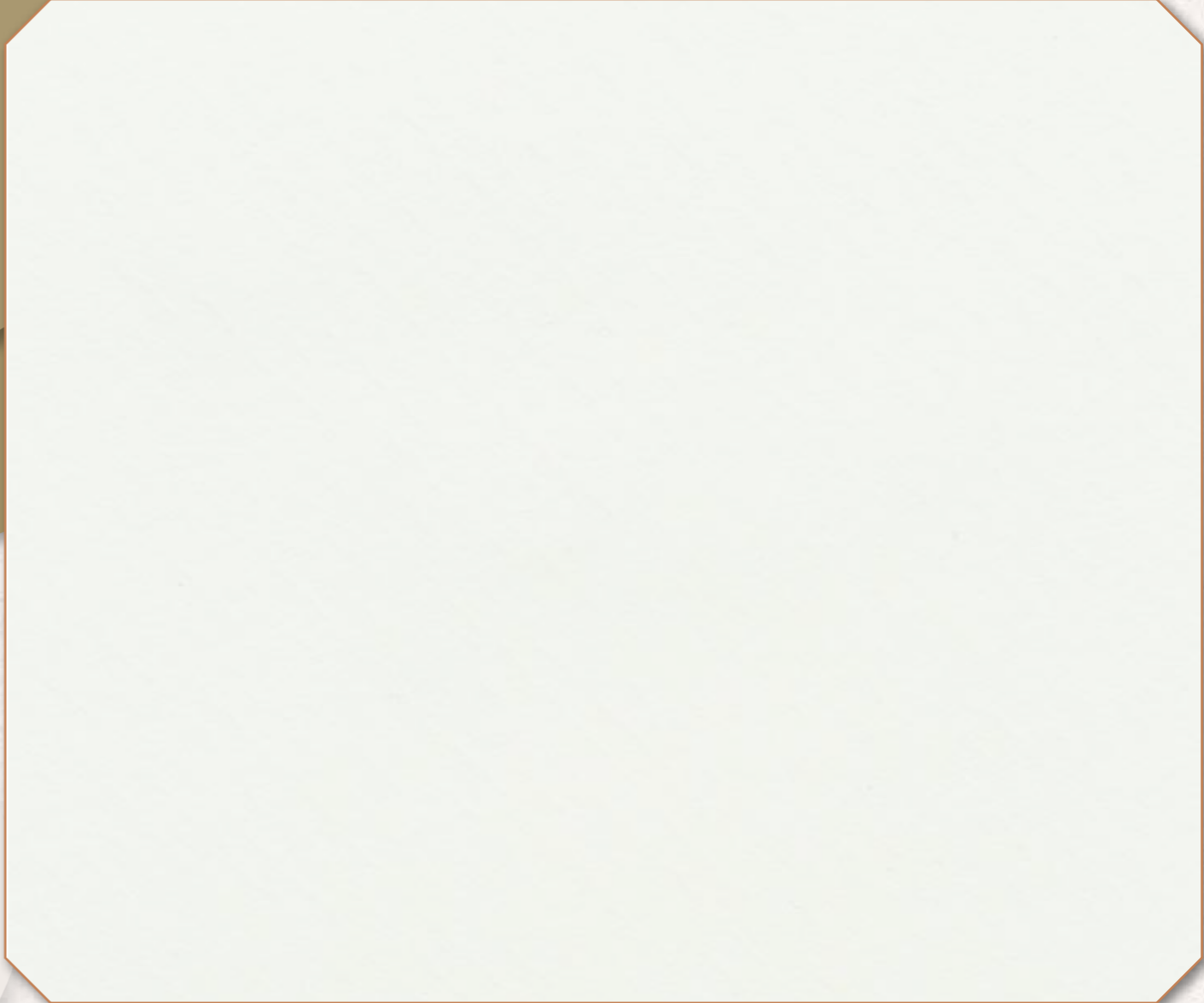
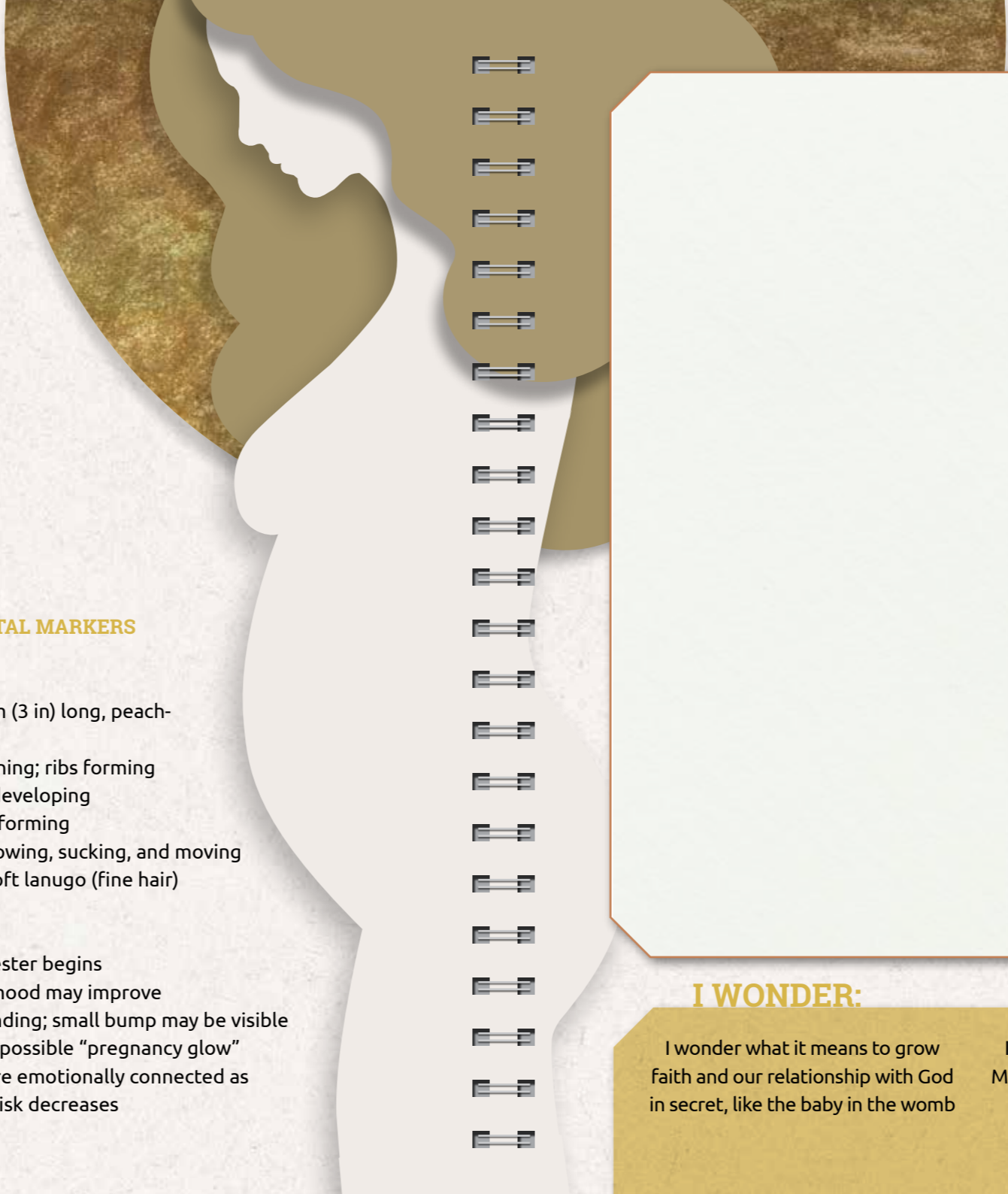
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- About 7–8 cm (3 in) long, peach-sized
- Bones hardening; ribs forming
- Vocal cords developing
- Fingerprints forming
- Begins swallowing, sucking, and moving
- Covered in soft lanugo (fine hair)

MARY

- Second trimester begins
- Energy and mood may improve
- Uterus expanding; small bump may be visible
- Less nausea; possible “pregnancy glow”
- May feel more emotionally connected as miscarriage risk decreases



I WONDER:

I wonder what it means to grow faith and our relationship with God in secret, like the baby in the womb

I wonder what kind of shelter Mary offered to Jesus before he was born

I wonder how we can be womb-like – offering space, warmth, and hope to other.

Making Room for silence

“Be still, and know that I am God.”
Psalm 46:10

Here’s Brother Munch’s contribution!

So every day I scurry down to the chapel to be quiet as a mouse.

Hello humans! Something a bit different today, from me, a Brother mouse!. I work very hard most days in our wonderful library. There is lots to do! We also have lots of guests to look after, meals to cook, rooms to clean. Our life is busy, and at its best, full in a good way.

Sitting there, I realise just how fast my mind is racing. But if I’m patient with myself and with God, I can gain a bit of distance from my thoughts, and remember what really matters. God is here. And the more I do this, the more I remember God is there in everything else I do. I return to my full life with more intention and with more love. My heart still beats just as fast, but it beats for everyone I love, and especially for God!

However, sometimes it gets a bit much. My heart beats at around 600 beats per minute, and sometimes my thoughts are even quicker! In fact, even on quiet days my mind can be full of distractions. Like what kind of cheese to have for lunch...

BROTHER MUNCHIN

is the librarian at Alnmouth Friary.

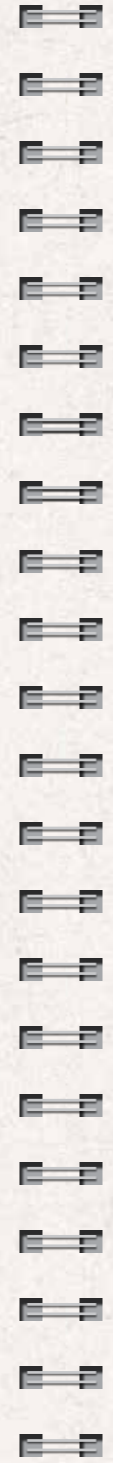
What the mystics tell us is that we need time each day just to be still and silent. Advent is a very good time for that, because it’s the season of waiting.

He is a mouse who likes cheese, and often gets distracted by it a bit too much.

REFLECTIVE ACTION

REACH OUT

Reach out to someone who might feel lonely.
Send a message, make a call, or invite them for coffee.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

And the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon those men and women who have done and persevered in these things and It will make a home and dwelling place in them. And they will be children of the heavenly Father, Whose works they do. And they are spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(Later Admonition and Exhortation 48-50.)

PRAYER

Creator God,
help me to see You
in the people I encounter.
Give me a heart
that is open
and welcoming.

Amen.

JOURNALING PROMPT

Stillness with Brother Munchin
Brother Munchin says his mind races, even when everything is quiet, and sometimes he needs to scurry into silence to remember what matters most.
What thoughts race through your mind when you try to be still? Can you name them, not to judge, but just to notice?

Then gently ask:
What helps you return to what really matters?
What would it look like to sit still, even just for a moment, and remember that God is here?
Why not draw a mouse in your journal as a reminder that will put a smile on your face . In speak makes the complete... “When I am still, I remember...”



TANZANIA

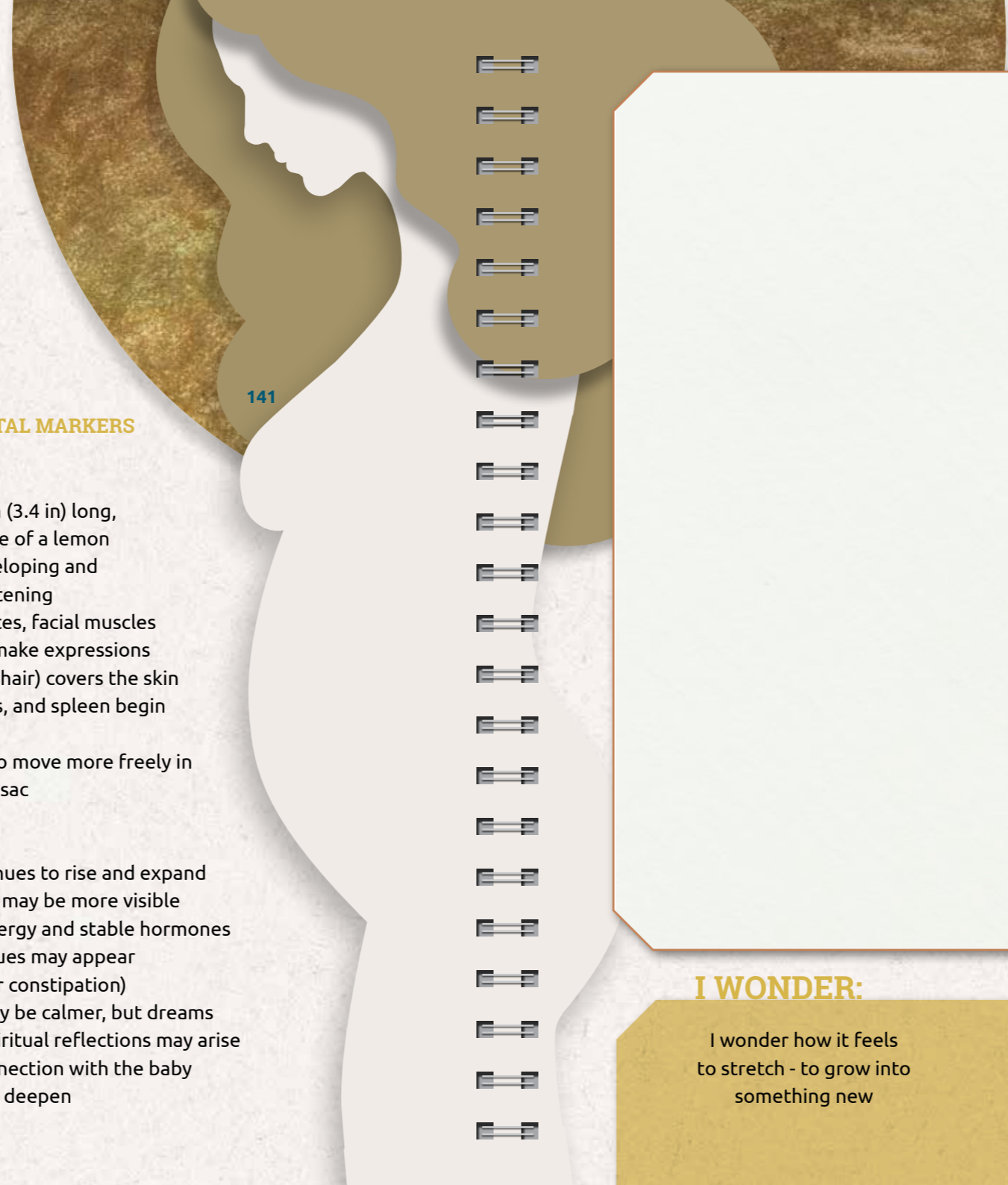
CULTURAL INSIGHT

In Tanzania there are more than 120 ethnical groups (tribes).
Having worked in three different Lutheran Dioceses I still have only a very narrow point of view into the rich Tanzanian Christian culture.
In Tanzania there is not a culture to buy Christmas presents. But even the poorer families want to give their children at least a new garment to use in Christmas Services. And to gather into these services is the thing. To celebrate together the birth of our Saviour is even more important than ever. And if you can have a family meal with a piece of whatever meat is accessible, you can really feel the Christmas.
Christmas is also the time to do the big Baptism Services. Many Christians have been baptised at Christmas. So if you don’t remember your birth date, you can always write 24th or 25thDecember. In Chaggaland, around Kilimanjaro, you can see lots of people who have come to visit their home places.
To “eat Christmas” together and celebrate Baptism, of their own or of their relatives.

OLAVI HEINO TSSF Finland missionary 1986-2020

STRETCHING TOWARD LIGHT

“The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light.”
Isaiah 9:2



WEEK 14

DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

THE WOMB

- About 8.5 cm (3.4 in) long, about the size of a lemon
- Muscles developing and body straightening
- Neck elongates, facial muscles active – can make expressions
- Lanugo (fine hair) covers the skin
- Liver, kidneys, and spleen begin functioning
- Baby starts to move more freely in the amniotic sac

MOTHER:

- Uterus continues to rise and expand – baby bump may be more visible
- Increased energy and stable hormones
- Digestive issues may appear (heartburn or constipation)
- Emotions may be calmer, but dreams or deeper spiritual reflections may arise
- Sense of connection with the baby may begin to deepen

Growth now happens more rapidly. Facial expressions develop, and the baby can even frown or squint. The body is lengthening and straightening.

The neck becomes more defined. Lanugo covers the skin. Kidneys start producing urine, and the liver begins making bile. The whole body is practicing being alive.

It is a time of stretching- muscles growing, limbs lengthening, space being made.

The womb holds and expands. So too must we stretch to make space for love incarnate. Christmas is near. The Word is not only taking flesh, but form. Not only presence, but personality.

Stretching is rarely comfortable. For Mary, for us, for a growing child it means surrendering to change, to growth, to grace. But from that stretch, light is born.

Large blank white area with a decorative border, intended for reflection or journaling.

I WONDER:

I wonder how it feels to stretch - to grow into something new

I wonder how we make space in ourselves for God to grow

I wonder what kind of person Jesus was already becoming in the womb

The Inn with No Room: Recognising Christ in the Margins

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and laid him in a manger,
because there was no place for them in the inn.”
Luke 2:7

Christ entered our world on the margins. No place at the inn, cradled in a manger, and greeted not by kings, but by shepherds. Today, He is still turned away in war-torn cities, refugee camps, and detention centres. He looks at us through the eyes of a child fleeing violence, a mother torn from her family at a border, or the homeless person passed by without a glance. Wherever poverty strips people of their dignity, Christ waits—standing at the door, longing to be welcomed.

St. Francis of Assisi saw Christ most clearly in those the world cast aside. He chose a life of poverty and solidarity, recognising the face of Christ in the poor, the broken, and the forgotten. His radical response to the Gospel was to make space where there was none. Inspired by his witness, we too are called to shift our focus—from comfort and privilege to compassion and simplicity. In doing so, we learn to see Christ not in power, but in vulnerability.

BR FINNIAN SSF
Guest Brother at Alnmouth Friary

REFLECTIVE ACTION

CHRISTMAS CRIB

Place “something broken “
in your Christmas crib.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

Though he was rich, he wished, together with the most Blessed Virgin, his mother, to choose poverty in the world beyond all else.

(Later Admonition and Exhortation 5)

PRAYER

Lord Jesus,
You were born in poverty
and laid in a manger.
Open our hearts to see you
in the poor and the forgotten.
Help us walk with humility,
love with courage,
and make room
where there is none.

JOURNALING PROMPT

“Making Room”
Imagine: You are the innkeeper.
It’s late. The house is full.
A knock at the door. A poor couple.
A young woman in labour.
You pause. What do you say?



GAZA

CULTURAL INSIGHT

This year, I will once again place rubble in the manger: shards of stone where straw should lie.

It felt like a prayer too deep for words, a cry carried across borders and centuries.

I cannot look at Bethlehem without seeing Gaza, cannot look at Mary without seeing mothers fleeing airstrikes, clutching babies to their breasts.

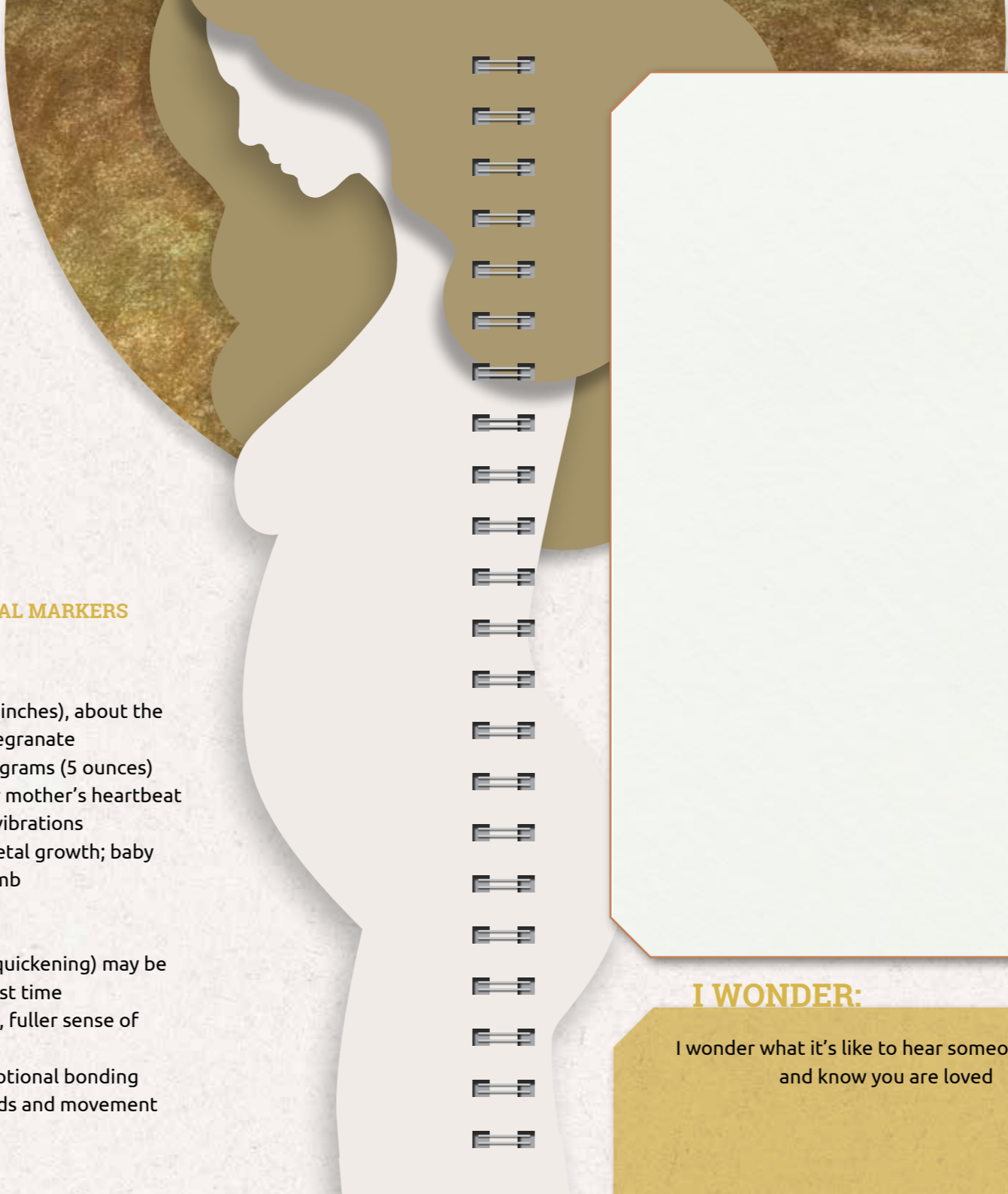
The Christ-child comes not to sanitised stables but to bombed-out buildings and border camps.

In the rubble, I see Emmanuel, God with us, still arriving among the displaced, still wrapped in vulnerability.

This is no sentimental nativity. It is a holy reckoning. And still, somehow, it is hope.

SOUND AND WONDER

“The Word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”
Deuteronomy 30:14



A large, blank, cream-colored rectangular area with rounded corners and a thin brown border, intended for handwritten notes or reflections.

Ears are developing rapidly.

Although external sounds are muffled, the mother’s heartbeat can be heard, voice, and rhythms of her life.

Totally connected yet not through sight yet, but through sound: heart to heart.

Similarly, our faith may begin not with seeing clearly but hearing and wondering.

The Word of God is spoken into us: whispered in prayer, sung in hope, breathed through Scripture.

Christ is the Word made flesh and the sound of His life calls us toward Him, even before we fully understand

WEEK 17
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

THE WOMB

- Size: 13 cm (5 inches), about the size of a pomegranate
- Weight: ~140 grams (5 ounces)
- Baby can hear mother’s heartbeat and external vibrations
- Stronger skeletal growth; baby may suck thumb

MARY

- Movements (quickening) may be felt for the first time
- Growing belly, fuller sense of “presence”
- Increased emotional bonding through sounds and movement

I WONDER:

I wonder what it’s like to hear someone’s voice and know you are loved

I wonder what voice you are tuning your heart to this Advent?

Breaking Bread: Meals as Acts of Love

“They recognised him in the breaking of the bread.”
Luke 24:35

Sharing a meal is one of the simplest, yet most powerful ways to build relationships. Who needs to be invited to your table?

There is a lovely children’s song about the story of the meeting of Jesus with Zacchaeus the feared tax collector, when he had climbed up into a tree to see Jesus and Jesus implores him to come down – for I’m coming to your house for tea!

That is one of a number of occasions when we hear of Jesus enjoying eating and drinking at the homes of friends, ordinary people rather than the rich and famous.

In my experience offering hospitality has become less frequent since the Covid epidemic, when we were forced to remain in our own homes and not meet with neighbours and friends. Perhaps now is the time for us to reach out again as individuals and as church families to those in our fellowships and communities who for whatever reason, would appreciate a coffee and chat, a listening ear maybe, or by taking the opportunity over a meal, to introduce newcomers, enabling new friendships to be forged. Why not bring joy into the lives of others by offering hospitality?

SUE HOLMES TSSF
European Province

REFLECTIVE ACTION

SET AN EMPTY PLACE

Today or this week, set an extra place at your table... even if you’re eating alone. Let it be a quiet act of welcome for Christ in the stranger, the lonely, the forgotten.

As you eat, pray for those with no table of their own, and ask God to enlarge your heart to receive the unexpected guest.

You might say aloud: “Christ, be my guest. Love, be my light. All who hunger, come and be filled.”



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

Listen my brothers: If the Blessed Virgin is so honoured, as is becoming, because she carried Him in her most holy womb.....how holy, just and fitting must be he who touches with his hands, receives in his heart and mouth, and offers to others to be received the One Who is not about to die but Who is to conquer and be glorified, upon Whom the angels longed to gaze.

(A letter to the Entire Order 21)

PRAYER

*God of Welcome,
you come in need,
not splendour.
Make every meal holy,
every open seat
a place for you.
Teach me to welcome you
in each guest.*

JOURNALING PROMPT

Today take time with your journal. Let your pen become a place of prayer and reflection: Who needs to be invited to your table... literally or metaphorically. What does “breaking bread” look like in your life right now? When have you experienced a meal as an act of healing, friendship, or unexpected grace?

CULTURAL INSIGHT

POLAND

On Christmas Eve, our table glows with candlelight, and always – always – there’s one extra plate set.

It’s not a mistake.

It’s for the unexpected guest, the stranger, the soul who might knock, or simply be held in our hearts.

In Poland, we call this Wigilia – a sacred supper of waiting and welcome.

As we share opłatek and stories, that empty place reminds me: Christ came not as a king, but as a guest with no place to stay.

So we keep watch, honouring the mystery that every knock at the door might be holy.

In our waiting, we make room – for love to arrive.

LISTENING FOR THE WHISPER OF GOD

“Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’”
ISAIAH 58:9

This week marks a turning point. In the quiet of the womb, the baby begins to hear the mother’s heartbeat, the stir of life within, the muffled sounds of the world beyond. The womb becomes not just a place of shelter, but of encounter. The baby listens, attuning to life before it can fully understand it.

For the mother, these days may bring the first real flutters of movement, small signs of life stirring within. Alongside this joy may come deeper questions, a growing awareness of vulnerability and hope. What will this life become? What does it mean to carry such a mystery?

This is the way Christ entered the world – hidden, listening, drawing near. Even before the cry in Bethlehem, Jesus was already present, already attentive to the heartbeat of creation.

Advent calls us to listen, too. To pause and notice the quiet signs of God’s presence all around us. Like the child in the womb, we are invited to attune our hearts to the whisper of God believing that Christ is near, waiting to be heard, waiting to be received.

WEEK 18

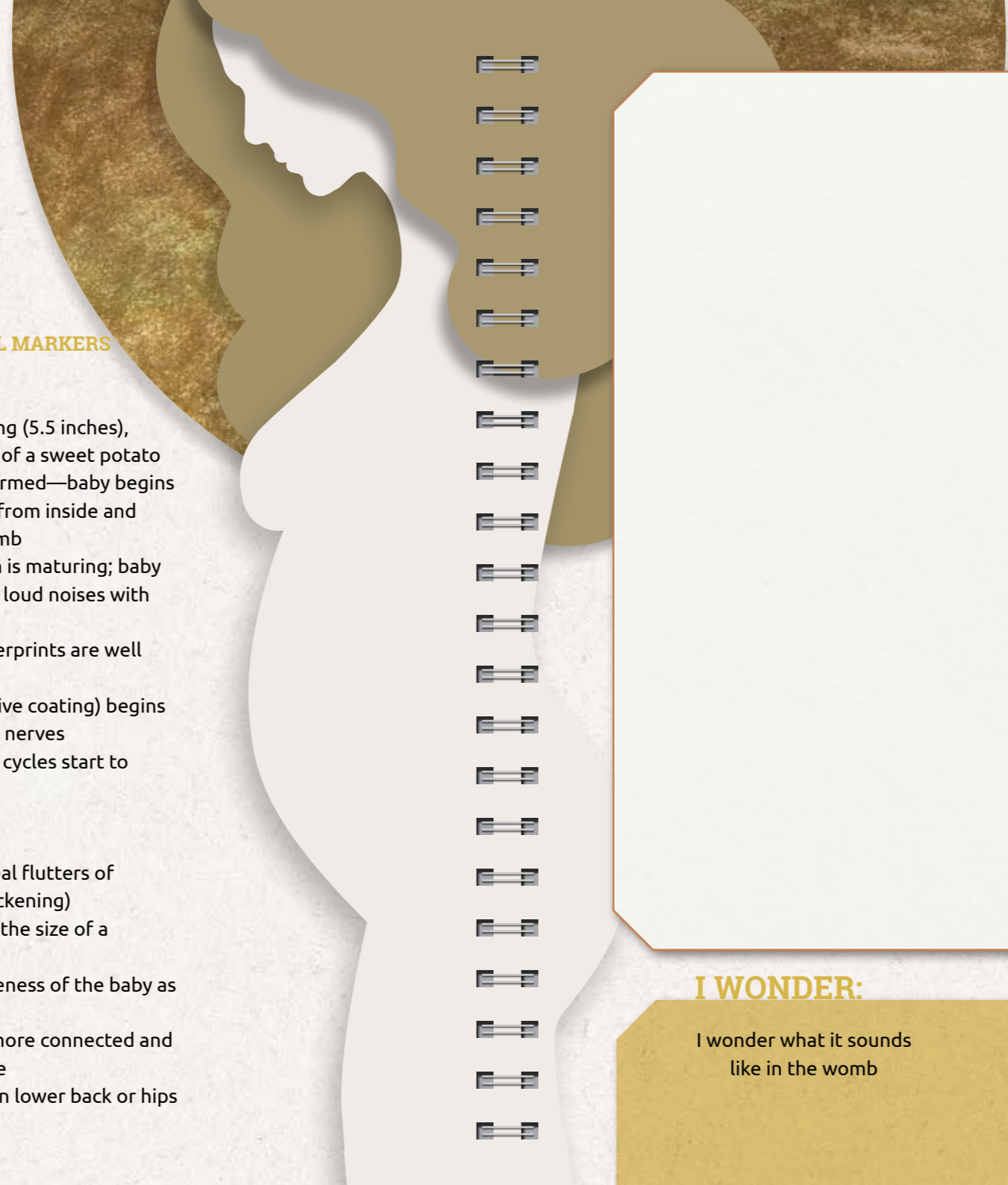
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- About 14 cm long (5.5 inches), around the size of a sweet potato
- Ears are fully formed—baby begins to hear sounds from inside and outside the womb
- Nervous system is maturing; baby may respond to loud noises with movement
- The baby’s fingerprints are well established
- Myelin (protective coating) begins forming around nerves
- Sleep and wake cycles start to develop

MOTHER:

- May feel first real flutters of movement (quickening)
- Uterus is about the size of a cantaloupe
- Increased awareness of the baby as a person
- May feel both more connected and more vulnerable
- Possible aches in lower back or hips



A large, blank, light-colored rectangular area with rounded corners and a thin orange border, intended for handwritten notes or reflections.

I WONDER:

I wonder what it sounds like in the womb

I wonder how we can learn to hear God the way a baby listens in the womb

I wonder what sounds of love or peace are forming us right now

Joy in Giving: The Heart of Generosity

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”
Acts 20:35

REFLECTION

She had been self-employed for 20 years, spending carefully, struggling when there was no work. Then suddenly £400 appeared in her bank account – her first pension. Totally unexpected! She had never thought about becoming an OAP.

After all, it was just for one month, and the Lord would look after her.

The next month £400 was again in her account, and again she gave it for his wage. And the next month... and the next...

He was a young man leaving school, seeking his first job. A simple office placement was offered by a local counselling charity, but where would they find the minimum wage of £400 to pay him?

20 years later the boy is General Manager. “I don’t know how we would do without him”, writes the CEO. Joyfully she reads the glowing report of his success and praises God for using her gift in this way.

Challenged by the need she gave her pension, in its entirety. She had managed without it the month before, so she could manage now.

ANN LEIGH
TSSF European Province.

REFLECTIVE ACTION

LIGHT A CANDLE IN SILENCE

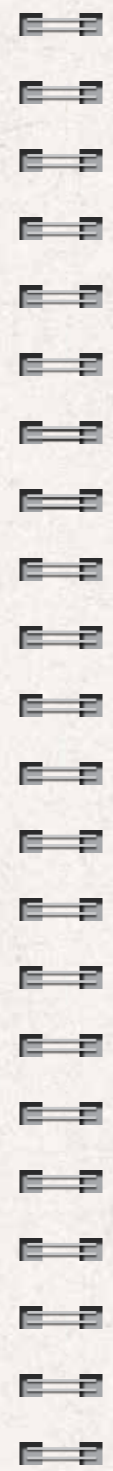
Take a few minutes today to sit quietly and light a candle – if possible, one of the Advent candles for hope, peace, love, or joy.

As the flame flickers, let it represent the growing anticipation of Christ’s presence in your life and in the world.

Imagine Mary holding the light of Christ within her and then

imagine that same light being born in you. Let this flame be a promise:

That even in uncertainty, love is growing. That in prayer and generosity, Christ is near.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

‘O loving mother, hail Mary, filled with the Spirit’s gift, The Lord be with you, you who are blessed among women, And blessed the fruit of your womb.’ And say those words for as long and as often as your devotion lasts. For through these you ponder the first joys of Christ’s mother; So may he help you reach the joys of the future.

(The Versified Life St Francis by Henri d’Avranches The 7th book 10-11.)

PRAYER

O God of joy and justice,
as we wait
with the faithful of Africa,
let our prayers kindle hope,
our fasting deepen peace,
and our love prepare
a place for Christ.

JOURNALING PROMPT

Think of a time when you gave something, your time, money, skills, or presence, without knowing what the outcome would be. What did it cost you?

What joy (or challenge) did it bring?

Now consider: Is there something you have today that you could offer freely and generously, into God’s hands?



SOUTH AFRICA

CULTURAL INSIGHT

The Advent season in Africa is a time of spiritual preparation for the coming of Christ focused on prayer, fasting and charity work.

The most common activities are Advent Wreaths, special services focused on themes of hope, peace, love and joy for a period of four weeks.

A candle is lit each week for each theme from the first Sunday of advent to the fourth Sunday symbolizing the growing anticipation of Christ’s birth.

Some of our churches conduct weekly Advent courses in study groups .

Some people do individual study with passages specifically chosen on the coming of Christ.

MABEL TSSF
African Province

You may wish to draw a hand (or draw around your hand)

Write a short prayer or intention, offering that could go into that hand space.

“I offer this... Lord, may it bless more than I can see.”

KNOWN BEFORE WE SPEAK

“Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely.”
Psalm 139:4

This week, the tiny life hidden in the womb grows to around the size of a mango. The baby’s senses are developing, especially the ability to hear and feel. The sound of a heartbeat, the rhythm of breathing, the hum of familiar voices, and even gentle touch begin to shape the baby’s earliest experiences of connection and belonging.

It is a mystery both tender and profound- to be known without words, to be loved before anything can be spoken or understood. Long before the baby can respond with speech, the relationship has already begun. The child is recognised and loved simply by being present.

In this season of Advent, we are reminded that God meets us in the same way. Before our words are formed, before our prayers are spoken, we are already known. God listens not just to our voices, but to the quiet rhythms of our lives- the longing, the ache, the hope that stirs within us.

Today offers a quiet invitation: to rest in the truth that we are held in God’s presence just as we are, without needing to perform or explain. Like the child in the womb, we are already seen, already heard, already loved. Even in mystery, God draws near.

WEEK 19

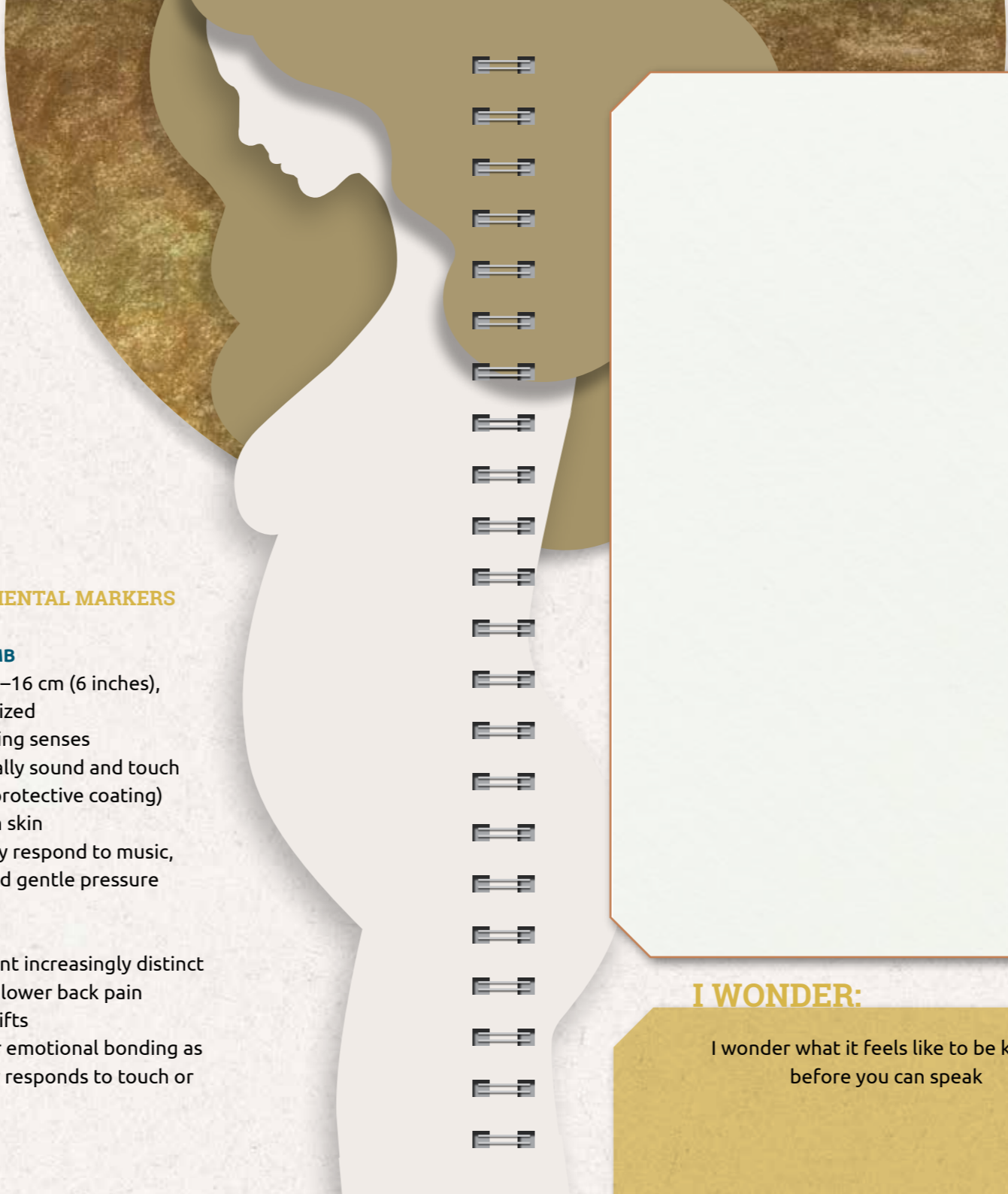
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- Size: ~15–16 cm (6 inches), mango-sized
- Developing senses – especially sound and touch
- Vernix (protective coating) forms on skin
- Baby may respond to music, voice, and gentle pressure

MOTHER:

- Movement increasingly distinct
- Possible lower back pain or hip shifts
- Stronger emotional bonding as the baby responds to touch or sound



A large, blank, light-colored rectangular area with rounded corners and a thin orange border, intended for reflection or journaling. It is positioned on the right side of the page, overlapping the spiral binding.

I WONDER:

I wonder what it feels like to be known before you can speak

I wonder how God hears us when we don't have words

Loving the Difficult People in Our Lives

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.”
Luke 6:27

I recently spent 6 months at Alnmouth Friary as an alonsider, living with the Brothers as a volunteer. I wanted to experience Franciscan community from the inside, to find out what it is really like. As Timothy Radcliffe OP says in his insightful book *Sing a New Song*, when people are asked what they most like about religious life they say “living in community”; when asked what they most dislike, they say “living in community”!

Living in community taught me that those I find most “difficult” to live with usually show me something difficult about myself. A Brother who often shows his anger shows me how much I repress my emotions. A guest who seems excessively friendly with everyone grates at me, perhaps,

because I do not feel the same kindness towards others. A volunteer who seems overly pious and demanding reminds me of the lack of discipline in my spiritual life.

The challenge of loving these “difficult” people (and isn’t everyone, in some sense, “difficult”?) is the challenge to love them as ourselves. If we can show them a little grace, we might discover how much God would still love us if we were - shock, horror! - a little more like them.

MATT STEMP

is a postulant of the Society of St Francis, currently living at Hilfield Friary. He is a difficult person to live with!

REFLECTIVE ACTION

HUMBLE SERVICE

Undertake in a quiet, humble gesture of service – like setting a place at the table, tidying unnoticed, or offering a word of encouragement for someone who irritates or misunderstands you. Let your action be a silent blessing.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

A servant of God cannot know how much patience and humility he has within himself as long as he is content. When the time comes, however, when those who should make him content do the opposite, he has as much patience and humility as he has at that time and no more.

(The Admonitions XIII : Patience)

PRAYER

*God of mercy,
grow patience in me
when comfort fails.
Let your love
shape me
even in hard places.*

JOURNALING PROMPT

Think of someone you find difficult to love- perhaps someone close to you, or someone you’ve encountered recently. Without judgement, write about what it is that you find challenging. Now gently ask: What might this person be revealing to me about myself?



ITALY

CULTURAL INSIGHT

Many towns and villages in Umbria stage ‘praesepi viventi’ (living cribs). Sometimes these are spectacular medieval celebrations, with the crib at the centre. Sometimes they are complete re-enactments of the Christmas story - I remember how once King Herod collapsed in fits of laughter when he realised he was shouting at a bemused crowd of English pilgrims!! The enormous re-enactment of 1223 in the square in front of Santa Maria degli Angeli was particularly moving one year, and another memorable ‘play’ was in Rivo Torto where the children acted out ‘A Christmas Carol’ in various scenes around the village (I wondered if the local Italians realised what the story was about!)

Always in Italy there is a life-sized baby doll lying in front of the altar during Christmas Mass. At the end of the service the priest will hold it high and lead a procession to the church’s crib to bless that. At the Carceri above Assisi one year the priest led us out into the open air and along to the first outdoor altar (which you probably know), where Mary stood beside Joseph with the doll in her arms and we could all go forward and venerate it with

Is there a mirror here – a hidden insecurity, a fear, a longing? Think about drawing the outline of a mirror in your journal and then write a short prayer for this person. Then write one for yourself. How might grace, God’s gift of love beyond deserving, invite you both into deeper healing?

A GLIMPSE OF WONDER

“Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face.”
1 Corinthians 13:12

At the halfway point of pregnancy, many parents around the world receive a much-anticipated glimpse into the hidden world of the womb. Through the blurred light and shadow of a scan, fingers, toes, a tiny spine, and a forming face appear. What has been growing in mystery is seen, if only in part. Movements grow stronger, responses to sound become clearer, and the bond deepens—both with what is seen and with all that remains unseen.

This moment speaks of wonder- partial, fragile, yet real. It reminds us that revelation rarely comes fully formed. Like those who journeyed far to glimpse the Christ child, we often see only in part, catching glimpses of what God is doing in the world and in us.

Yet these glimpses are enough to move us deeper into love. Advent invites us to live in this holy tension- seeing in part, longing for more, trusting that even in the mystery, God is at work. Every glimpse, every movement, every heartbeat draws us nearer to the One who is already drawing near to us.

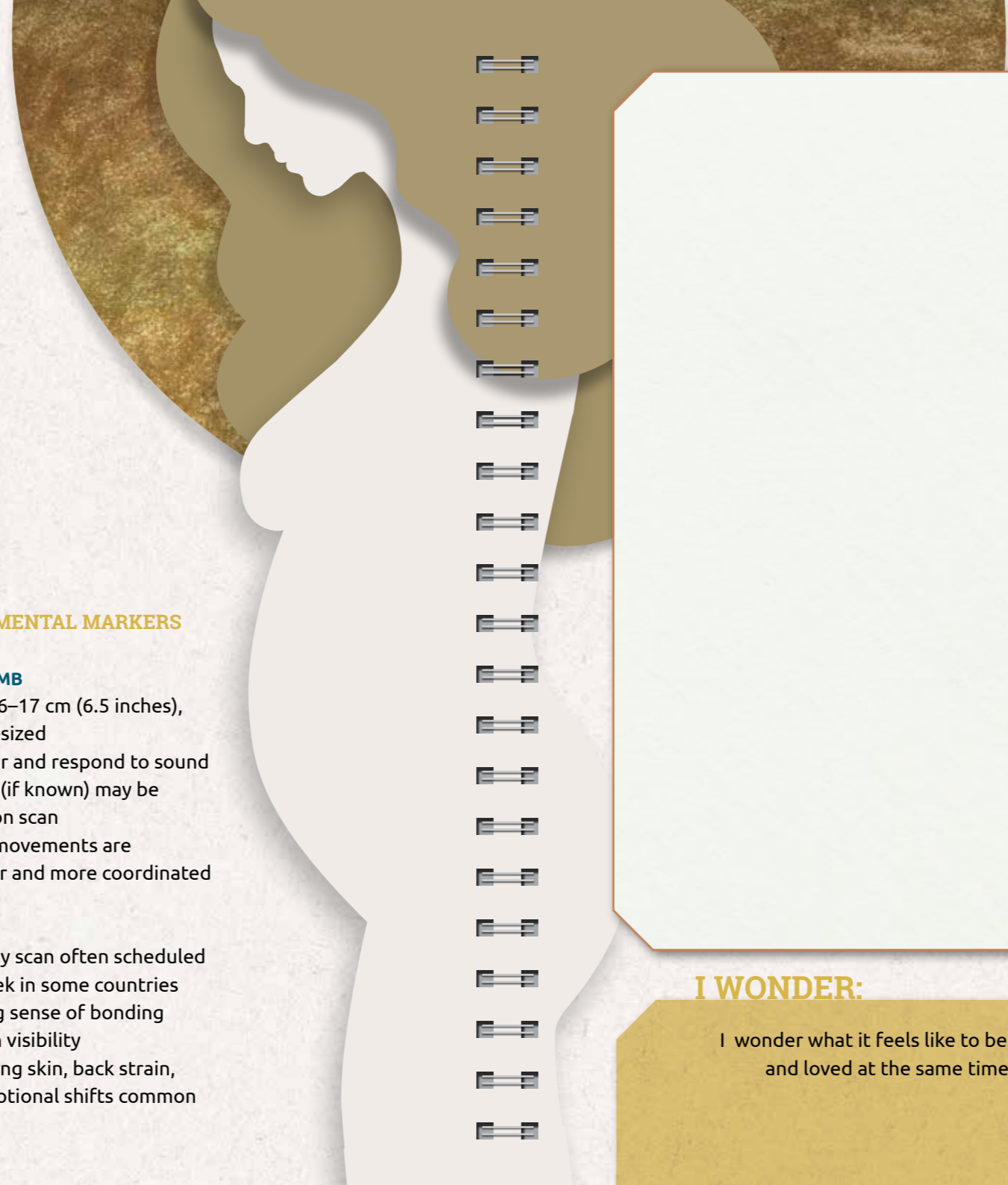
WEEK 20
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- Size: ~16–17 cm (6.5 inches), banana-sized
- Can hear and respond to sound
- Gender (if known) may be visible on scan
- Baby’s movements are stronger and more coordinated

MOTHER:

- Anatomy scan often scheduled this week in some countries
- Growing sense of bonding through visibility
- Stretching skin, back strain, and emotional shifts common



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I WONDER:

I wonder what it feels like to be seen and loved at the same time

I wonder what God sees in me when I can't see myself clearly

Welcoming Christ in silence and hopes

“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”
Joshua 24:15

During this Advent, as the Third Order, let us choose to embrace the silence that the world tries so desperately to fill with noise. Let us strive to remain vigilant in prayer while the rest of the world dozes off in apathy. Let us wipe away resentment and fear so as to make room for hope and peace. Let us relinquish the need to hold onto grudges so to make room for forgiveness. Let us put self-centredness aside so that the loving self-sacrifice of Christ may easily take root within us: in our heart.

enlarge our compassion, our capacity for mercy, to make us the bearers of light in the shadowy portions of this world.

As we light each candle on the Advent wreath, may it mark and revive the memories that light increases as we remove the obstacles that hinder it. Most importantly, may the simplicity of the stable lead us back to the essentials of our faith: humility, joy, and the radical love of our Incarnate Lord.

Creating a hospitable space welcomes the One who, as a vulnerable child, comes seeking the open heart instead of a palace. It also allows the Spirit to

MICHAEL TWUM-DARKO TSSF
African Province Minister General

REFLECTIVE ACTION

SING A SONG OF LIGHT

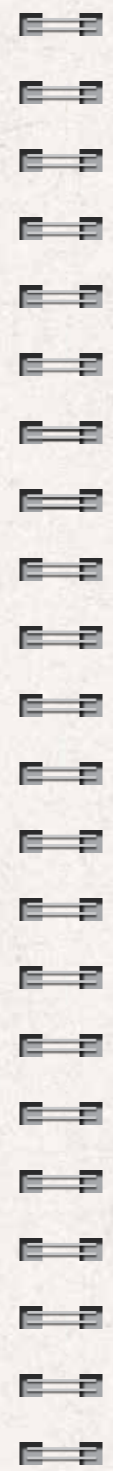
Today, sing a carol or hymn, even quietly or alone.

Let it rise as a prayer of hope in dark times.

If you're able, invite someone to sing with you or play music together.

As you sing, imagine your voice joining a great circle of praise across snowy landscapes and silent hearts.

Light a candle and pray for Christ's presence to dwell in your home.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

The people that gather for the holy festivities fill The church, bring candles and torches, while incense breathes Forth it scent. After matins, the Mass of the Feast Is celebrated. Francis it is who reads the Gospel In sweet-toned melody; and then when the people are seated, He gives them a sermon, and softens the hearts that were hardened, And out of hard rock causes rivers to flow.

*(The versified Life of St Francis
by Henri d'Avranches 11th Book 100-105.)*

PRAYER

Christ,
Light in our Darkness,
in this long night of the year,
let my voice join with others in hope.
Fill my silence with your song
and my home with your peace.
Shine through me with joy,
that I may carry your light to others.

Amen.

JOURNALING PROMPT

“What Still Needs Clearing?”
In the silence of this Advent moment,
ask yourself:
What within me is taking up space
where Christ longs to dwell?
Is it resentment? Busyness? Fear?

What one thing can I release to make
more room for hope, mercy, or light?
Write down the word or phrase that comes.
Sit with it.
Then write a simple prayer of invitation:
Come, Lord Jesus. There is room now in my life.



FINLAND

CULTURAL INSIGHT

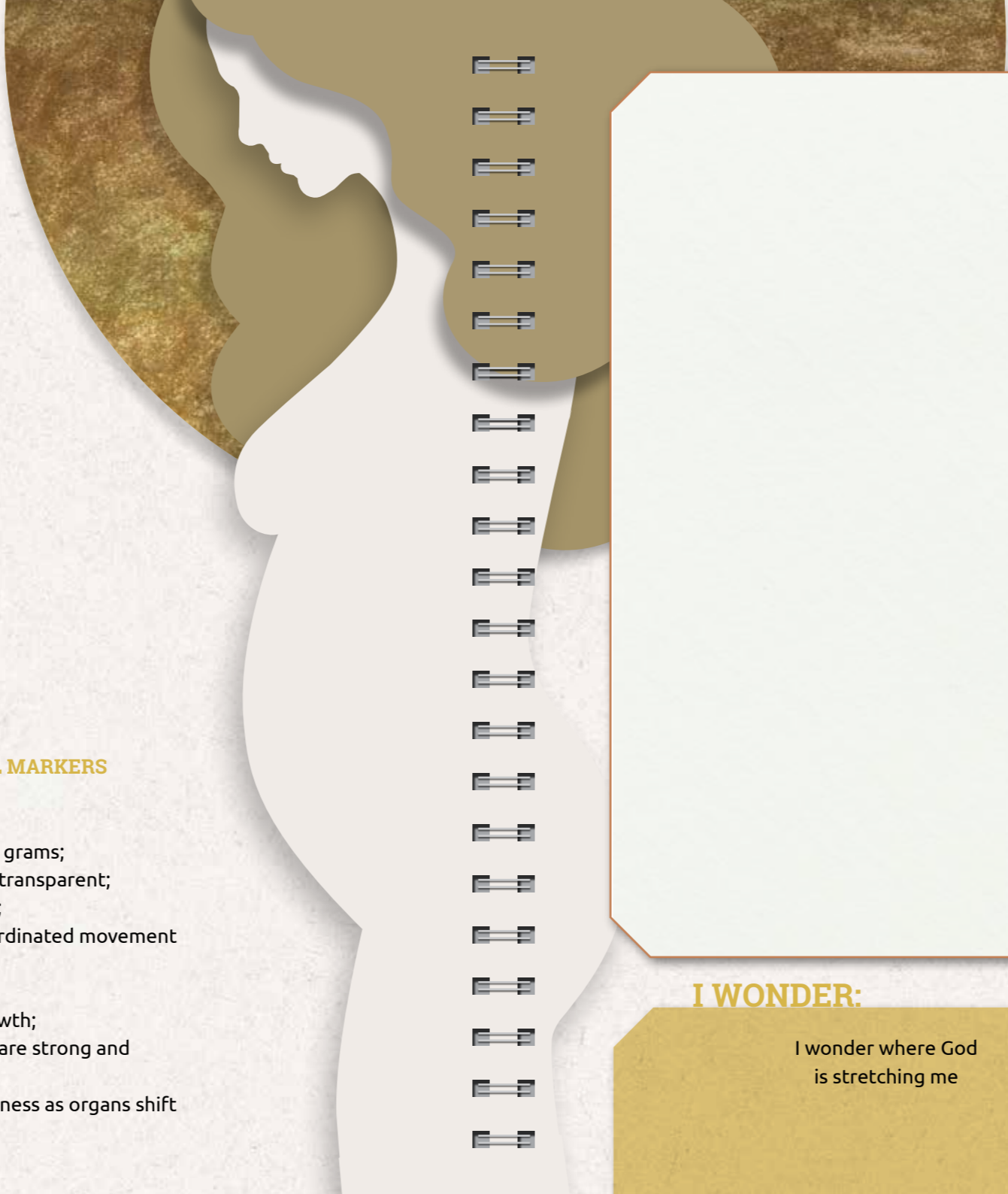
Singing together. This is what is common in Finnish Advent and Christmas traditions. In the worship on the First Sunday of Advent is a certain Hosanna hymn. And the churches are full of people who have come “to sing Hoosianna”. That Sunday is one of the most popular Sundays in the whole Church Year.

Then before Christmas people gather in churches, parish halls and even in pubs, to sing the “Most Beautiful Christmas Carols”. This event is organised in every Lutheran Parish. It was originally started in order to raise funds for Mission work. This is still happening, but basically people come in numbers to feel the genuine wintery Finnish Christmas atmosphere. Most Christmas songs in Finland are winter related, full of snow, candles and light shining in the darkness. Christmas is celebrated in the darkest season and that makes it the most loved Christian Feast.

It brings hope to people who walk through the darkest valley. Occasionally singing together.

STRETCHING TOWARD LOVE

“Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back.”
Isaiah 54:2



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Marked by growth.

The limbs lengthen, movements become more deliberate, and the baby begins to stretch out in the womb.

pace is needed.

The mother’s body adjusts, expands, makes room.
his is the holy stretch of love.

In our lives, too, love asks us to expand. We are asked to stretch our hearts, our habits, our imaginations.

Advent calls us to prepare space, not only in the womb of the body but in the womb of the soul.

To love is to stretch- for Christ, or others, for new life.

WEEK 21

DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

27 cm (10.5 in), 350 grams;
skin becoming less transparent;
taste buds forming;
stronger, more coordinated movement

MOTHER:

Increased belly growth;
baby’s movements are strong and consistent;
possible breathlessness as organs shift

I WONDER:

I wonder where God is stretching me

I wonder how we make room for someone new in our hearts

Preparing the Prophets of today

“Go out quickly to the streets and bring in the poor,
the crippled, the blind, and the lame.”
Luke 14:21

The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures spoke clearly to the needs around them. Each with their own voice. They challenged corruption and gave reassurance to the oppressed. Liberation is at hand.

John the Baptist followed in the steps of these prophets. In a corrupt society he resisted the abuse of power, and he gave hope and new life to those who came out to him in the desert.

Who are our prophets today? They follow the footprints of those who went before them challenging power and proclaiming liberation.

We hear their voices speaking out against popularism in politics, against all that demeans others, against bullies.

We hear them speaking out for migrants and calling to justice those who stir up fear of “the other”.

They speak out too for creation giving voice to Mother Earth. And even in times of despair we hear them reminding us that God’s time and purposes are bigger. That ultimately God’s justice will prevail.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN SSF
Minister General

REFLECTIVE ACTION

REACH OUT

Today, reach out to someone who may feel overlooked.
Perhaps a neighbour, someone new at church, or a colleague.
Send a kind note, an invitation, or simply share a warm greeting.
Let your words be a candle of connection, an act of hospitality in the spirit of Advent.
As you do, quietly pray: “Christ, be near to those who feel far.”



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

As usual, blessed Francis had John summoned to him some 15 days prior to the birthday of the Lord. “If you desire to celebrate the coming feast of the Lord together at Greccio,” he said to him, “hurry before me and carefully make ready the things I tell you. For I wish to enact the memory of that babe who was born in Bethlehem: to see as much as is possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, and how, with an ox and ass standing by, he rested on hay.”

(The Life of St Francis by Thomas of Celano, the First Book Chapter XXX, 84)

PRAYER

Christ of every heart,
you came for the lonely
as well as the joyful.
Open my heart to
make room for others.
Help me see You in every face.
and welcome You with joy.

JOURNALING PROMPT

“Who are the voices calling us home to justice?”
Take time today to reflect on the prophets you have heard or seen in your own life – those who speak truth with courage, who disturb the comfortable, who make space for the silenced.



FRANCE

CULTURAL INSIGHT

Households with a crib, an affair that can take up a full sideboard top, would not dream of dismantling it on 6 January. No, it stays put until Candlemass.
French nativity sets are not restricted to the traditional ox and donkey, Holy Family and shepherds and sheep. They can include a vast number of characters (santons) representing the kind of people who might have joined the shepherds had they heard the angels’ call: ordinary village folks, who, poor as they are, are displayed rushing up to the stable, itself only an element in a mediterranean landscape. All the small trades are represented (cobbler, butcher, weaver...) but also the elderly and... the village idiot (le Ravi). Many families add a new figure to their set every year or to mark significant occasions.
How did this happen?
Look no further than St Francis and his Greggio living crib, taken up wherever the friars preached, not least southern France where the re-enactment enlisted every willing villager. By the end of the middle-Ages, public re-enactments, or reproductions, of the nativity scene were rife, every locality boasting at

OPEN TO THE WORLD

“My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations.”
Luke 2:30 - 31

At this stage of waiting, something tender and astonishing begins to unfold. After weeks of growing in darkness, eyelids in the womb slowly begin to open. Though true sight is still some way off, the first flickers of light start to reach in through the darkness. Gentle touches, sunlight through a window, or the soft glow of a lamp are sensed in ways the world cannot yet see.

This quiet awakening mirrors the invitation of Advent. It’s the invitation to turn toward the light. In a season when the world often feels shadowed by uncertainty or restlessness, we are reminded that God’s light continues to break in, not with sudden clarity, but with flickers of hope and gentle revelation.

It takes courage to open our eyes. It takes courage to see not only what is clear and certain, but to notice what is forming in mystery. God invites us to open the eyes of our hearts to what is stirring within us, around us, and among us. To trust that even in hidden places, new life is taking shape, and light is already reaching into the dark. This is the hope of Advent: that God is preparing us to see again again, to recognise the light that has never stopped shining, and to wonder at the world that is, even now, being made new.

WEEK 22

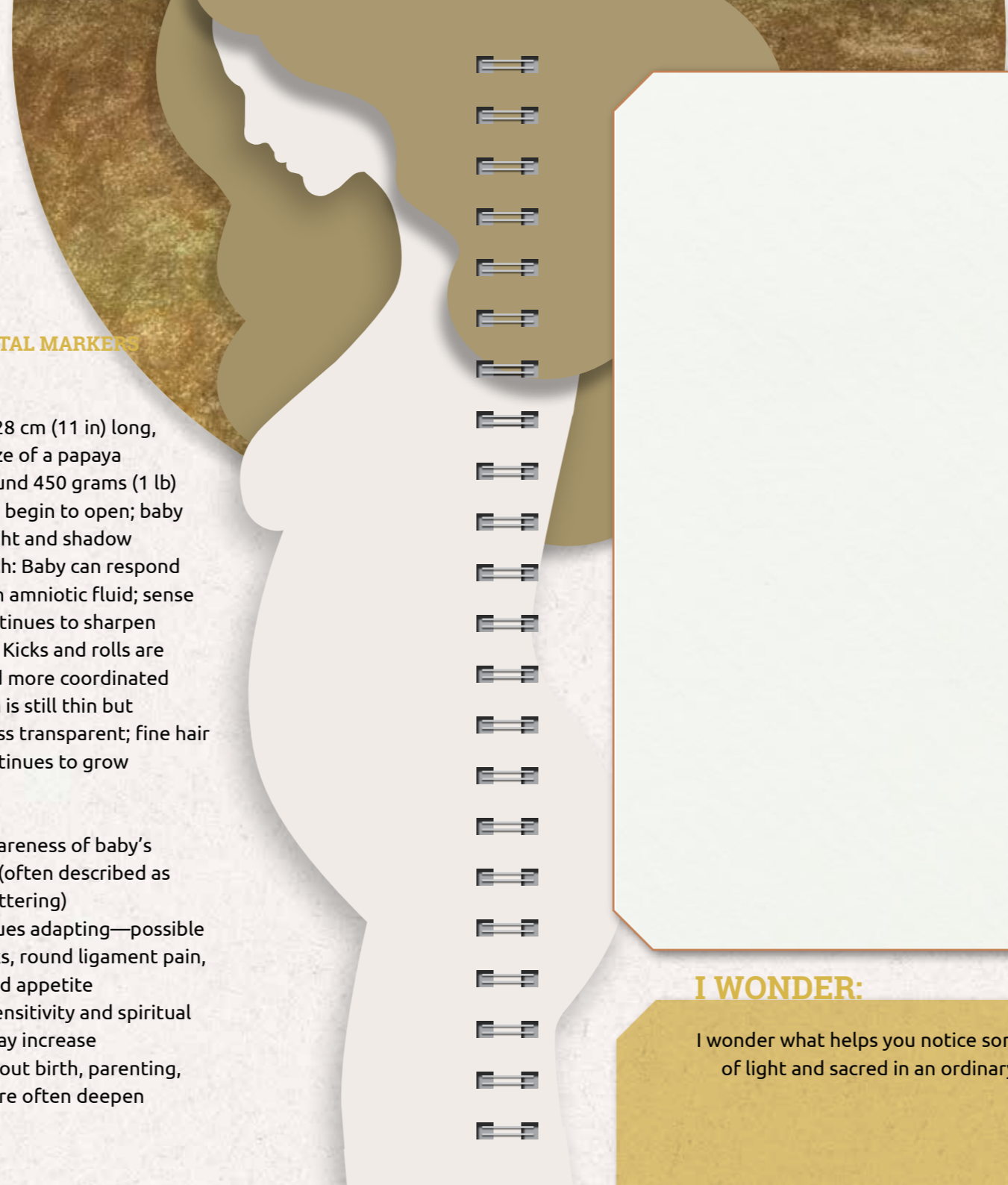
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- Size: About 28 cm (11 in) long, about the size of a papaya
- Weight: Around 450 grams (1 lb)
- Eyes: Eyelids begin to open; baby can sense light and shadow
- Taste & Touch: Baby can respond to flavours in amniotic fluid; sense of touch continues to sharpen
- Movements: Kicks and rolls are stronger and more coordinated
- Growth: Skin is still thin but becoming less transparent; fine hair (lanugo) continues to grow

MOTHER:

- Stronger awareness of baby’s movements (often described as rolling or fluttering)
- Body continues adapting—possible stretch marks, round ligament pain, and increased appetite
- Emotional sensitivity and spiritual reflection may increase
- Thoughts about birth, parenting, and the future often deepen



A large, blank, cream-colored rectangular area with rounded corners and a thin brown border, intended for handwritten notes or reflections.

I WONDER:

I wonder what helps you notice something of light and sacred in an ordinary day

I wonder how we can help others feel seen and loved

A space for God in everything

“Give us this day our daily bread.”
Matthew 6:11

REFLECTION

Here in Gulu, Northern Uganda life is more precarious than we are used to. Road accidents and unexpected death are not uncommon, and life depends very immediately on the production of food. Almost everyone grows at least their basic foodstuffs of beans, ground nuts, greens and maize.

As a farmer comes to the garden they will slip of their shoes, pause at the edge and pray. Every meal begins with a prayer of thanks, every journey with a prayer for safety on the roads; every morning a recognition of the blessings of life.

There is space for the presence of God in every activity, and a need for God’s blessing for every part of life.

When there is loss, or when there is celebration everyone puts what they can into the contribution so that all are able to stand together in community.

SARAH CAWDELL
TSSF African Province

REFLECTIVE ACTION

LIGHT A CANDLE IN SILENCE

Find a quiet space and light a candle. Gaze gently at its flame. Let it become for you a mirror of eternity, as St Clare invites a sign of Christ’s glory hidden in simplicity. Now close your eyes and picture the nativity scene in a small African church: children performing the story, neighbours gathered across denominations, voices raised together by candlelight. Drums beat joyfully. Let the flame and the joy unite in your heart. Let this stillness prepare you for Christmas morning. Let your being be transformed, not just in silence, but in singing, sharing, and belonging.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

“Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brightness of glory! Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance! And transform your whole being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation.”

ST. CLARE OF ASSISI

(Third Letter to Agnes of Prague)

PRAYER

*God of glory and simplicity,
form my soul in your image,
and let my heart reflect your joy.
In stillness and in song
may Christ be born in me.*

JOURNALING PROMPT

Imagine slipping off your shoes before beginning your work. Imagine every meal, every journey, every morning beginning not with rush or worry – but with prayer. Not as obligation, but as instinct. A breath. A recognition. In Gulu, daily bread is not a metaphor- it’s the work of hands, the fruit of soil, the grace of survival.



SOUTH AFRICA

CULTURAL INSIGHT

Some of our churches set up the Crib inside the Church at the beginning of Advent and dismantle it after Christmas.

There is a special evening before Christmas day where carols by candlelight are sung. In some communities they invite other denominations in the neighbourhood, for example, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholics to practise and sing carols by candlelight together.

During this service nine lessons relating to the period from the annunciation to the birth of Jesus are read.

Sunday school children perform the nativity play during the Christmas day Service. On Christmas Day there is so much excitement in the singing of the Carols especially where they play the Organ or drums!
IT IS ALL JOY TO THE WORLD!!

MABEL MWAMUKA. TSSF Africa

“The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”
John 10:3

As this hidden life continues to grow, something beautiful is taking place. The hearing, already formed, is beginning to tune in more clearly. Sounds from the outside world, familiar voices, music, even the steady rhythm of a heartbeat are becoming part of the first sense of belonging. In the quiet mystery of the womb, learning what it feels like to be close, what feels safe, what is known.

This moment offers a powerful image for our Advent waiting. In life, as in faith, we are shaped by the voices that surround us. Some speak peace, others stir anxiety. Some draw us closer to love, others pull us away. Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd, whose followers learn to recognise his voice- the voice that calls by name, the voice that leads with gentleness and care.

Advent invites us to pause and ask: what voices are shaping us? What do we hear most often? And how might we make more space for the voice of Christ. That voice that speaks love into our deepest places, even before we fully understand?

In these days of preparation, may we tune our hearts again to that voice—the voice that calls us home, that holds us close, and that longs to shape us from within.

WEEK 22

DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- Size: About 28–30 cm long (11.5–12 in), around the size of a large grapefruit
- Weight: About 500–600 grams (1.1–1.3 lbs)
- Hearing: Stronger ability to detect and respond to sounds; may react to music or voices
- Movement: More distinct and rhythmic; baby may respond to external touch or sound
- Lungs: Developing, practicing “breathing” motions with amniotic fluid
- Fat: Beginning to accumulate, helping with temperature regulation after birth

MOTHER:

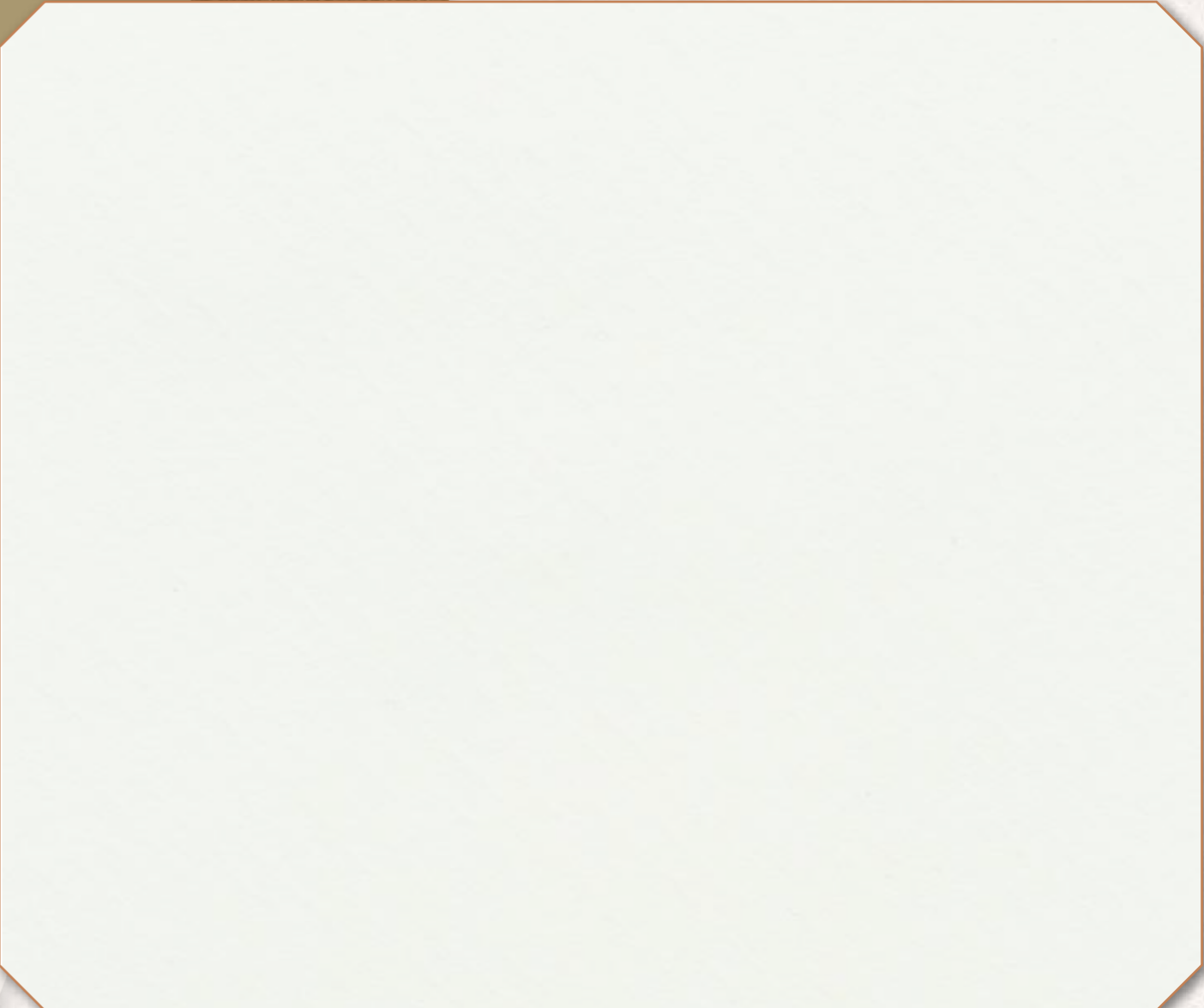
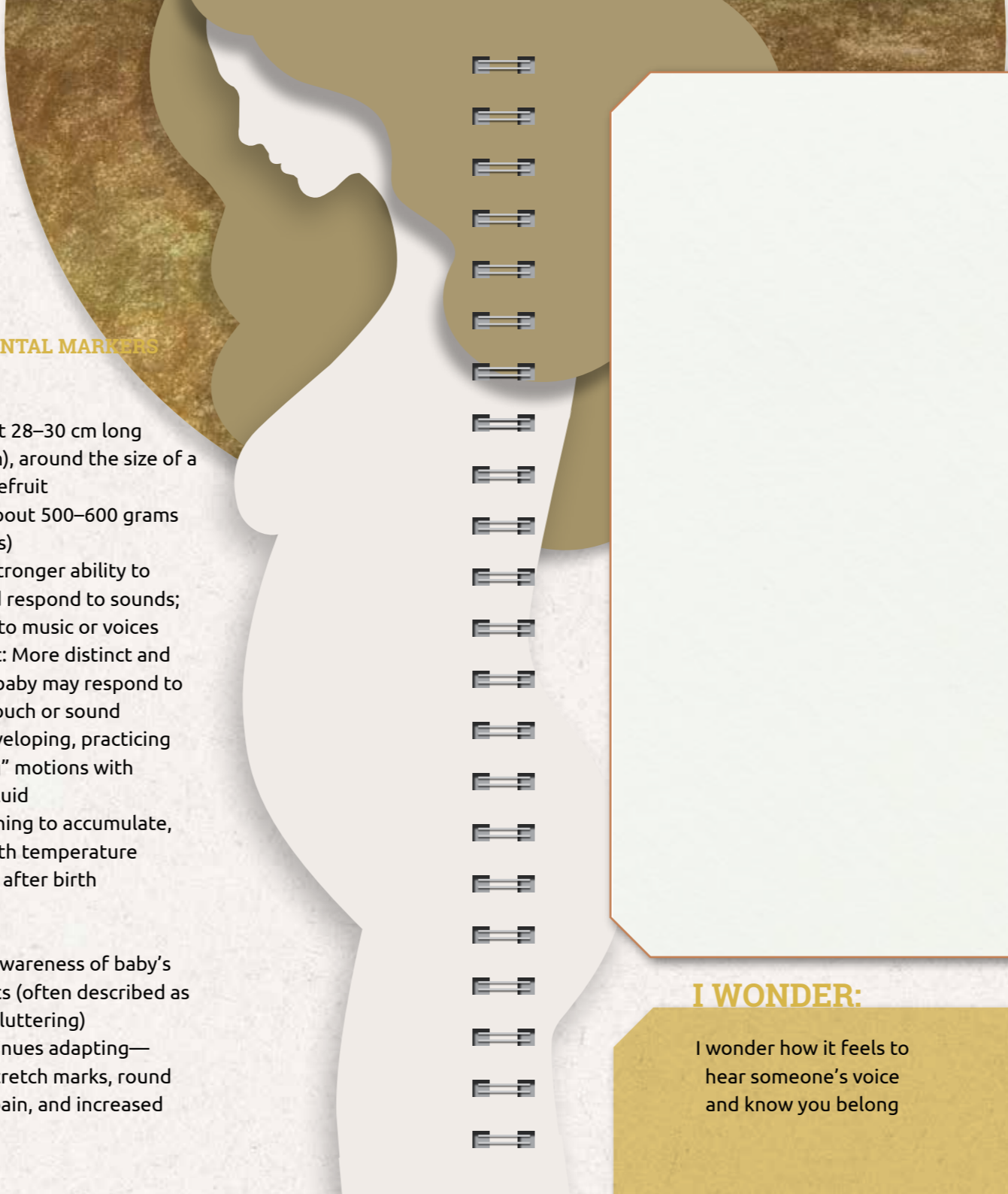
- Stronger awareness of baby’s movements (often described as rolling or fluttering)
- Body continues adapting—possible stretch marks, round ligament pain, and increased

I WONDER:

I wonder how it feels to hear someone’s voice and know you belong

I wonder what voices help you feel calm, strong, or loved

I wonder how we listen for God’s voice in our daily lives?



The Least of These: Serving the Vulnerable

“Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me.”
Matthew 25:40

Advent is a time for reflection and the practice of compassion. The message from Matthew “Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me,” highlights the importance of caring for others.

Narratives of Jesus’ birth in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew reveal His humble origins. Born in a stable, surrounded by animals, Jesus is the exemplar that embodies the Franciscan value of Minority. Francis’ desire to share an experience of Christ’s Minority was the whole point of the Christmas liturgy in the cave of Greccio.

Franciscan Minority challenges societal norms and categories that often prioritize success, status, and material possessions. Instead, it invites people to find joy in simplicity and to appreciate the beauty of everyday life. It encourages everyone to recognize their own limitations and acknowledge the dignity of every person, regardless of their social status or circumstances.

How might we practice Minority this Advent?

CHARLIE MCCARRON TSSF
Minister Provincial Americas

REFLECTIVE ACTION

MAKE SPACE FOR SOMEONE

Today, intentionally make space for someone who carries unseen burdens, especially women or caregivers.

This could mean taking on a task they usually shoulder, writing a note of thanks, or offering to cook a meal or give them space for rest.

If you are one who labours much for others, give yourself permission to pause.

Sit with a cup of tea, light a candle, and name (aloud or silently) the women or companions whose care has sustained you. Give thanks. Let this be a sacred sabbath of remembering and restoring.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

“Christ is the one whose brightness illuminates the mind darkened by sin, whose flame burns away ignorance and warms the heart with the fire of divine love.”

ST. BONAVENTURE

(Journey of the Mind into God, Prologue)

PRAYER

*Christ of the quiet hearth,
bles the women who
have carried this season.
Make room for their rest,
and in us, make room for justice,
shared work,
and tables where
no one is forgotten.*

JOURNALING PROMPT

“Seeing Christ in the Vulnerable”
Jesus tells us that when we serve the hungry, the sick, and the imprisoned, we are serving Him. Reflect and write: Who are “the least of these” in my community right now? When have I overlooked Christ in someone in need?

What one action – small or bol – can I take to serve someone vulnerable this week?
Complete this sentence in your journal: “Today I choose to see Christ in...”
Let it guide your compassion into concrete care.



IRELAND

CULTURAL INSIGHT

In Ireland, Epiphany – January 6th – is traditionally known as Nollaig na mBan, or Women’s Christmas. Rooted in rural communities, this day marked a well-earned pause for women after the long, labour-intensive season of Advent and Christmas. While men took over household chores for the day – cooking, cleaning, and tending to the fire – women visited one another’s homes, shared stories, laughed, and rested. It was a quiet, communal sabbath of sorts, born from the deeply practical and emotional need for respite and connection.

Though some have critiqued the tradition as offering women only “what’s left – the end of the Christmas cake or a fleeting holiday at the tail end of the season – many Irish women today are reclaiming Nollaig na mBan as a celebration of solidarity, resilience, and renewal. Hotels and cafés now host Women’s Christmas teas and gatherings, echoing the original spirit of making space for one another. In the light of Epiphany, Nollaig na mBan invites a different kind of revelation: that Christ is found not only in gold, frankincense,

MAKING ROOM

“You knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and
wonderfully made.” – Psalm 139:13-14

We imagine her hand resting on her belly, feeling the press of tiny feet. We picture the quiet moments when she listens not to words, but to life stirring deep within. She makes space in her body for him, for the one who will change everything.

And now, in our time and place, we are called to do the same. To make room not in the womb, but in our homes, our hearts, our lives. To stretch beyond what is comfortable. To prepare for the holy, not only in the wonder of Christmas Day, but in the long, quiet days of waiting.

We remember that the Christ child comes hidden first in the womb - growing slowly, silently, unseen by most. Holiness takes time to take shape. God’s coming often begins in what feels small or unnoticed: the steady breathing of hope, the quiet heartbeat of trust, the unseen work of love preparing room

Come, Lord Jesus, come.
Come into our waiting
and our wondering.

WEEK 25

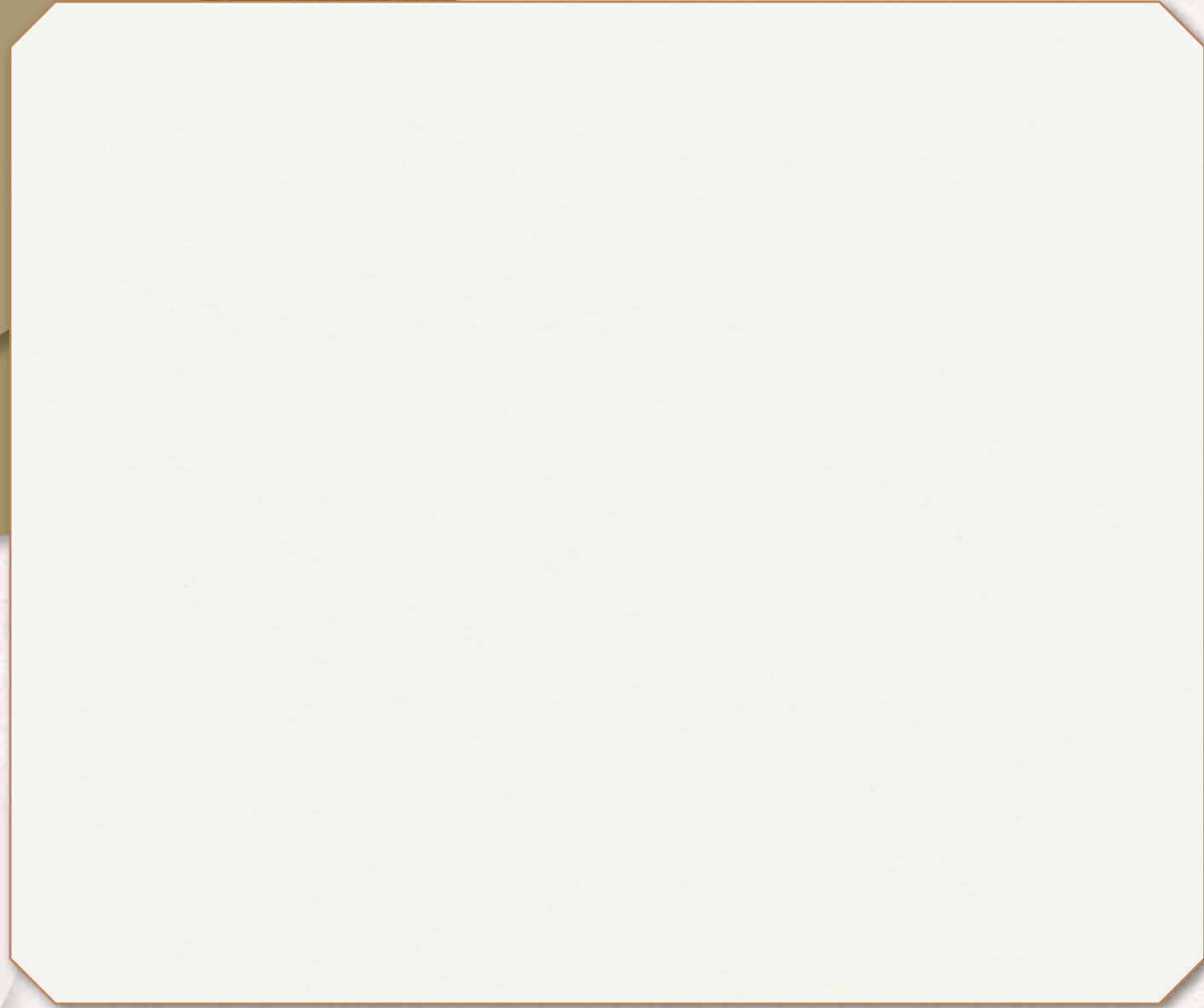
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- Size: Around 34-35 cm (13.5-14 in), about the size of a cauliflower
- Weight: Around 660-700 grams (1.5 lbs)
- Breathing Practice: Lungs begin moving rhythmically – preparing for air after birth
- Heartbeat: Strong and audible via stethoscope
- Brain: Developing rapidly; beginnings of REM sleep and possible dreaming
- Movement: Kicks, rolls, and stretches are strong; baby may respond to familiar sounds and touch

MOTHER:

- May feel more frequent and stronger baby movements, including hiccups
- Uterus is about the size of a soccer ball
- Common experiences include heartburn, fatigue, or sleep disruption
- Bonding deepens as the baby’s patterns become more familiar
- Spiritual reflections may focus on preparation –welcoming, nesting, trusting



I WONDER:

I wonder... how we are being invited to make room for Christ in hidden or unexpected places this Advent

I wonder... what small, unseen movements of hope or love we might already notice growing within or around us

The Good Samaritan: Loving Beyond Boundaries.

“Love your neighbour as yourself.”
Mark 12:31

Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that love knows no borders. Who are the “outsiders” in our community, and how can we extend love to them?

SR MAUREEN

REFLECTIVE ACTION

TAKE A PHOTO

Take a photo of something beautiful in creation. Perhaps a flower, the sea, your meal, and know that you are part of the great communion of saints and creation that celebrates Christ’s birth.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

“Behold, each day He humbles Himself as when He came from the royal throne into the womb of the Virgin; each day He comes to us, appearing humbly; each day He comes down from the bosom of the Father upon the altar into the hands of the priest.”

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI (*Adm 1:16–18*)

PRAYER Emmanuel, God with us,
you come not only
to stables and stars,
but to beaches and barbecues,
to laughter shared
under summer skies,
to fruit ripening under your sun.
Christ of every culture,
be born again among us,
in our land, in our homes,
in our hearts.
Amen.

JOURNALING PROMPT

“Who Is My Neighbour... Really?”
The Good Samaritan crossed boundaries – of race, religion, and risk – to love someone the world said he shouldn’t. Ask yourself: Who in my community do I tend to overlook, avoid, or judge?

What invisible lines have I drawn around who I “count” as my neighbour? What one act of mercy can I offer across that boundary this week? Write a response that begins: “Today, I choose to love beyond...” Let it name a wall you’re ready to cross, even in a small way.



AOTEAROA | NEW ZEALAND

CULTURAL INSIGHT

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Christmas is marked not by snow and candles, but by sunshine, sand, and the shimmer of summer light. After morning worship or a quiet pause to remember the birth of Christ, many families head to the beach—barefoot on warm sand, swimming in the Pacific, or simply resting under the pōhutukawa trees, whose red blossoms have come to symbolise Christmas here.

Later, we return home to gather around the barbecue, preparing a meal rich in local flavour—grilled meats, salads fresh from the garden, juicy stone fruits, and, yes, the turkey roasting in the oven while we enjoy a glass of chilled wine and good conversation. The food may be different from northern traditions, but the heart of the day is the same: celebration, gratitude, and togetherness. At the centre of it all is a photo, not of gifts or decorations, but of family gathered, faces full of laughter, arms wrapped around one another. This is our nativity scene: Christ born again in the warmth of human love, in shared food, in the joy of being together.

WATCHING AND WONDERING WITH MARY

“???”

LUKE 1 : 46

We have watched her change over these past months. What once was hidden is now unmistakable. She carries life. So near, so real, and yet still unseen.

Lately, she tells us how he moves when she sings or stands in the warmth of sunlight. We watch her rest her hands on her belly, her eyes distant, as if she is paying attention to a world beyond our reach.

They say this is the time when a baby's eyes open for the first time, sensing light in the shadows. Though the child cannot yet understand what light is, he turns toward it. Blinking. Reaching. Becoming aware.

And perhaps this is what faith looks like for all of us. That turning toward the light before we fully understand. Trusting in something growing beyond our sight.

We are learning from Mary. She shows us how to wait with hope, how to bear the mystery with wonder, how to trust the slow, unseen work of God. She reminds us that holiness often begins quietly, in the smallest signs of awareness, when life stirs us to turn toward the promise of light.

WEEK 26

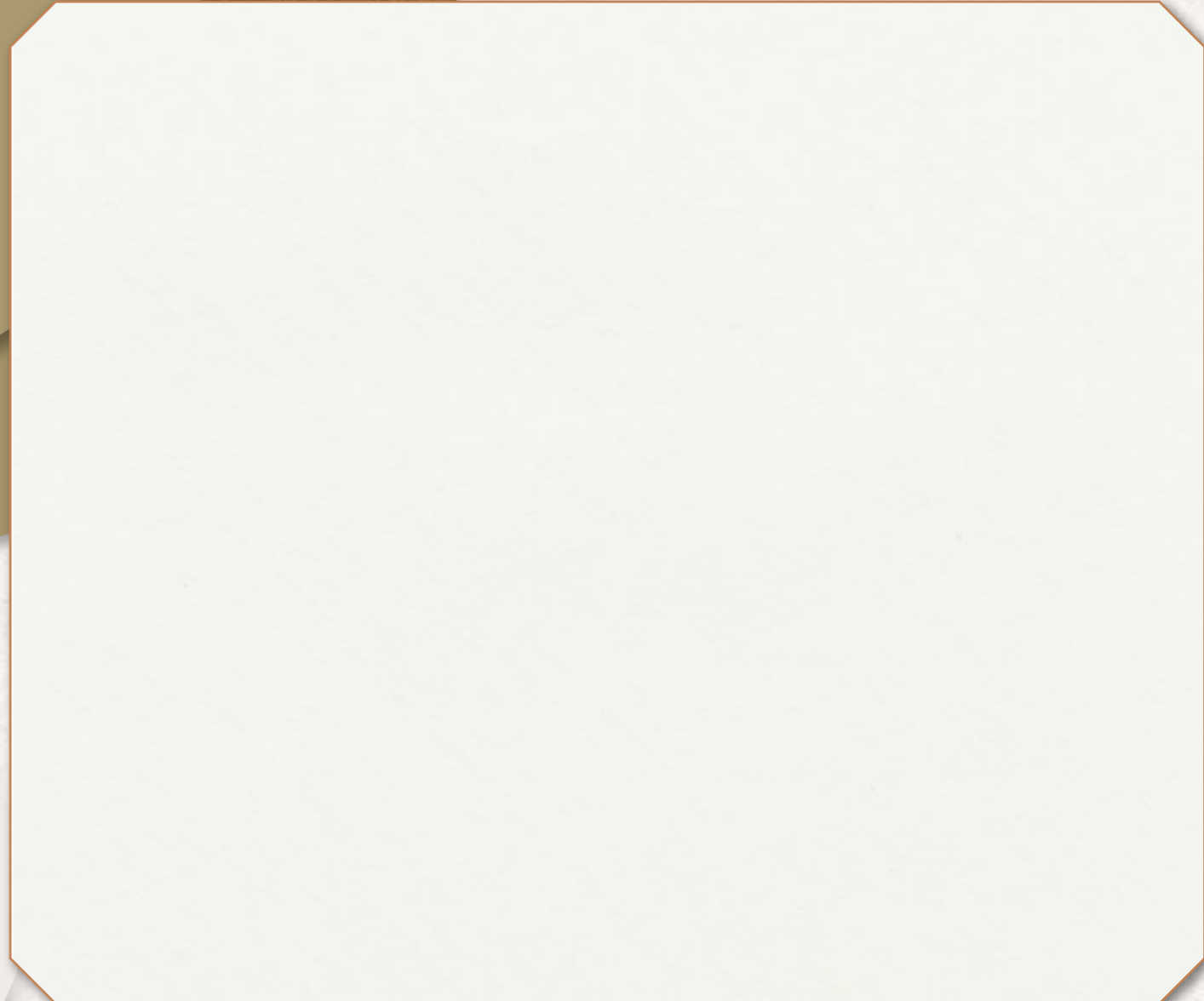
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- Size: ~35 cm (14 inches), about the size of a zucchini
- Eyes open for the first time
- Improved coordination and response to light and sound
- Beginning to inhale and exhale amniotic fluid—lung practice continues

MOTHER:

- Increased fatigue and back strain
- Growing anticipation as viability outside the womb increases
- May experience stronger kicks and baby hiccups
- Emotional connection may deepen as baby's awareness grows



I WONDER:

I wonder what small signs of light or life are stirring in us this Advent, inviting us to pay attention

I wonder how we might practice turning toward hope, even when we cannot yet see clearly

Making Room for Creation: A Franciscan Ecology of Mercy

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice,
love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?”
Micah 6:8

When the brothers are cutting wood, (St Francis) forbids them to cut down the whole tree, so that it might have hope of sprouting again. He commands the gardener to leave the edges of the garden, so that in their season the green of herbs and the beauty of flowers may proclaim the beautiful father of all. He even orders that in the garden a smaller garden should be set aside for aromatic and flowering herbs so that those who see them may recall the memory of eternal savour. He picks up little worms from the road so they will not be trampled underfoot. This makes sense today. At Hilfield Friary we rejuvenate hedges by laying them. We coppice trees at ground level and pollard them higher up. Many of Britain’s oldest oaks were pollarded in the Middle Ages and this has prolonged their lives, allowing them to harbour a host of biodiversity over centuries.

We try to be untidy. Patches of nettles and brambles encourage biodiversity. Churches that are working towards Eco church awards can leave unmown patches in their churchyards, often surrounded by a tidy mown edge. Some follow the NO Mow May practice. We generally pull up ragwort plants, as they are poisonous to cattle. Last summer we collected the black and yellow Cinnabar caterpillars and moved them to ragwort plants outside the field, just as Francis rescued worms. They keep ragwort in check and then turn into beautiful moths. Making Room for Creation Wise ecology is making room, not imposing. As we seek justice and mercy for people, we must also honour and protect the diversity of creation. God’s mercy extends to all creatures and ecosystems. If you have access to land, a garden, a churchyard or

REFLECTIVE ACTION

TAKE A WALK IN NATURE

Take ten minutes today to step outside into a garden, park, woodland, or even a balcony. Walk slowly, noticing textures, sounds, and the way light touches leaf or branch. Bend down and hold a handful of soil, or breathe deeply and listen to birdsong. Ask yourself: Where is God arriving in creation today?

FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

Praised be you, my Lord, through out Sister Mother Earth, Who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

(The Canticle of the Creatures, 9)

PRAYER *Creator God,
teach me to walk gently,
to make room,
and to live in harmony
with the world
You have made.*

Amen.

JOURNALING PROMPT

“Leaving Room for Wildflowers” Francis reminds us that even weeds praise God. Creation doesn’t need to be controlled – just welcomed. Reflect and write: Where in my life do I try to manage or dominate, when I could make space instead? How might I “leave room for wildflowers” – in my routines, my relationships, my prayer, or my care for the Earth? What small act of mercy toward creation can I offer this week? Finish with one quiet intention: “Today, I will honour creation by...” Let your response be gentle, joyful, and rooted in humility.



This Advent, I find myself drawn outdoors, to damp leaves, bare branches, breath hanging in the cold air.

In Forest School sessions in the UK and outdoor worship with children, I’ve seen how creation becomes a church.

We listen for God in birdsong, notice grace in the shape of a fallen feather, and find wonder in the winter stillness. It reminds me that Jesus wasn’t born in a building, but beneath stars, among animals, into the earthy life of the world.

As I wait for Christ, I want to keep my senses open: watching, listening, touching the soil where God is quietly arriving again.

THE TURNING POINT

“Let it be to me according to your word.”
Luke 1:38

At 27 weeks, Mary the God bearer reaches the edge of something new.

The child within her is nearly fully formed, moving with strength and rhythm.

She likely feels every kick, every twist, reminding her that life is both fragile and powerful.

This moment is a turning point—not just in pregnancy, but in faith.

As her body begins to stretch and strain under the growing weight of the Christ Child, Mary’s earlier “yes” takes on deeper meaning.

She is becoming the first to share in His suffering, her body already bearing the cost of love.

Like a living altar, she holds the hidden mystery of salvation within her.

God is at work in this unseen space, forming life through surrender, through waiting, through pain.

WEEK 27

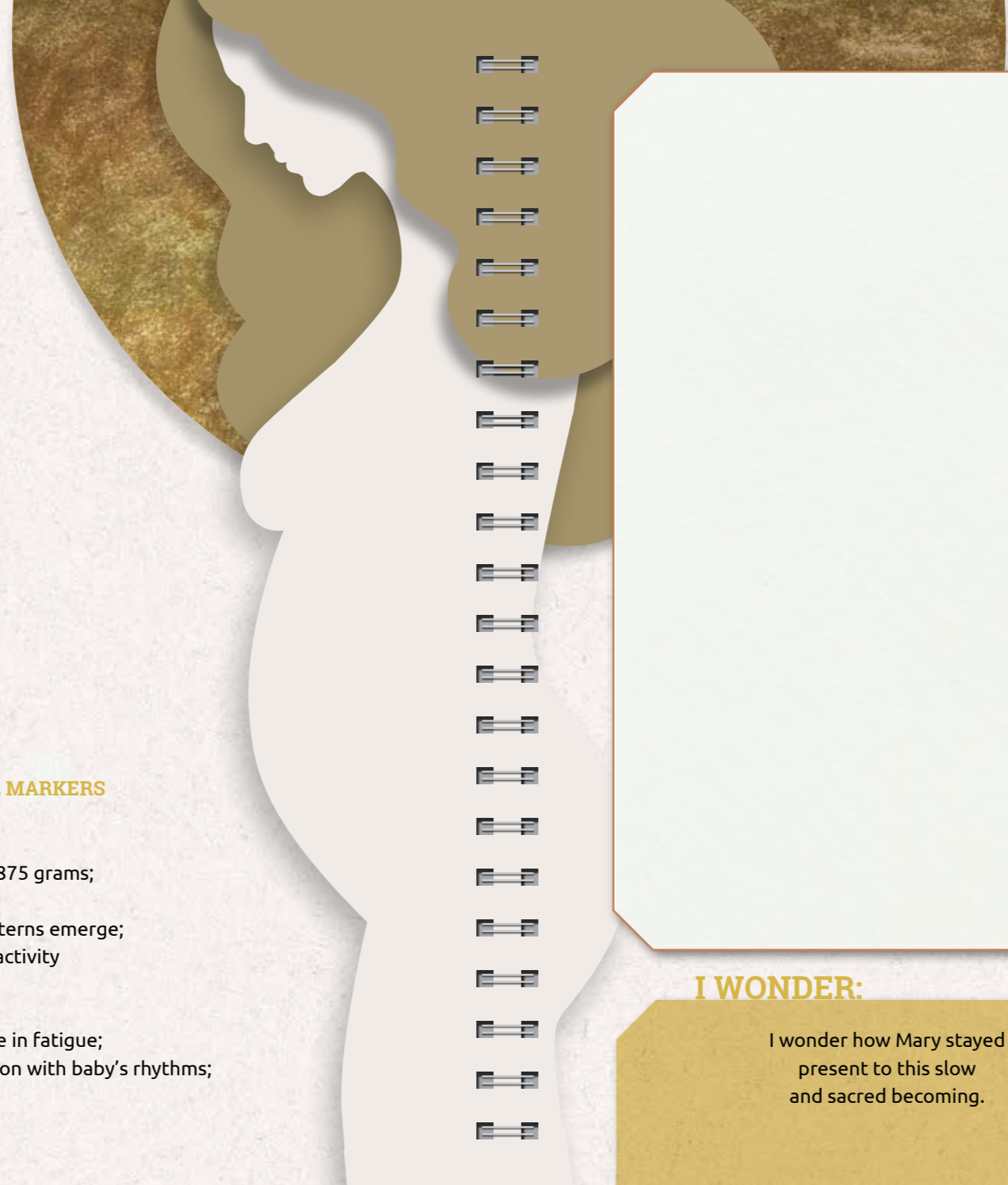
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- ~36 cm (14 in), 875 grams; eyes can blink; sleep/wake patterns emerge; stronger brain activity

MOTHER:

- Possible increase in fatigue; deeper connection with baby’s rhythms; stronger kicks



A large, empty rectangular area with a light beige background and a thin brown border, intended for handwritten reflection or notes.

I WONDER:

I wonder how Mary stayed present to this slow and sacred becoming.

I wonder what hidden work God is doing in me as I wait and trust.

Simplifying for Christ.

“But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.
Luke 10:41–42a

Having been a Franciscan for more than 40 years I know how important it is to ‘making’ time for prayer. Not just ‘arrow prayers’ and intercessions but time to be with Christ – yet that can seem just another thing to do. ‘Clearing the clutter’ means taking time to consider our days and how we might prevent them becoming overloaded. One way to do this is to look at our Rule of Life and see what’s important: the work we must do, sleeping and relationships that need attention, yes, but so does the prayer of the Divine Office and silence in the presence of God.

In the end we need to develop a still and open heart about which I wrote in *Heart of My Own Heart* (Canterbury Press, 2024) for that is the place to which we can always withdraw.

This was the pattern of Francis who spent time in solitude and in the marketplace – yet even there he could commune with God as we can do waiting in the queue at Tesco. Perhaps Abbess Osyth of Malling got it right when she wrote:

Be silent
still, aware,
for there in your own heart
the Spirit is at prayer.
Listen and learn,
open and find
Heart-wisdom.
Christ.

JOHN-FRANCIS FRIENDSHIP (?)

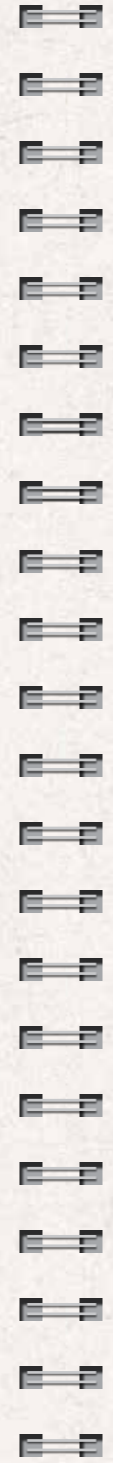
REFLECTIVE ACTION

SIMPLIFY YOUR CELEBRATION

Today, set aside something you might usually keep for yourself – a small treat, a little time, an item of comfort – and offer it freely to another. Perhaps it’s a neighbour, a visitor, a stranger, or someone you’ve overlooked.

As you do, hold this question in your heart:

How am I welcoming Christ through this act of giving?
Let the sharing be quiet, generous, and without expectation.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

“The Lord revealed to me that we must be brothers to all, especially to the poor, who are the image of Christ.”

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI (*Testament*)

PRAYER

God of every doorstep,
you come not in grandeur
but in the hungry guest,
the knock at the door,
the face we might not recognise.
Teach us to welcome with joy,
to give without counting,
and to find you
not only in the feast,
but in the simplicity
of bread shared.
May we see your light
in all who come our way.

JOURNALING PROMPT

What does your inner clutter look like?
Take time today to notice the distractions,
external and internal, that pull
your attention from what truly matters.
What do you cling to that
keeps your heart from stillness?

How might your Rule of Life or your daily rhythm help you clear space for silence, presence, and prayer?
What would it take to simplify not to do less, but to be more fully with Christ?
Write about one small change you can make to create space for God in the everyday. Begin there.



UGANDA

CULTURAL INSIGHT

This northern part of Uganda was evangelized by Protestants – mainly Church Mission Society, and Roman Catholics in the early twentieth century. The Protestant church is not used to images, or a rich use of the liturgical year.

Christmas is celebrated with a new clothes and a good feast with plenty of meat. There are no carol services or midnight mass.

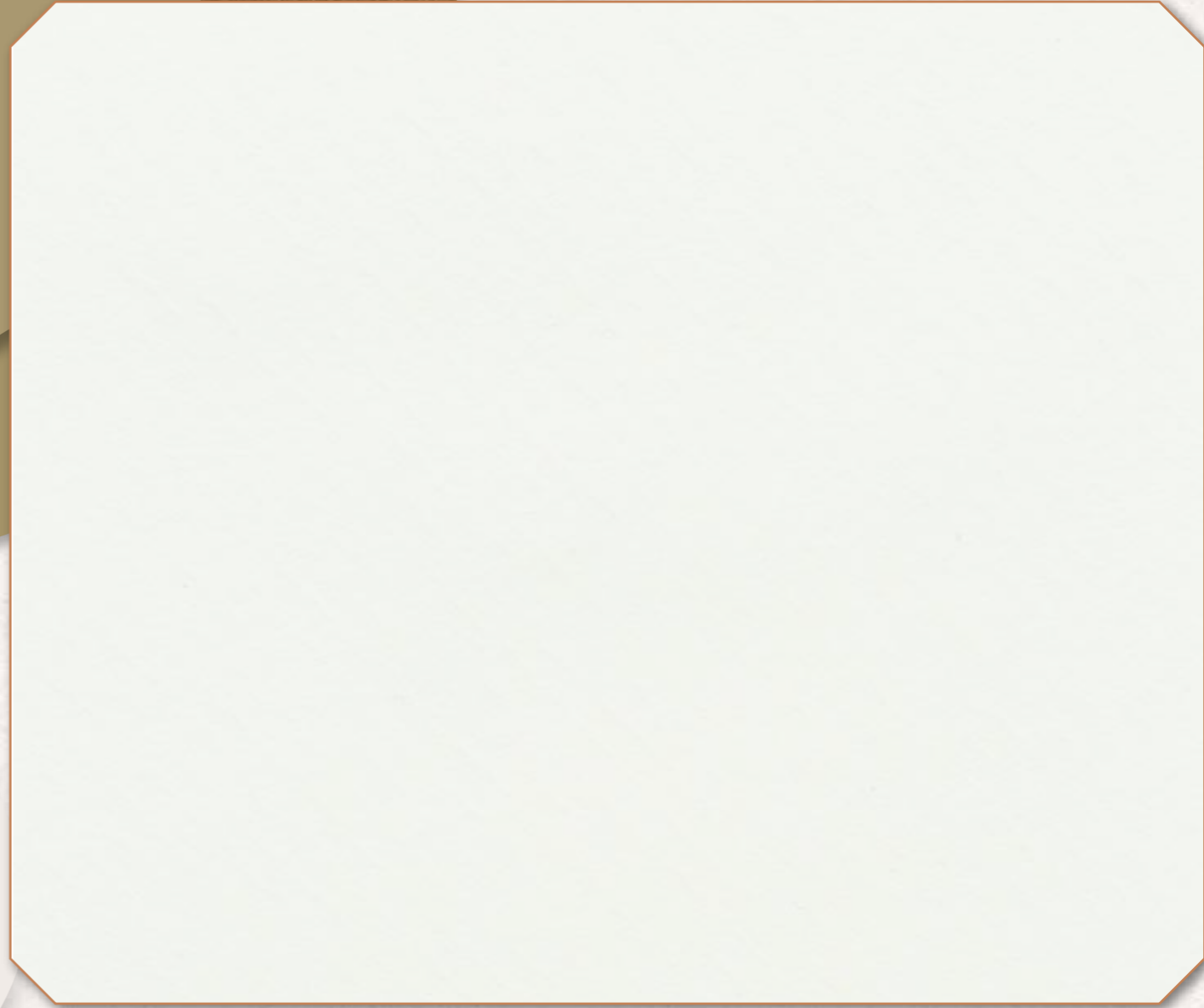
The celebration is stripped down to the bare proclamation of the word through reading the Scriptures for the day. Christmas however is a time to visit one’s neighbours and share whatever food is in the house freely with whoever comes to the door.

This ministry of hospitality reminds us to welcome Christ in whatever guise He comes to us, seeing in each visitor something of the light and love of God.

SARAH CORDELL TSSF Africa

CREATING SPACE FOR MYSTERY

“You will go before the Lord
to prepare his ways.”
Luke 1:76



At 28 weeks, there is no hiding Mary’s pregnancy now. The weight of carrying Christ is visible to all.

For some, this might have stirred wonder and reverence. For others, suspicion, fear, or judgment. How could this young woman possibly bear the Holy One?

Many likely whispered, doubted, or distanced themselves. Yet Mary keeps making space, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, for the life growing within her.

This is sacred gestation, an embodied waiting. God is forming salvation in hidden places, even when others cannot see or believe.

Like an ultrasound revealing the unseen, Mary carries the mystery before it is fully visible to the world. She bears the cost, the joy, and the risk of hope.

WEEK 28
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- 37.5 cm (14.8 in), 1 kg (2.2 lbs); strong brain activity; begins to dream (REM sleep); hearing continues to improve

- MOTHER:**
- Greater physical strain; deepening awareness of birth ahead; emotional and spiritual preparation increases

I WONDER:

I wonder how I might make space for mystery, even when others do not understand.

I wonder how I respond when God’s work appears hidden, slow, or uncertain.

Sacred Interruptions

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace.”

Isaiah 52:7

We are so used to the story that it has ceased to be unexpected – the Son of God in a stable manger? 2000 years have made it so normal that we do not see it as bizarre. The Prince of Peace arrives into a country occupied by a militant nation? Of course. An amazing new movement starts in a scruffy corner of the empire and unexpectedly grows after its founder is executed? Of course.

We shouldn't be surprised that the unexpected keeps happening, Jesus's followers have been taking his story and his gospel everywhere. And the spread of his message of love and of peace has been heard almost everywhere - and sometimes heard and acted on.

One of the unexpected events was the calling of Francis, from a comfortable merchant's life to a radical following of Jesus. His greeting was Pax – peace, he carried the message of the Prince of Peace to his generation and the message goes on, carried by the Franciscans of today.

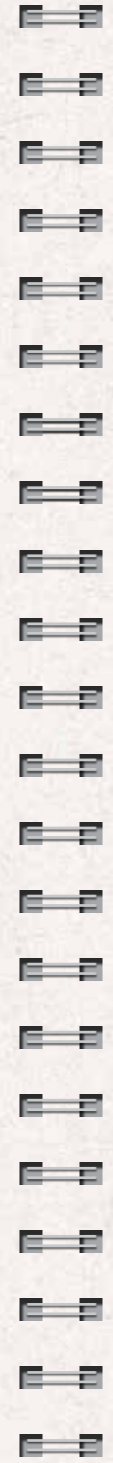
We probably all know the Prayer of St Francis – ‘Make

me a Channel of your Peace’; possibly all know it was written almost 700 years after his death - obviously not by Francis; but let's not allow the facts mess up a good story.

Francis may not have written that prayer and the hymn that came from it, but he tried to call his brothers to follow Christ, and his writings, particularly his Admonitions gave them, and us today inspiration. I offer you Admonition 15, Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Those are truly peacemakers who concerning all, which they suffer in this age, preserve peace in soul and body for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

May I suggest you use the Hymn ‘Make me a Channel of your Peace’ to lead you quietly into a meditation of the coming of Jesus into your heart.

Mary had her life so wonderfully interrupted by her saying ‘yes’ to the angel that she became the God Bearer, the Theotokos. Our war torn world needs the Sacred Interruption/Divine Intervention of the Prince



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

Where there is charity and wisdom, there is neither fear nor ignorance. Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor disturbance. Where there is poverty with joy, there is neither greed nor avarice. Where there is rest and meditation, there is neither anxiety nor restlessness. Where there is fear of the Lord to guard his courtyard, there the enemy cannot have a place to enter. Where there is a heart full of mercy and discernment, There is neither excess nor hardness of heart.

(Admonition, number 27)

PRAYER

God of every season and sky, you meet us in purple blossoms and southern stars.

Open our eyes to your beauty, and our hearts to your coming. Amen

JOURNALING PROMPT

“What Is Interrupting Me?” Advent leads us toward the greatest sacred interruption—the birth of Christ in a world that wasn't ready. Francis saw that Christ still arrives in unexpected places: through poverty, humility, mercy, and joy.

Take a moment to reflect: What “interruption” in my life might actually be an invitation from God?



PERTH | WESTERN AUSTRALIA

CULTURAL INSIGHT

I was ordained deacon on the Feast of St Nicholas, the 6th of December. That day, etched deep in my memory, was bright and warm—as most days are in early summer here in Perth. The sun had already climbed high by mid-morning, casting sharp shadows through the stone arches of St George's Cathedral. The air shimmered slightly in the heat outside, and the scent of eucalyptus drifted in from the nearby parks.

Our ordination retreat leader preached in the cathedral, and she began with a distinctly local image—one that still brings a smile to my face. “Look outside,” she said. “The jacaranda trees are in full bloom. Their vibrant purple blossoms are carpeting the streets like confetti from heaven. That's how we know two things: an ordination is near, and Christmas is on the way.”

In Perth, the jacaranda trees are our Advent candles—lit not with flame, but with colour. Their blossoms fall like blessings on garden paths and churchyards, their lavender-blue hues against the dusty green of Australian summer. The smell of freshly mown grass

REFLECTIVE ACTION

NOTICE THE SIGNS AROUND YOU

Take a moment today to notice the natural signs around you. What is blooming, changing, or shimmering with life? Let these be your Advent candles.

Pause, give thanks, and ask: How is God speaking to me through this place, this season, this land, where ever you are at the moment?

GROWING MYSTERY

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”
John 1:5

Mary carries within her “The Light of the World”, yet everything still feels hidden, fragile, and small.

Her body strains under the growing weight. Each breath feels a little harder. Each movement of the child within is a bold reminder that mystery is becoming reality.

Perhaps she lays her hand on her belly and feels both joy and fear- - wondering what this child’s life will cost her, and what it will cost Him.

Yet in this quiet, stretching space, strength is growing. Holiness ripens in the silence of her body’s hidden work. Mary may have felt alone, misunderstood by many, but she trusted the Light within. Her womb becomes both sanctuary and school, a sacred space where Christ is prepared for the world.

This light shines quietly now, but soon it will break into the world’s darkness.

WEEK 29

DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- Now about 39 cm (15.2 inches) and 1.1 kg (2.4 lbs), the child stretches and turns with strength. Bones harden. The brain grows more intricate. The unseen becomes wonderfully complex.

MOTHER:

- Her body labours quietly. Fatigue lingers; breath is short. But inwardly, something is deepening—an awareness, a listening, a tenderness that did not exist before.



A large, empty rectangular area with a light beige background and a thin brown border, intended for reflection or journaling.

I WONDER:

I wonder how Mary held onto hope when she could not yet see the fullness of God’s promise.

I wonder how I might notice the quiet strengthening of God’s life within me, even when it feels hidden or hard.

Light in the Darkness: Christ as Our Hope

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”
John 1:5

Today is longest night, and I think of the long dark years of suffering of the Palestinian people, following their forced displacement from many parts what is now Israel in 1948, which they call the ‘Nakba’ (catastrophe) and their ongoing trauma in Gaza and the West Bank.

When I lived in a Palestinian village in 2010 as part of a World Council of Churches programme, I found the cruelty and injustices of the Israeli occupation almost unbearable. I struggled to pray amidst such hopelessness.

All I could do was sit in the dark next to a candle feeling despair crushed by the weight of people’s trauma, but I found if I stayed and leaned into my difficult feelings something began to shift, and I was surprised by a sense of hope. Palestinians describe this steadfastness as ‘sumud’ Romans 5.3-5 ‘For suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character and character hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit’

JONATHAN HERBERT
community of Hilfield

Action; find out more from The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions icahd.org

REFLECTIVE ACTION

CARRY THE LIGHT INTO A DARK PLACE

After lighting a candle in silence today, reflect not only on its beauty but on its mission.

Ask: Where is the darkness in my community, my family, my inner life?

Then choose one small but intentional act to carry Christ’s light into that space.

It may be a visit to someone isolated, a word of truth spoken gently, or a renewed commitment to justice.

Write it down and dedicate it as a spiritual offering in your Advent waiting.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

“Let us always desire the light of the Spirit and the brightness of divine wisdom.”

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI (*Admonition VII*)

PRAYER

*Christ, Light of the World,
you did not shun the night.
You were born into it,
wrapped not in gold,
but in silence and stars.
Shine through me, not to dazzle,
but to guide, to comfort, to steady.
Like Lucia, let me carry
the flame of love
into shadowed places
with courage,
with gentleness,
with joy.*

JOURNALING PROMPT

“Sitting with the Darkness”
Advent holds space for both the candle
and the shadow.
Hope, in this season, isn’t a denial of suffering.
It is the decision to stay with it
until the light breaks through.

Ask yourself: What darkness in the world do I find hardest to face right now?
Where do I feel helpless or tempted to turn away?
Can I choose, even for a moment, to sit with that pain in prayer without fixing or fleeing?
Now write: A short letter to Christ, the Light, from within that darkness. Be honest. Name what you see.



SWEDEN

CULTURAL INSIGHT

In the hush of Advent, I think of Santa Lucia. I remember the girl in white, crowned with candles, walking slowly through the dark, her light steady and brave.

She doesn’t banish the night – but she changes it.

Her flame reminds me that even a single light can hold back despair.

As I wait for Christ, the Light of the World, I wonder how I, too, might carry light.... through kindness, truth, presence.

The darkness in the world feels deep, but Lucia walks ahead, showing me how to move gently, hopefully, through it.

Advent is not about avoiding the dark, but lighting it.

CARRIED WITH PURPOSE

“Then she brought him to the temple to present him to the Lord.”
Luke 2:22



A large, blank, light-colored rectangular area with rounded corners and a thin brown border, intended for reflection or journaling.

At thirty weeks, Mary knows she carries more than a child. She carries a promise.

Every movement reminds her that this life is not hers to hold forever. The womb has become a place of sound and memory.

Jesus, fully alive and aware, listens to her voice, feels her touch, knows her heartbeat. The songs she hums, the prayers she whispers, the sounds of the world around her, all begin to shape the Christ Child.

Mary carries Him not for herself alone, but for the world. She will one day bring Him to the temple, releasing Him to God’s greater purpose and on the the Cross. But for now, she holds Him in this hidden sanctuary of sound, breath, and love. Though discomfort and vulnerability grow, so does her quiet readiness.

The space she has given becomes a sacred offering, carrying Light for the sake of others.

WEEK 30
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- 40 cm (15.7 in), 1.3 kg (2.9 lbs); all major senses active; strong movement and awareness of space

MOTHER:

- Physical discomfort increases; emotional vulnerability may return; a sense of spiritual readiness begins to rise

I WONDER:

I wonder how Mary’s prayers and songs shaped the heart of Christ even before His birth.

I wonder how I might carry hope, knowing it is meant not just for me,

- but for the world.

The Manger is Ready: Welcoming Christ into Our Hearts

“She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger,
because there was no room for them in the inn.”
Luke 2:7

REFLECTION

In the stillness of Advent, when the days grow short and the world waits in hope, journaling can become a sacred way to make space—both for God and for ourselves. Each evening, I light a candle and open my journal, not to perform, but to listen.

What challenges did I face, and how did I respond? Over time, these small acts of honesty begin to shape something deeper: awareness, gratitude, and even courage. Journaling in Advent isn't about perfection.

Writing becomes a quiet conversation with my soul, a way of noticing what I might otherwise ignore. I reflect on the day just passed: what made me smile, what unsettled me, what I longed for. I ask myself questions that open the heart gently – What am I grateful for today?

It's about presence.

A tender, trusting way of saying to God, “Here I am. Let it be with me according to your word.”

BLARE MATHESON TSSF
Brussels European Province

REFLECTIVE ACTION

LSYMBOL OF WELCOME

Create a small visual symbol of welcome for Christ today. It might be a handmade nativity, a bowl of simple items that speak of your culture or story, or even a retablo-inspired image placed by your doorway or prayer space. As you do, ask yourself: If Christ were born here, in my land, my kitchen, my heart, what would that look like? Let this be your offering of welcome, both inward and outward.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

“This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. For the Most Holy Child has been given to us and has been born for us on the way; And placed in a manger because he did not have a place in the inn.”

(Vespers of the Lord's birth. Antiphon: Holy Virgin Mary. Psalm Undated Writings of Francis of Assisi 156)

PRAYER

Jesus,
you come not as a guest,
but as family,
wrapped not in linen alone,
but in our colours,
our stories, our soil.
Let my heart be
a doorway flung open,
my life a home made ready,
my hands full of
the gifts I long to offer.

JOURNALING PROMPT

Tonight, imagine your heart as the manger... simple, open, waiting.
Ask yourself: What straw has been laid today? A moment of kindness? A small joy? What still feels cluttered, cold, or unready? What would it mean to say, “Let it be with me,” just as I am?



PERU

CULTURAL INSIGHT

In Advent, I find myself drawn to the colourful Peruvian retablos – tiny, vibrant scenes of the Holy Family nestled in Andean hills, wrapped in ponchos, surrounded by llamas.

They remind me that Christ is not only born in Bethlehem but in every land, every language, every heart open to receive him.

God comes close not as a stranger, but as one of us.

This season, I hold that truth gently: Christ is born here, too—in my culture, my home, my story.

As I wait, I open my heart like a doorway, ready to welcome the One who makes all places holy.

Write a short reflection:
Today, I prepare the manger by...

Let this be a way of welcoming Christ not with perfection, but with presence.

BEARING SACRED LIFE

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”
Matthew 11:28

Mary carries the increasing weight of sacred life.

Her body, stretched and weary, feels every breath and burden. Yet she does not carry a burden only- she carries glory.

The hidden Christ grows heavier in her womb, curling into the shelter she has made for Him. He practices breathing, swallowing, and turning, preparing for the world beyond.

Perhaps Mary feels the tension of holding both weariness and wonder. Each step toward Bethlehem presses on her back and her heart. Yet she keeps walking, trusting that she is held by the One she carries.

The womb has become a holy space of preparation, but Mary knows she cannot hold Him forever. One day, she will place Him in the arms of the world.

For now, she bears Him in love, knowing even the weight is a gift.

WEEK 32

DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- 42.5 cm (16.7 in), 1.7–1.8 kg (3.8–4 lbs);
developing body fat;
lungs maturing;
practicing breathing, swallowing, and kicking;
may settle into head-down position

MOTHER:

- Increasing fatigue, shortness of breath, back pain; heightened emotional sensitivity; nesting instincts and reflection on birth and readiness often deepen



A large, empty rectangular area with a light beige background and a thin brown border, intended for reflection or journaling.

I WONDER:

I wonder how Mary found rest in God while carrying so much.

I wonder how I might recognise the sacred weight of what I am called to bear.

The Gift of Expectancy: God's Surprising Ways

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.”
Isaiah 9:6

Bible readings at this time give us a sense of surprise, before God's unexpected promise. David gets the news of an everlasting covenant between God and his house. Isaiah prophesies David's offspring Immanuel, God with us. Matthew gives us Emmanuel, with God truly with us in Jesus.

In 2 Samuel 7, David prays sitting before God after the news. Not as one king sitting before another. He is bowled over, he is humbled. ‘Who am I, O Lord Yahweh and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?’

God's gift meant humility for Mary too. Matthew labours the point with the Magi that this Emmanuel is found in poverty and danger, not in a palace. We too, God's poor, sit with her in astonishment before God's gift of himself. ‘Who am I, my God and my all?’ Most astonishing of all is the “great humility” of God himself. Our poverty and danger is his own. Let the surprise gift of God humble us. In what unexpected ways is God working in your life to draw you into his humility, his giving himself to us?

TED ARDIS TSSF
Ireland European Province.

REFLECTIVE ACTION

SPEND TIME

Bringing beauty into worship or daily life: Pick or display local flowers, create a handmade decoration, or offer a small act of beauty in your home or church, in solidarity with the brothers of Haruro.

Proclaiming peace:

Write a message of hope or peace (perhaps a few lines inspired by your walk) and share it with someone outside your usual circle.



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

“What wonderful majesty! What stupendous condescension! That the Lord of the whole universe should humble Himself like this under the form of a little bread, for our salvation.”

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

PRAYER

*God of islands and cities,
Of muddy tracks
and blooming flowers,
Teach us to carry
your peace with our feet,
To sing your hope
with our voices,
And to share your light
wherever we go.*

JOURNALING PROMPT

Who Am I...?”
Like David, like Mary, like the shepherds and magi – we are called to sit before the mystery of God's gift with open hands and astonished hearts.
Ask yourself: Where has God surprised me recently? What gift have I received that I didn't expect – or even ask for?



PAPUA NEW GUINEA

CULTURAL INSIGHT

Christmas for our brothers in Solomons and Papua New Guinea is about as far from a snowy European landscape as you could imagine. It's hot and humid and likely to be raining. There is lush vegetation and tropical flowers. However, you might also find a plastic Christmas tree or two in a friary (made in China and bought from the local Chinese shops). Our chapel at Haruro is likely to be strewn in freshly picked flowers. The brothers and some of our neighbours will be with us for Midnight Mass, and Christmas day there will be a feast of whatever we can afford or find in our garden.

Two years ago in Advent we inaugurated our peace and justice awareness programme in Oro Province, PNG—beginning in the settlements round Popondetta. These are the parts of town where those who have moved in from outside have settled. They have no land or local connections here, and are often implicated in the violence in Popondetta. So, our Advent message was one of peace and reconciliation. In Solomons there is often a major mission trip for the novices starting before Advent and running until around Presentation. For 2-3

In what area of my life is God drawing me into greater humility, trust, or love?
Write a short prayer or reflection beginning with David's words:
“Who am I, O Lord, that you have brought me this far...?”
Let your response be honest, expectant, and full of wonder.

THE THRESHOLD OF ARRIVAL

“My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations.”
Luke 2:30-31

Mary carries the Christ Child closer to birth with every breath.

The hidden life within her is nearly ready: alert, esponsive, and reaching toward the world beyond the womb.

Her body feels the pressure, the shifting weight, and the anticipation of what is to come.

This is no longer just a season of carrying, but of preparing to release.

Mary’s womb, once a shelter of hidden growth, is becoming a passage into the light of the world.

She is not only the one who bears salvation, she is the one who will offer Him, first to the arms of Simeon in the temple, and then to the world.

We, too, are invited to carry light not for ourselves alone, but to let it go, trusting God with the offering.

WEEK 34
DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- 45 cm (17.7 in), 2.1–2.2 kg (4.7–5 lbs); most internal systems are developed; baby responds clearly to light and sound; skin smoother and body rounder

MOTHER:

- Stronger pelvic pressure and frequent movement; emotional mix of anticipation, anxiety, and awe; final preparations may begin



A large, blank, cream-colored rectangular area with rounded corners and a thin brown border, intended for handwritten notes or reflections.

I WONDER:

I wonder how Mary prepared her heart to release the One she had carried so long.

I wonder how I am being invited to offer something I have nurtured in love.

The Evening of Glory: The Wonder of Christmas Eve.

“O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.”

Christmas Eve is a night suspended in wonder.

The Franciscan charism of joy, hope, and peace is never ours to keep— it is a light we are called to bear into the shadows.

The world seems to hush, holding its breath for love to be born again.

Tonight, beneath the silent stars, I wait not only for Christ to be born in Bethlehem, but to be born again in us – in unfamiliar streets, in new neighbours, in the quiet readiness of our hearts.

Later this year, our community will begin a new chapter. Some sisters will move to Gloucestershire, and I will begin a new chapter in our Franciscan house in London. Even now, I sense the stillness that such a threshold brings – pregnant with hope, trembling with promise.

Come, Lord Jesus. We are waiting.

SR BEVERLY CSF
Provincial Guardian

Like Mary, we carry Christ into new places. We do not always know how we will be received, but we trust in the slow, unfolding work of God.

REFLECTIVE ACTION

HONOUR THE LAND

- Today take inspiration from the Indigenous communities of Guyana and the Akawaio people: Honour the land by choosing one simple action that reconnects you with the earth—walk barefoot on grass, cook with local ingredients, or light a candle and pray in silence outdoors.
- Create a moment of quiet joy: turn off all devices one evening and gather with others to sing or simply sit in silence by candlelight, reflecting on Christ born in stillness.
- Celebrate intercultural faith: learn a carol or blessing in a different language, or explore how local customs



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

The holy man of God preaches to the people standing around him and pours forth sweet honey about the birth of the poor King and the poor city of Bethlehem. Moreover, burning with excessive love, he often calls Christ “the babe from Bethlehem” whenever he means to call Him Jesus. Saying the word “Bethlehem” in the manner of a bleating sheep, he fills his mouth with sound but even more with sweet affection.

(The Life of St Francis by Thomas of Celano, the First Book Chapter XXX, 86)

PRAYER Christ of the forest and river,
Born in stillness and
sung in many tongues,
Make your home
in our humble hearts.
Teach us to walk gently,
To rejoice quietly,
And to welcome your light
in every culture
and every soul.
Amen.

JOURNALING PROMPT

- Christmas Eve invites us into stillness: the kind that listens more than it speaks, that waits not with fear but with open hands and hope. Take some quiet time tonight to write and reflect: Where in your life do you sense God is inviting you to carry light into a new place?
- What unknowns are you stepping into, like Mary or the shepherds, with faith rather than certainty? What does it mean for you to be a bearer of joy, hope, and peace this Christmas?
- Tonight, write not just with pen, but with wonder, awe and anticipation.



GUYANA

CULTURAL INSIGHT

In our Indigenous communities of Guyana, Christmas is a quiet joy, shaped by the rhythms of the land and the warmth of kinship. We gather in small wooden churches along the rivers or deep in the forest, bringing cassava bread, fish, and fruit to share after worship. Children sing carols in local languages, and candles light up the darkness with gentle hope. We feel close to Mary and Joseph—far from cities, but close to God. In the stillness of the rainforest, Christ is born again, not in grandeur, but in the hearts of people who walk gently with the earth. We now have a Franciscan Akawaio priest in Guyana. Also 4 Akawaio novices and 2 Akawaio postulants. Since the mid-19th century, the Akawaio have embraced a syncretic Christian expression known as Alleluia, or Hallelujah religion—rooted in their traditional spirituality yet centred on the Christian Creator. Led by indigenous prophets and shamans, it merges ancestral ritual with Christian worship. This faith, still vibrant, blends native language, music, dance, and spirit possession alongside Christian teachings .

CHARLES TSSF Americas Provincial minister

THE THRESHOLD OF ARRIVAL

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time... But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”
Romans 8:22, 25

WEEK 34

DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

IN THE WOMB

- The baby is about the size of a head of romaine lettuce, weighing around 6.5 to 7 pounds (2.9–3.2 kg) and 19–20 inches (48–51 cm) long.
- The lungs are fully developed and ready to function outside the womb.
- The brain continues maturing rapidly, increasing in size and complexity.
- The bones in the baby’s skull are not yet fused, allowing flexibility for birth through the birth canal.
- The baby continues to gain fat, helping to regulate body temperature after birth.
- The baby may have distinct sleep and wake patterns, and REM (dream) sleep is occurring.
- Most babies are now in a head-down position, ready for birth.

MOTHER:

- Braxton Hicks contractions (practice contractions) may become

Mary stands on the threshold. The child she has carried for so long is ready, yet still hidden. She feels the tightening of her body, the ache of waiting, the shifting nearness of what is to come.

Every breath draws her closer to the moment she will offer Him to the world.

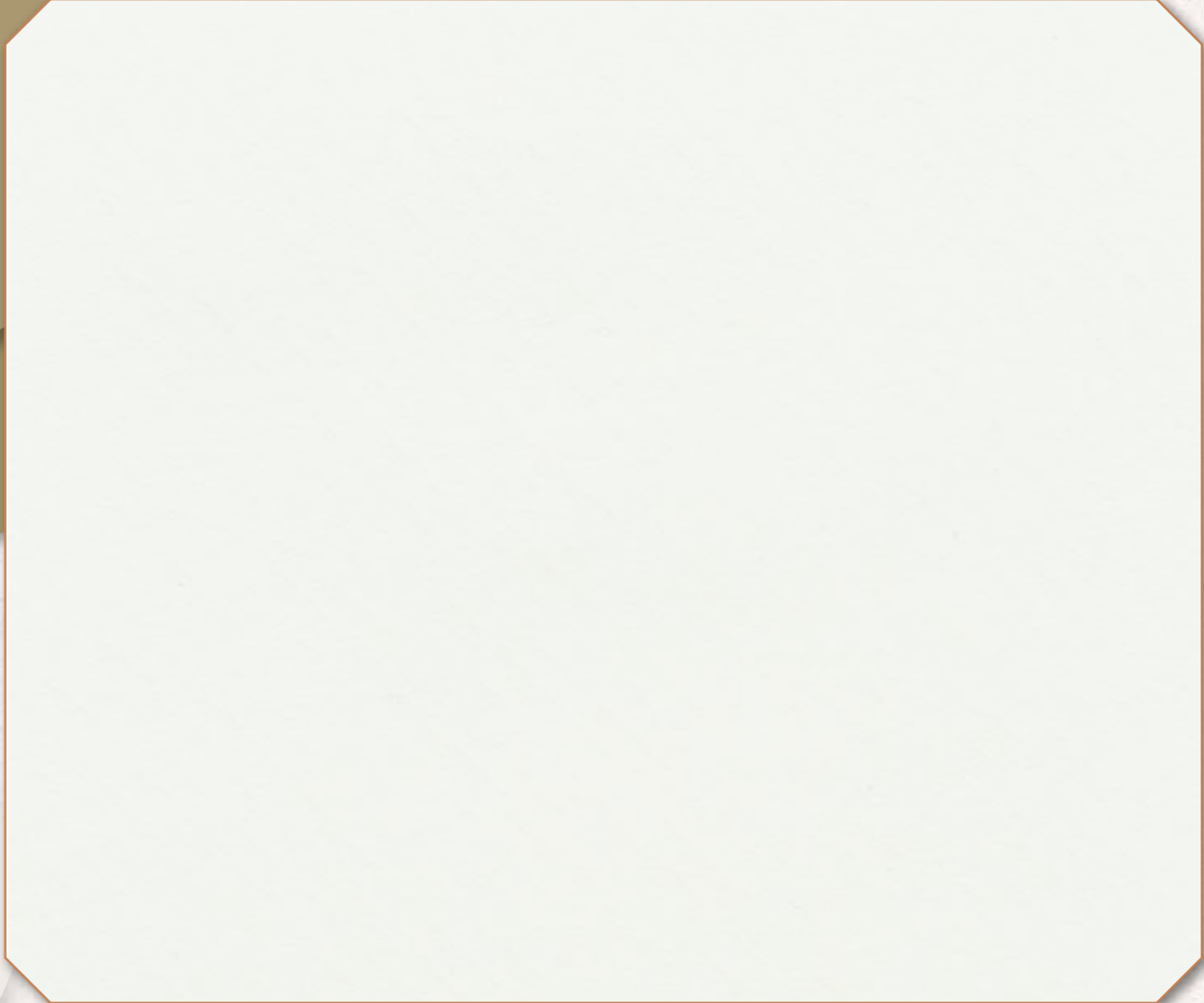
She knows the weight of this sacred task.

The One who formed her has been formed within her, now fully alive, ready to enter the world he created.

Yet still she waits. Not in fear, but in hope. Not in control, but in surrender.

This is holy ground. This is the thin space between hiddenness and revelation, silence and song.

Mary waits, not knowing when or how, but trusting the one she carries is already preparing the way.



I WONDER:

I wonder how Mary surrendered to the ache of waiting when the time felt so near.

I wonder how I might rest in this threshold space, trusting God’s perfect timing.

Christmas Day: Christ is Born!

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.”
Luke 2:14

“As God welcomes us to share the life of the Kingdom so we seek to share that welcome with those whom we meet or who come to us – in humility, generosity and compassion.”

One of my favourite memories of Christmas past comes from the time that my wife and I spent living in Africa. Our Christmas morning worship was followed by a “family meal” which consisted of rice and chicken stew. The whole church gathered on the porch of our house – all the men crowded round one very large bowl of rice and stew, and all the women and children gathered round a second very large bowl. We ate with our hands – rolling a ball of rice before lifting it to our mouths. It was truly a shared meal!

However you are celebrating this Christmas, I hope you will remember that there are many different Christmas traditions and practices around the world. Different cultures express hospitality in different ways – but all of them are a reflection of the welcome that we receive from God. And at the table in heaven, all cultures will be gathered round the throne of the Lamb.

MARTYN SNOW BISHOP OF LEICESTER
bishop protector TSSF European Province

REFLECTIVE ACTION

SHARE THE JOY

Share a moment of joy with someone – whether through a meal, a call, or an act of kindness



FRANCISCAN QUOTE:

He seems to lick his lips whenever he uses the expression “Jesus” or “babe from Bethlehem” tasting the word on his hungry palate and savouring the sweetness of the word. The gifts of the Almighty are multiplied there and a virtuous man sees a wondrous vision. For the man saw a little child lying lifeless in the manger and he saw the holy man of God approach the child and waken him from a deep sleep. Nor is this vision unfitting, since in the hearts of many the child Jesus has been given over to oblivion.

(The Life of St Francis by Thomas of Celano, the First Book Chapter XXX, 86)

*May this journey create space
in our hearts, homes, and
communities for Christ.*

Have a blessed Christmas!

JOURNALING PROMPT

Think of someone you find difficult to love – perhaps someone close to you, or someone you’ve encountered recently. Without judgement, write about what it is that you find challenging. Now gently ask: What might this person be revealing to me about myself?



SOLOMON ISLANDS

CULTURAL INSIGHT

The Melanesian Brotherhood always go on missions for Christmas leading worship, singing and acting out a powerful nativity play in each village they visit. This will involve as many as 50 brothers and novices with Sisters of Melanesia joining them to play the women’s parts touring one of the many islands in the Solomons- Ysabel, Ngela, Guadalcanal, Malaita, Makira, and even the far away island of Temotu. Its an exciting mission. The Brothers and Sisters are welcomed in each village with songs and garlands of flowers. In the evening the village leaf chapels will be filled as the Brothers and Sisters sing evensong and there will be speeches of welcome. The Brothers will build a stable in the middle of the village or in the chapel if it is big enough and then the nativity will begin punctuated by wonderful carols, dancing angels and a new born baby proudly offered by one of the village young mothers to play Jesus. The shepherds will arrive carrying gifts of live chickens and often carrying a live goat. A fearsome King Herod will be carried in on a sedan chair and the children will hiss and boo. The carols will continue until late and

SEE, I AM DOING A NEW THING!

“Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?”
Isaiah 43:19

WEEK 40

DEVELOPMENTAL MARKERS

40 weeks of pregnancy, the baby is considered full term, and many final developments are either complete or very close to completion.

IN THE WOMB

- The baby now weighs around 6.5 to 8 pounds (2.9–3.6 kg) and measures 19 to 21 inches (48–53 cm). Lungs are fully developed, the brain continues rapid growth, and the immune system is strengthened with the mother’s antibodies. Most babies are head-down, ready for birth, with flexible skull bones to ease the journey. Movements are smaller but still present. The baby is physically ready, and spiritually, this is a moment of hidden promise, vulnerability, and profound mystery.

MOTHER:

- The body is preparing actively: the cervix softens and dilates, and the baby drops lower into the pelvis.

Mary’s long journey of carrying the Christ Child draws to its final hours. The hidden work is complete. The time is near.

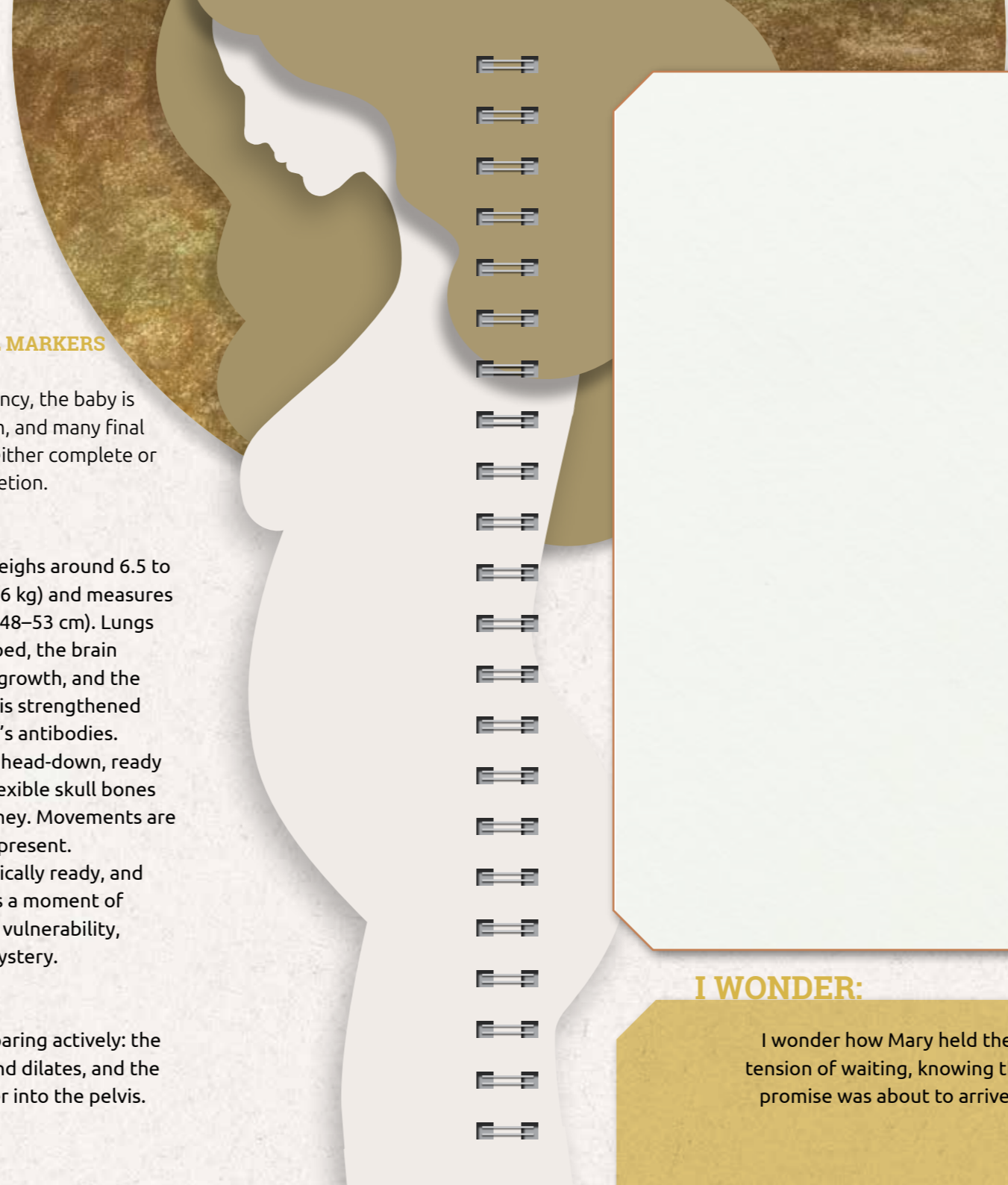
She feels every ache, every movement growing smaller as space runs out. The One she has carried in mystery is ready to be born in light.

The threshold holds both the ache of waiting and the wonder of what is coming. Mary does not rush this moment. She reathes. She trusts.

She waits in surrender, holding the promise that God’s new thing is about to spring forth. This waiting is not passive. It is rich with holy tension, hope, and quiet readiness.

Mary teaches us that birth, of life, of hope, of new beginnings, happens not in our timing, but in God’s.

And so we, like her, stand on the edge of something new, called to trust the One who brings all things to life.



A large, empty rectangular box with rounded corners and a thin orange border, intended for handwritten notes or reflections.

I WONDER:

I wonder how Mary held the tension of waiting, knowing the promise was about to arrive.

I wonder what “new thing” God is bringing to birth in me, even as I wait in the unknown.