

PART ONE

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Weekly Journey through Pregnancy



PREGNANCY DOESN'T HAPPEN ALL AT ONCE, BUT eases itself into our being. We might be torn apart by sickness and stretch marks, but this prepares us for the many more grueling hours of motherhood ahead of us.

Pregnancy happens week by week, so we'll be journeying together toward that baby, the one we're praying you'll hold in your arms. As with any adventure, things don't always turn out the way you expect or plan.

This section includes a weekly approach to your pregnancy. The introduction to each chapter considers what's probably happening to your bodies—yours and baby's. It's not meant to replace any of the usual books and is only a very brief and incomplete approach. Because your baby's a person, right from the beginning, I'll be using gender pronouns, such as "he" or "she," instead of "it."

In the "Walking with Mary" sections, you'll find a mystery of the Rosary, and we'll reflect on it in light of where you are in your pregnancy. In the forty weeks of pregnancy, we can reflect on almost every mystery twice! "One Small Step" is meant to encourage you with a faith-related task you can complete each week. The "Faith Focus" in each week's chapter

will highlight and explain an element of our Catholic faith. Since it is my prayer that you'll grow in your love for God as your baby grows inside of you, each chapter will close with a prayer to foster your conversation with God.

Throughout this section, you'll also find some features that focus on some of the difficult topics of pregnancy. In some ways, they don't "fit" the glowing and lovely idea of pregnancy, but they *are* very real. I asked some talented women to contribute, because some of these topics are beyond my range of experience. I wanted you to have a place to turn that was Catholic. If you find yourself in one of these situations during your pregnancy, I wanted to be able to offer you support—so often, these topics are taboo, silent, undiscussed. If you choose not to read them, I won't blame you, but they are there if you need them.

Don't wait until later in your pregnancy to read part two: "Labor and Birth," and part three: "Baptism." There are tips and tools included in those sections that will serve you well as you prepare for the end of your pregnancy.

Before we embark together on the adventure of pregnancy, let's offer a prayer that we can accept God's will and hold tight to Mother Mary's hand through the highs and lows of this grand adventure.



Mother Mary, walk with me through my pregnancy. Help me turn to your son with my fears and anxieties, annoyances and hardships. Guide me in the path to accepting God's will for my life and for this pregnancy. Pray for me, Mary, and hold me throughout the trials and joys ahead. Amen.

CHAPTER 1

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The First Five Weeks (Fetal Age: 1–3 Weeks)

IT'S SO EARLY IN YOUR PREGNANCY THAT YOU MIGHT not feel any differently. By this point, you haven't even missed a period. Then again, that ongoing longing for your pillow and the queasy nausea that's been haunting you might suddenly make sense.

While you're going about your usual business with the idea of a baby feeling more like a theory than a reality, your baby has already embedded himself in your uterus. Though he may just seem to be a "blob," everything he needs to be a complete human being is in place and growing within you.

Your baby's so tiny, barely a speck. You probably couldn't see him with your naked eye, if you could look. Life seems hardly possible, and yet he's there, within you. He's growing so fast right now, forming germ layers and growing a skeleton. His cells are multiplying, and he's expanding.

Have you calculated your due date? Are you starting to wonder and worry about the way you'll rearrange your home and your schedule and your life?

When I'm at the very beginning of a pregnancy, I am often overwhelmed with a flurry of feelings: joy, fear, dread. Questions are suddenly everywhere, and, if I'm not careful, I'm overwhelmed with the need to make decisions about everything right now.

Pregnancy is a very physical experience, one that challenges everything you've known, even if it's not your first pregnancy. If you aren't a glowing, happy pregnant person,

take heart. This is a journey with an end in sight, and the prize is another human being! We all approach pregnancy from our own perspective, and there is always room to improve our attitude and learn to be closer to God and his will for us.

I tend to be overly dramatic and focused on my physical discomforts, especially as I'm embracing the porcelain of my toilet bowl early in pregnancy. Do you find yourself complaining—even if only internally—about the hurdles? Are you struggling to keep your thoughts heavenly as your face points downward?

Walking with Mary: The Annunciation

So much of what Mary has to teach me can be found in the first Joyful Mystery, the Annunciation. When the Angel Gabriel came to Mary with the request that she be the Mother of God, she said yes.

She didn't hesitate or take a minute to think. What made her stop and ponder was the angel's greeting, not his request. She asked for clarification—"How can this be, since I have no husband?" But I can't blame her for that. It was, after all, a miracle out of all proportion with her experience.

How often do I find myself focusing on the wrong end of things and making it about me when it should be about others? How often do I ask God to give me a sign when I carry within me evidence of his mercy and love?

Being a handmaid, as Mary calls herself in her acceptance of God's request, isn't easy, but it's easier, in many ways, than saying yes without calculating the price in time, effort, and means. Letting things be done to me, as Mary did in the Annunciation and throughout her life, is a bigger challenge than struggling to control everything around me.

There are many aspects of pregnancy that you can't control. Your body will change, and you'll probably change your mind a time or two about anything and everything. You may find that you're irrational and emotional in ways you never have been before. Lean on God and reach for Mary, whose

yes in the Annunciation gives you the answer to what God's asking of you.

One Small Step

There are many times when I don't think I get a lot out of Mass. It might be that the music is extra-terrible or that the priest drones on in a homily that falls flat. It might be the amount of background noise or the constant potty breaks and screams from one of my children.

If I'm honest, there are far too many times when I don't come to Mass prepared for what's going to happen. I forget to insist that the kids go potty ahead of time. I fail to feed them properly. I don't get myself in a mental state that will allow me to hear anything.

But really, the point of Mass isn't to get; I go in order to give to God: he can have my problems and my stress, my fears and my pain. In the midst of giving, I do receive: all the graces I could ever need, thanks to an hour and a miracle that's waiting for me whenever I'm willing to say yes to it.

Say yes to God this week by attending Mass with your full attention—or as much of it as your state in life will allow. As you receive the Eucharist, know that you are joined to Jesus in a special way and that he loves you.

Faith Focus

Saint Gerard Majella is the patron saint for all aspects of pregnancy. The story goes that a pregnant woman made a false accusation against him. She said he was the father of her child, and he responded with silence.¹ Ultimately his name was cleared after she retracted her statement, but his association with pregnancy remains.

Saint Gerard struggled throughout his life, first with the poverty of his upbringing and then with his desire to enter the priesthood. He was eventually ordained and even accepted into a religious order, and throughout his life, reports of miracles—and even bilocation—surrounded him.

Turning to Saint Gerard during pregnancy is natural. He has a long history of helping pregnant women, and I always imagine that he has a soft spot for expectant mothers. He's a terrific intercessor and a great friend to have in heaven.



Praying Your Pregnancy

Saint Gerard, as I enter this special time of pregnancy, pray for me, that I may embrace my vocation and cherish my child. Help me to do God's will and to find peace in answering God's call. Intercede for me with God who gives all life that I may conceive and raise children to please God, in this life and in the life to come. Amen.

CHAPTER 2

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Week 6 (Fetal Age: 4 Weeks)



Surprise! The Unintended Pregnancy

There are some surprises that are more pleasant than others. I find pregnancy to be, often, a love-hate sort of surprise. It's always a surprise of sorts, and while I'm thrilled (and terrified) to welcome new life, I'm often (sadly) inconvenienced.

Is there ever a good time for a baby? (Yes, I know: is there ever a bad time? Think of me what you will, but I can all too easily respond with a knee-jerk yes.)

I don't always deal well with the difference between what I have in mind and what actually happens. God and I have had many discussions (mostly one-sided) where I shake my fist and demand to know just what in the world he is thinking.

It sounds trite to say, "trust in God," and I'm the last person to be good at putting this into practice. However, when I do finally surrender my will and let even a sliver of trust in God into my approach, I find myself freed. No longer do I have to have things figured out. No more do I have the burden of knowing what comes next.

Find a friend who will listen to your rants and point you, ever-so-gently, back to God. Sit in the sun and picture the warmth of God's arms holding you, carrying you, leading you to the place he has in mind for you.

And, while it might not be medically supported or even advisable, eat some chocolate. Then pray a Hail Mary and brew some tea. Picture Mary across from you, smiling gently, and know that you'll be blessed, even if the road to it feels like a pile of rocks to climb.



NOW THAT YOU'VE BEEN PREGNANT FOR ALMOST A full month, you're probably noticing some changes. Maybe you've gained some weight, or maybe, if you can't keep things down and your appetite is poor, you have lost weight. In any event, things are different with your body.

Pregnancy is not an illness, though at this point it can feel like one. When I'm hugging the toilet and cradling my head to avoid any further outburst, I have a hard time remembering that the child within me is a blessing. When I find myself considering all that's wrong with the world and the many dangers of life, I can get myself into a funk of wondering why we bother to have children. It is so easy to forget the hope I feel when I see a baby's unconditional gaze, the peace I feel when I ponder her tiny perfection, and the fulfillment she brings to the world through her very life.

There is a price to blessings, and, for me, that price is one of trust. I have to trust that God knows what's best and that he can bring great good from whatever situation I find myself in. I have to trust that the temporal discomfort—the puking, the heartburn, and the loss of appetite—will give way to a greater good.

During this week, your baby's heart tubes fuse, and her heart contractions begin.² She already has a beating heart, even though she's tiny. If you have an ultrasound during this week or any time thereafter, you'll probably see the heartbeats.

Every beat of that little heart is proof of God's love. It seems impossible. Conception is unlikely enough, but the growing baby is even more shocking. There are so many vulnerabilities that an embryo faces in the first developmental stage: how she makes it all the way to birth is really quite a miracle.

In the tiny thump-thump of my baby's heartbeat, I have so often felt the assurance of God. I never wanted children of my own. I never saw motherhood as a goal of any kind. God didn't let that stop the miracle from occurring though. As I continue through my journey of motherhood, facing the overwhelming task of caring for souls, I think back to the first few weeks of pregnancy with a combination of dread and wonder. A beating heart within me seems, somehow, to make the discomfort more worthwhile. It makes what's happening to my life real in a way that changes the entire world: there is another person, another soul, now alive.

Walking with Mary: The Visitation

Mary was in these early days of pregnancy when she made the long journey to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Was her trip punctuated with potty stops? Did she find herself wishing for her own bed during the days she spent getting there?

However miserable Mary might have felt in her first trimester, she didn't hesitate to serve. She knew Elizabeth, who was elderly, must need help. Beyond that, she provided an encouragement to her cousin that was probably worth far more than any of the cleaning or cooking she did during her three months in Judea.

Serving isn't easy when you don't feel well. It's hard enough when you're busy with your own life and juggling your own obligations, but insert physical hardships—even if it's just not feeling 100 percent—and it becomes a huge hurdle. It takes extra effort to serve in any capacity, and that's what Mary shows us.

She might have been throwing up every few hours, unable to keep anything down, without a taste for anything. She might have just longed for a nap. Elizabeth probably knew

this and more than likely encouraged Mary to rest. But I don't think Mary made the arduous journey there and back only to let Elizabeth coddle her. I picture her reproaching Elizabeth for trying to do too much. It was Mary taking over the household duties.

In Mary's embrace of Elizabeth, I find an example of serving when I least want to, of expending extra effort for others, and of giving in the most generous way. She gave, and in giving to Elizabeth, she also gave to each of us. She shows us, quietly and without fanfare, what it is to joyously accept our vocation. Her joy overflowed in the Magnificat, despite discomfort and uncertainty.

Our joy can overflow too, no matter what hurdles we face. Maybe, like Mary, what we need to do is give ourselves to another in service.

One Small Step

I have a confession to make: I fear pregnancy. It's not so much the discomfort or the way labor and delivery looms before me. I fear for my baby in many ways, and for my family should we face an infant loss or miscarriage. One sure way I've found to battle my fears (and, incidentally, my physical discomforts) is to be of service to others. It helps me to keep my mind off the fear of unexpected—and unpleasant—surprises.

Our parish has offered a Eucharistic Adoration program for a number of years, and spending time with Jesus, one-on-one, always soothes my frantic fears. I find that praying for others—there's never a shortage of people who have bigger prayer requests than I do—and giving some of my time to Jesus to be the best balm.

If you aren't well enough to make it to church to pray before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, you could also spend time in prayer at home or offering your pregnancy-related challenges and struggles in communion with others who are suffering throughout the world and in your parish family.

The most important work we do is that which unites us to God more fully and completely, though that work is often