

# **FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

## **BEGINNING THE 2019 LITURGICAL YEAR**

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# **CHRIST'S COMING NOW**

**Developed from a sermon by St. Bernard**

It is certainly important that we celebrate our Lord's Coming with all our hearts. We should be filled with joy because of the marvelous consolation that Advent brings us. Aren't you amazed by the depth of Christ's self-abasement and the greatness of the love Christ shows us in this way? When we seriously reflect on that love we have to be stirred to new fervor.

Of course, we mustn't think only of Christ's first coming. That was when he came to seek and save all who were lost. We have to keep constantly in mind Christ's Second Coming, especially because he will then take us to be forever with him. It is very important that we keep both of these comings in mind. They provide much to meditate on, turning over in our minds and hearts all Christ has done for us already and all that Christ promises to do for us at the Second Coming. But notice equally all that is happening within us now is yet another coming of our Lord.

Judgment has already begun. The Prince of this World, as Scripture tells us, has been cast out, but not only cast out of Heaven; he is being cast out of our hearts and minds. Judgment has begun for us too, for if we fail to obey the Gospel now, we pass a judgment upon ourselves. What judgment will be reserved for those who can't stand firm in the judgment taking place in every moment? Don't you want to cast Satan out? Do you want yourself to be cast out with him? People can evade judgment now but no one can evade the final one when Christy comes at the end of this world.

If we constantly hold ourselves to account before the judgment of Christ's Gospel words, if we constantly accept our responsibility for loving Christ and one another. Then we are fully judged right now and may safely wait for the Savior's Second Coming. That will involve our Lord Jesus' changing our humble bodies so they are like his glorious body. Then we will shine forth with all the just and all, both the learned and the simple, will see what God has done in us. We will be forever in the Heavenly Father's Kingdom.

The Lord has called to us: "*Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart*". This humility is two-fold. There is an intellectual humility and there is a humility of heart. By the first we recognize that we are nothing, and we can learn this much from our own weakness. There is also a humility that enables us to trample under foot all the glory of this world in as much as it leads away from God. We learn this from the Son who emptied himself and took on a servant's form and life. He even fled when people wanted him to be their king. Notice that he didn't flee the ignominy of the Cross. He sought nothing for himself but only for us, and for all. What do we seek in our judgment? We seek to stand with Christ as he comes this very day. Then we will have only a joyful anticipation as we hope for his final coming on the Last Day.

## **BECOMING LIKE ST. FRANCIS XAVIER**

**A reflection from a homily by St. Pope John XXIII**

**When we think of a missionary what sort of pictures fill our minds? We think of people who in effect give up the way of life they have been living, one which may have cost them a great deal of effort and many trials to create. They don't think first of what they give up but of the opportunity they are being given to testify to God's living love in Jesus Christ as shown to all in the Gospels. This is what makes a person holy and even a saint. Think of St. Francis Xavier whom we celebrate and remember today. Think of his never-ending prayer for us who are struggling to live out our own call to be a witness to the Gospel love given us in Christ. Can we cease to care for all those who still haven't given God and Christ the gift of their self and their life?**

**What we are called to do is to make of ourselves a protector, a stronghold to which others can turn when overwhelmed, a shelter in all sorts of difficulties and dangers, a support when another falters, one to pick up others when they fall! There is so much we can do to witness Gospel love concretely. How can we find the strength? We ourselves have to turn to Christ and find in him strength, consolation, comfort and whatever is needed to crown our own efforts with victory—whether we see it visibly or not. To follow Christ as a missionary is to let Christ work all these wonderful things in you.**

**When missionaries are sent out officially, they are usually given a crucifix. This is a symbol of the reality of the Cross that will be an ever more prominent part of their life. When we think of people like St. Francis Xavier we think of heroism. But that wasn't what he thought of. He thought only of denying himself anything that would get in the way of spreading the love and peace of Christ. That was the comfort that strengthened him in doing what seems to us heroic. The Cross is not just pain. It is comfort, guidance, light, and strength; it is all one needs in order to glorify God's name, wherever you happen to find yourself. You want the blessings of Christ to be available to all everywhere. That is why God has placed you where you are. You don't need a new mission.**

**How many in mission lands, even during their lifetimes, thought of Francis Xavier as one to whom they owed great thanks. He led them to the One Redeemer. He led them to a new hope and to the fulfillment of that hope. We like to think that we too have done good things for others and brought some small blessing into their lives. But we know that is true just to the extent that we have witnessed to God and to God's Christ and to his divine love become human love given to all who came to him. Now we are to go into the world we live in and share our lives and selves. The gift is one we too give—without us it wouldn't come to those we touch. That is a missionary's blessing. You are called to give and receive that blessing. The great missionaries of Christian history remind us of this, now and always. Accept the gift and its blessing.**

## **OUR REDEEMER IS AT HAND**

**A reflection developed from a homily by St. Pope Gregory the Great**

Scripture contains the following message: *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”* What can we learn here? First, notice the implication that no matter how stable and unchanging earthly things are, even if the earth itself or the stars seems to last forever, they are all going to pass away. Second, notice that you, who receive the word of God and treasure it, aren't going to pass away. If God's word isn't to pass away, those in whom that word has been planted are going to last forever. We will never cease to be, but everything we see will pass away. Let that thought shape what we set our hearts on.

Not to long ago some sort of hurricane uprooted a very old orchard, knocked houses off their foundations and even destroyed some churches. Things like this happen all the time. Sometimes we feel that more and more is going wrong and bad things are increasing. We can't set our heart on passing things but we have to set it on the Lord. When the hurricane came, some people who went to bed filled with plan for the next day were killed; only the Lord's love remained.

Think of how your body fails as you grow older. You end up bent, your neck gets scrawny and your skin looks withered, you have difficulty breathing, your strength fails more and more, you sometime wheeze when you want to speak out strongly, even the senses may fail. We are reminded that we do are going to die.

All this ought to remind us of St. Paul's warning: Don't love the world or the things of the world because lovers of the world don't love the Heavenly Father with all their hearts! To cause all the destruction that a hurricane does God only has to move a little air. It becomes a storm and even the strongest building gets knocked down. If God allows such things to happen quite apart from any special sins people commit, think of another reminder from St. Paul: *“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God”*. But a day will come for all of us when we will fall into God's hands.

Keep that day before your eyes and mind. With the knowledge firmly fixed you won't be disturbed by the constant loss of what seemed so firm. All such losses will seem minor matters by comparison with the examination of our hearts, and of what we genuinely stand for and stand upon, that God will make on the Day of Judgment. The things of earth can't even stand up to a strong wind so how will we stand before God? The difference between now and that day is that between a summons to appear in court and actually standing before a judge.

We need to give hard thought to these facts. If we have placed our hope, even some seemingly small hope, in someone or something other than the Lord now is the time to turn to God, to repent. Now is the time to amend our lives, to change our bad habits, to resist and overcome temptations. Don't try to do it just by fear. Let yourself be filled with love and live that love—even as the Lord Jesus did and does. Love must cast our fear. Then we are ready to stand before our God and Lord with confidence. It is not confidence in ourselves. When we discover love within the citadel of our hearts, then we know the Lord is there in his Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the source of all confidence, and of all Godly love.

# **ESCHATOLOGY REALIZED IN US**

**A reflection by St. Cyril of Alexandria**

Listen to the prophet Isaiah: *“In days to come the mountain of the Lord and the House of the Lord will be higher than any mountain and lifted above all hills; all the nations shall come to it”*. In many ways we have seen this prophecy being fulfilled. The Only Begotten Word of God has become visible, made flesh and born of a woman, and by his word he has already gathered many peoples and nations to God and to the Church. Even Jerusalem has become a place of pilgrimage for peoples from all parts of the world.

On the other hand, we know that the Church is to be presented to Christ and to God as a virgin, pure and wise and without any stain of sin on her. She is to be a bride who is holy and immaculate. Scripture says this too. Listen again to Isaiah: *“All the nations will stream to God’s House and many peoples shall say, Let’s go up the mountain of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob, so that the Lord may teach us his ways and we may walk in God’s paths”*. They need to learn God’s ways.

There is no need to describe the coming of nations and peoples. The Church holds one faith and unites all human beings in that faith. This is the simple truth and we can witness it happening as much as we like. These people were called by God’s grace. It brings all together into, as it were, one house. It enlightens them with understanding of how to please God and fills them with a desire to please God and find salvation through Jesus Christ. Think of the fact that God called them from injustice and from people’s struggles to take what others have for themselves. People resort to every sort of violence and all sorts of evil passions drive them. These evils have to be removed from them if they are to be one with the Lord Jesus and the Heavenly Father.

All must learn the way of the Lord and renounce their past evil ways. Until a person has done this it is impossible to walk in the way of the Lord. This means that all must be brought to believe that there actually is a better way to live than in the greed and oppression and violence that fills the lives of those who don’t know the Lord Jesus and haven’t learned to love others as He loves them. How can we help others recognize God’s truth as a better way? How can we help them know by experience the love that enables one to hold old ways in contempt and hurry to learn the new way that is the Lord’s?

The prophet Isaiah says: *“To God of power and might, ruler and Lord, will judge among the nations”*. That means he will teach them justice and right judgment and will exercise justice and judgment upon them according to their response to his teachings. Then justice and right judgment from God can prevail. Under the rule of Christ, who is peace, all discord and quarrelling and war and greed cease. All injuries due to the former evil conduct will be healed and the “peace” (Shalom) of Christ will prevail. Recall the Lord’s words: *“My peace I give you, my peace I leave you”*. This has already begun. God is leading us toward the fullness. Let’s us follow him by doing justice and showing mercy each day. Then we are preparing the way for Christ’s final coming and for the everlasting joy that is God’s Kingdom.

## **PUTTING ON CHRIST**

**A reflection developed from a homily by St. Gregory Nazianzen**

**The Word of God existed from all eternity as invisible, incomprehensible, incorporeal, the beginning from the Beginning, light from Light, and the source of all life and immortality. The Son is the impress of the Divine Archetype, the Permanent Seal and Perfect Image of the Heavenly Father. For us the Son is the revelation of the Father, the very Word of God. What do you think, then, when you are told that the Son clothes himself in a human body with a human soul and does this for the sake of my body and soul? What do you think when you are told that the Son now wishes to cloth himself in your body and soul, in you?**

**God calls you to freely accept being another Christ. The Son became one of us in Jesus the Christ. He did this in order to cleanse us, just as he had purified the Virgin in advance of becoming her child. He who is God comes forth with his humanity as a single being formed of two natures, bestowing divine nature and receiving a human nature. In yet another way God becomes one with us by giving us too the divine nature. It is not done in the same way as in Christ Jesus but it is done truly and really. He who would enrich you endlessly becomes poor in you, and as poor and wretched as you are. He who is fullness empties himself of the fullness that you may share in his plenitude. How can we explain this wealth of divine goodness? Can we understand this mystery and preserve our participation in it?**

**Human kind is sanctified by the humanity taken by God. This overpowers all the strength of mankind's enemy and frees us. Freed, we are led back to God in a way endlessly richer than what we had by creation. The Son shows us obedience to God in all things and so shows us the way to complete union with God through his mediation. All of this happens as we walk, hour by hour and day by day, in Christ. How can this happen freely, as God wills it to happen, if we do not learn to think of ourselves as being Christ enfleshed in us?**

**When you do an act of love do you realize that Christ is doing it in and with and through you? When you think of yourself do you reflect that you are Christ, not simply for yourself but for others. Christ becomes you, leading you to share in his works of love; thus, God's salvation comes to those you meet and touch by your words and deeds of love.**

**Human kind is sanctified by the humanity of God. This was ordained by the Heavenly Father. It is God's intention to overpower every foe by the force of this love and through the mediation of the Son, continued through the Son living in you. But this involves leading you, and all, back to the Heavenly Father even as prodigals or as lost sheep. The Good Shepherd lays down his own life for the flock. Jesus seeks the straying, lifts them to his shoulders, the same ones that bore the wood of the Cross, and carries them all the way to heaven.**

**God decreed that He would become human and be put to death in order to give life to us all. We have been put to death with Christ in order to be purified. Since we have died and been raised with Him, we are also to have a share in the same Glory. What a wonderful gift we are given to live each day of our lives.**

## **BECOMING A BEARER OF HOPE**

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

It would be a wonderful thing to enter into the heart of St. Ambrose and so to understand how he lived his mission as a disciple of Christ and a shepherd. What inner trials did he bear and what lights and shadows did he pass through? We can't learn all we would like from his writings because he didn't write about himself. Yet Augustine, who did write a great deal about himself, knew Ambrose and later reflected on this in writing. In the Confessions he says, *"I thought Ambrose a happy person in the eyes of his people, because he was honored by his being such an outstanding person. I was unable, however, to know or experience what sort of hope he was the bearer of, what struggles he had been called upon to undergo against the temptations of his high position, what comfort he experienced in adversity and what savory joys he tasted in his heart as he consumed in silence the bread of your Word."*

Notice the two aspects distinguished in Ambrose. There is the exterior one, of a person honored by the society surrounding him. There is an interior and secret one, full of a hope incomprehensible even to Augustine. Of what hope was Ambrose the bearer? Jesus says, *"I am the good Shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father."*

Jesus' relation with the Father and with "his own" is not simple, born of an immediate knowledge lived day by day and growing through encounters and conversations. It is a knowledge growing from the awareness Jesus has of the Father, an awareness rooted in the infinite fullness of the love and mercy of God.

Jesus contemplated God's Plan of action toward His Own as he contemplated the love of the Father. And Ambrose brought to his relationship with the diocese, to his daily encounters, a hope that came to him from the contemplation of the love of the Father and of the Father's project for this community.

This is the great grace we all have to ask for. You must ask for it for me, and I ask for it for each of you, and for the responsibility you bear in your family, at work, in social and civil or public life. Each person has some responsibilities, some daily relationships of which an account must be made to God. So, an interior vision, a hope that can't be won by looking around and calculating circumstances and possibilities. It is only grasped if we are people who walk as if they saw the Invisible, looking upward to the Father's merciful design for us. From this upward gaze we can draw the consequences and directions for our daily deeds of love. Hope lives by contemplation, and the quality of a life depends on the hope that inspires it.

## **MARY'S VOCATION AND OURS**

**Developed from a sermon by St. Anselm of Canterbury**

**The sky and the stars rejoice! The earth and the waters rejoice! Day and night rejoice, and all things rejoice! You, O Mary, have been made the means of restoring the lost beauty of all things and filling them with the beauty that comes from grace.**

**The dignity intrinsic to the true nature of all created things is found in their being and being used as praise to God. They lost that dignity when they began to be misused by people who bow down and serve not God but false gods. Such people use created things in ways they were not created for. So, when people began to use things wrongly, they began to rob them of their dignity and their deepest beauty.**

**Now all things are seen to rejoice in a new-found life, now that they are used and ruled-over by those who serve only God. All things receive beauty from being used to praise and glorify God. Even beyond this, they were given through Mary the inestimable gift of being used to praise God by the very God who created them and now has become human too.**

**These mighty and marvelous things came to pass for our world through the blessed fruit of the womb of Mary, the one blessed beyond all others. Through the fullness of the grace given her the things of our world began to rejoice at their liberation. Under the world and on the world and over the world, all things rejoiced. Just as through the glorious Son of Mary's resplendent virginity, so all the just who lived before Christ's life-giving death now exult in their release from captivity. Through them all the world rejoices.**

**O Lady, full and more than full of grace, to you we cry "Praise!" From you has rained down the grace that is Jesus Christ; he revives all creation. In you every nature is blessed, not only are creatures blessed by their creator but he is doubly blessed by those same creatures.**

**God gave to Mary the very Son who alone is begotten in God's inner life. From Mary God made himself a Son who alone is not only begotten but equal to the Father and whom God loves as God loves himself. All nature is created by God, yet God was born of Mary. God created all things, yet Mary brought forth God. Our God, who made all, made himself from Mary and thus re-made all that had been made.**

**God is the Heavenly Father of all created things, and Mary is the mother of all re-created things. God established a universal order in all things; now through Mary all have been brought back into that order. Without God nothing has being. Without the Son of Mary nothing has well-being.**

**The Lord is with you, Mary. To you by God's grace we all owe the abundant life that is realized in our restored existence and order. Let us give glory to God all the days and hours and minutes of our lives. This is our restored vocation and dignity. Now we can once again live a life that finds in all things reasons to praise to God. In Mary's vocation ours has been restored to us.**