



It's BAAACK! The Great Advent Wood Blocks Giveaway

Happy December, all! Last year's Advent giveaway was so popular, I'm doing it again! My friends at [Soli Deo Gloria Sacred Art](#) and I are teaming up to offer two winners a set of two Advent handcrafted wood blocks! The blocks are 4x4x2 inches, made of maple. Enter today through 12:15 a.m. ET this coming Tuesday, December 4. To learn more, visit my [homepage](#). And good luck!

Friends in Faith: Mary Lou Swanberg

You know how you're sometimes drawn to another person because there's just something about him or her when you first meet? For me, Mary Lou Swanberg is one of those people. We first met about four years ago, and her faith and inner peace just radiated. At that point, Mary Lou was in a leadership role in a Catholic home schooling endeavor, and during that time she and her son hosted more than 125 conferences across the country to provide professional training and encouragement to home schoolers. Since then, she's married the love of her life and has joined him at [Life Line Counseling Center](#), which has offices in Fairfax and Warrenton, VA. Recently, Mary Lou and her husband have discerned a call



to increase awareness in our area of the opioid crisis, including organizing a great conference on short notice. Here's what she wrote friends, including me: "Since addiction is so shame-based, people stay isolated. We want to reach out and be there with them, give them a forum to share their stories, and to provide hope and love." Mary Lou's willingness to answer the Lord's call... along with her love of fun, as this photo shows... inspires me to act more and navel gaze less.

Who Inspires You?

Blessed Chiara Gambacorta: Giving and Getting Saintly Advice

Now, it's not the most unusual thing for more than one family member to be canonized or beatified, especially among wealthy families from centuries ago. So, it's not a surprise that Chiara Gambacorta (1362-1420; Italy) has a brother who like her has been formally beatified. What's perhaps more unusual is the story of how advice from Catherine of Siena helped Chiara discern a vocation after her husband's death when Chiara was sixteen... and how a woman religious Chiara mentored also has been beatified. It reminds me that we have saints in the making



around us all the time, to learn from and to help on their own journey.

I'll be writing a bit more about her later this month in my Wednesday's Woman feature (short profiles of beatified and canonized women).

Wednesday's Women

On the Nightstand: *Remember Your Death: Memento Mori Journal*

It probably seems morbid to select a title like this for December, the time when we're waiting for the arrival of the Christ Child and surrounding ourselves with love and joy. And yet, as [Sister Theresa Aletheia Noble](#) notes, this is a practice that has been encouraged for centuries. "We remember our death in order that our lives may be filled with the Life of Christ, both now and when we enter into the joy of eternal life," she writes. "... The practice of *memento mori* is more about living than it is about dying." Every page of the journal has a quote from scripture, a saint or writer, or from Sister herself. Personally, I'll be using it as a place to record my nightly examen; next year, there will be a companion devotional, and [Whitney Hopley](#)'s interview with Sister about that will be on my web site in late February.



What's on Your Nightstand?

Merry Christmas!

Blessings on your Advent and Christmas, and may they both be filled with peace and happiness! I'm excited about this year's round of gatherings, and about spending Christmas in Williamsburg, VA, with my longtime pal and romance writer [Blythe Gifford](#). I've never spent any real time in Williamsburg, and exploring it with Blythe will be a true gift!

In Christ, Melanie

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Other ways to keep the conversation going:

