

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
THE SOLEMNITY OF THE BIRTH OF THE LORD

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- Sun. **The Fourth Sunday of Advent**
Dec.23 **THE ENTHUSIASM THAT GOES WITH FAITH & HOPE**
 A reflection from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny
- Mon. **Late Advent Weekday/Vigil of Christmas**
24 **HOW WE LEARN THE TRUTH ABOUT LOVE**
 A reflection from the Dialogues of St. Catherine of Siena
- Tues. **THE SOLEMNITY OF THE LORD'S BIRTH**
25 **CHRIST'S TWO GREAT BIRTHDAY GIFTS**
 A reflection from a sermon by St. Pope Leo the Great
- Wed. **Feast of St. Stephan, the First Martyr**
26 **THE TRUE MEANING OF PERSECUTION**
 A reflection from a sermon by St. Gregory of Nyssa
- Thurs. **Feast of St. John, Apostle & Evangelist**
27 **SEEING, HEARING & TOUCHING THE WORD OF LIFE**
 A reflection from St. Augustine's Commentary on I John
- Fri. **Feast of the Holy Innocents**
28 **THE ALL-EMBRACING LOVE OF CHRIST**
 A reflection from a letter by St. Cyprian of Carthage
- Sat. **Fifth Day in the Octave of Christmas**
29 **LEARNING TO TREASURE GOD'S GIFT TO US**
 A reflection from a sermon by St. Bernard

THE ENTHUSIASM THAT GOES WITH FAITH & HOPE

A reflection taken from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Our king, our Savior, is coming! Good News has come from afar! What does that mean for us? Is it like a drink of cold water given to a thirsty soul? Don't we believe that it means the reconciliation of the whole world? Don't we hope for a coming life filled with every good thing? The more we thirst for God, the more wonderful and refreshing is the good news proclaimed to us! How wonderful that this is granted to you and me! The Lord is coming! Hearing this news my spirit leaps for joy within me so I can help you! We help one another.

Are we going to get up and start running in spirit to meet our Savior? Is this the cry to our heart: "*Come, Lord, and show me your face, that I may be saved!*" We have been waiting for you, Lord, now come and be our real help in this time of trouble! All of you, think how close is the Day of Celebration! Scripture calls us to joy and rejoicing. This is going to be a joy that lifts our spirits and causes us to forget ourselves in longing for Our Savior! Every delay fills us with impatience because we can't wait for what our future offers!

There are so many texts of Scripture that urge us to go out of ourselves and meet Christ, and meanwhile speak to one another of Christ's coming. It isn't just his first coming but his coming to us today and at the end of time. Our hearts are called to run with longing toward Christ in both today's coming and the final one.

The fact is that the Lord frequently visits us individually. He comes to us in proportion to the way we have made ourselves fit to welcome him with rejoicing. The Holy Spirit has been forming us within by our hope for this coming and by reminding us of how wonderful it will be. We do this by recalling how he came for the first time to our world. He comes to us now to make sure we won't lose the fruit that his first coming was meant to bear.

The goal now is to transform our pride into the sort of humility he showed when he came for the first time. This is only the beginning of the transformation of our whole self into the likeness of his risen glory. His first coming was a time of unparalleled grace. Glory will clothe his final coming. We have a combination of the two. We experience a great consolation by reason of the grace of his first coming and we experience another by an anticipation of the glory to come. Blessed are those whose burning love has gained these two great blessings!

Perhaps you feel you haven't yet experienced even this much consolation. But aren't we given the gifts of faith and of the hope it brings with it? They give us encouragement and patient expectantly. The more frustrated you feel the more fully longing for the Lord is being poured into your hearts. Disappointment is a kind of fulfillment. You can say with St. Paul: "*I know the one in whom I have put my trust! I am completely confident that his power guards what I have been given right up to the day when our Lord and Savior, Our Great God, Jesus Christ, comes in glory!*" The greater this confidence the greater our experience of consolation provided by this Celebration. Rejoice in the Lord and be Glad!

HOW WE LEARN THE TRUTH ABOUT LOVE

A reflection from the Dialogues of St. Catherine of Siena

O depth of love! What heart could keep from breaking at the sight of your greatness taking upon itself our lowliness? We are your image but by making yourself one with us you have made yourself our image! Your eternal divinity is veiled in our wretchedness! Why do you do it? It is done for love! You became human, Lord, and have made us divine!

In the name of your untellable love, I beg you to have mercy on your creatures. I am imperfect and filled with darkness. Yet you who are perfect and filled with light have shown me the perfection that is the light-filled path of your Only Begotten Son's teaching. I was dead and you revived me. I was sick and you gave me medicine—and not only the blood you gave our race in the person of your Son—but a further medicine against a hidden, unrecognized sickness. You taught me that I may never sit in judgment on any person, especially on your servants. For I am blind and, as weak as I was from this sickness, I often judged others under the pretext of working for your hour and for their salvation. You have now taught me the fuller truth about love.

O immeasurably tender love! Who wouldn't be set on fire with that love? What heart could keep from breaking? You are the deep well of charity, for you are so madly in love with your creatures that you weren't willing to live without us! Yet you are God! You have no need for us! Your greatness is no greater by reason of our well-being, nor are you harmed by any harm that befalls us. You are supreme and eternal goodness! Such is the love you teach and give us. Neither duty nor need can move you to this mercy, but only a love that loves without seeking anything.

Eternal Father, fiery abyss of charity, eternal beauty, eternal wisdom, eternal goodness, eternal mercy! O hope and refuge of sinners! You are immeasurable generosity and eternal and infinite Good! O mad lover! It seems as though you had a need for creatures, because you seem to act as though you couldn't live without us. And this in spite of the fact that you are life itself and everything! Why have you fallen in love with your creatures? You are pleased and delighted over us as if you were drunk with longing for our salvation. We run away and you come looking. You even clothe yourself in our humanity. You couldn't come any nearer to us than this. You show us the truth about love and you call us to love as you love.

CHRIST'S TWO GREAT BIRTHDAY GIFTS

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Pope Leo the Great

Today our Savior is born. We must rejoice! Surely, there is no place for mourning on the birthday of Life Itself! Christ has given us the gift of a new life and swallowed up mortality and all its fears. Christ has brought us besides the joyful promise of life everlasting. No one is excluded from today's jubilation. All have the same reasons for joy. You see, just as our blessed Lord found none of us free from guilt so in the same way he came and freed as never before.

You holy ones, rejoice! You are soon to receive recompense. You sinners, break forth into praise! You have been welcomed to forgiveness. You unbelievers, take courage! You are called into a new life. In the fullness of time, God ordained, by the mystery of his divine love, that the Son should clothe himself in human nature and reconcile the entire human race to its maker. He overcame the devil in that very nature from which the devil had taken the false reasoning that had brought him original victory over us.

So, it is that at our Lord's birth the angels sing this song of joy, "*Glory to God in the highest*"! They go on to proclaim "*Peace on earth to all of good will*". They see the Heavenly Jerusalem being filled by all the peoples of the world. If the angels, exalted as they are, find this act of divine love so great a cause for gladness, how much blessedness should it bring to lowly human hearts?!

Dear friends, give thanks to God the Heavenly Father, do it through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Give thanks for the great charity with which our God has loved us. God has taken pity on us when we were dead in sin. God has brought us to new life in Christ and made us a new creation.

Having given us so much, what more can be left? Yet there is another gift, and one just as great as we already have received. It is the gift of laying aside our former way of life with all its works, and claiming our share in Christ's sonship. In our joy we can renounce all the deeds of our formerly corrupted nature.

Recognize your new dignity, Christian, and do the deeds proper to the divine nature you now share. Keep in mind that you are members of Christ, as your head, and you live as a member of Christ's Body. You can now see that none of the evil deeds we did could bring us to the good we longed for, but we see now that all we sought is given us freely.

Live from now on by the light and love we see in Christ. Our first parents didn't believe you, Lord, when you told them what was good. So, they chose what was evil. We are freed from that deception coming from unbelief. Now we can live for what is truly good. Accept the gift of following Christ and you will possess the gift of the true freedom that enables us to live for what is good.

THE TRUE MEANING OF PERSECUTION

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Gregory of Nyssa

“Blessed are those who suffer persecution for my sake!” This is a promise of the Kingdom of Heaven; the Lord makes this clear. The objective of all we do is to become the sort of persons who can live by sharing with others in our turn all that God shares with us.

The Lord sees human frailty. The Lord tells us that we will be tested but that the outcome of these trials will be life in his Kingdom. It is the hope born of this promise that gives us strength to overcome all passing experiences of pain.

This was the hope that enabled St. Stephen to rejoice in the hail of stones that fell upon him from every side. He prayed that the sin of his murderers might not be held against them. He responded to evil with good and with a blessing.

When the time for him to suffer came, Stephen thought first of the promise made to all who suffer with Christ. He saw his hope being fulfilled through his very sufferings. He had made his profession of faith and now he saw the heavens open and God bending down to encourage him in his struggle as he ran toward the goal.

There is a wonderful meaning for us in God’s presence at the contest of his friend and beloved, Stephan. Could one suffering persecution for the Lord’s sake have any greater blessing than the knowledge that the Lord was presiding over his struggle as a helper and support? We have this just as Stephan did.

We must live for the present on earth. But when we depart from it, we will change our dwelling in such a way that what seems harsh and hurtful here becomes a longed-for fruit and joy when we enter our new home. As St. Paul remarked: *“Discipline is never pleasant; at the time it seems painful but, in the end, it bears fruit in peace and goodness for those who have been trained by it”*.

What is affliction really? It is the flower that comes before a much longed-for fruit. This enables us to even welcome persecution and to run our race successfully. Why should we be sorrowful when we are attacked and persecuted? It is really a matter for rejoicing.

This is the assurance given by the One who promises blessedness to all who suffer persecution for his sake. By the grace of Christ, if you suffer and persevere nevertheless, yours will be the Kingdom of Heaven.

SEEING, HEARING AND TOUCHING THE WORD OF LIFE

A reflection from St. Augustine's Commentary on I John

“I speak of what has existed from the beginning, of what we have heard, and have seen with our own eyes; we have watched and touched it with our hands: The Word of Life.” How could anyone actually touch The Word unless it had been made flesh and come to dwell among us? But this Word, which was made flesh and has dwelt among us, could be touched and still can.

He began to be flesh from the flesh of the Virgin Mary. Yet this wasn't the beginning of the Word. The Word had existed from the beginning. What we hear in this Letter of John we also heard in John's Gospel. ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God”***.

We can all gain a kind of knowledge of the Word by hearing about him, as we just have. But receiving human words, like the phrase “the Word of Life”, is not the same as touching the body of Jesus Christ. Yet we are also told that ***“this life was made visible”***; that is, Christ who is the Word of Life has been made visible to us; isn't the visible touchable?

We know now that the Life which is in Christ, and which has been given to us, can actually be perceived only by the heart. Thus, for the healing of hearts, and so they may be able to perceive this life, it is made visible in various ways to human eyes. The Word and Life are perceived, and received, only by and in the heart, and yet we are led to them through their presence in the flesh and that is perceived by bodily vision and received in sacrament.

All this is possible because the Word itself became flesh in a way visible to mortal eyes. This was done so that the heart might be healed by what was seen by our eyes and so become capable of receiving the Word in an even fuller way. Listen to John again: ***“We saw it and we are giving testimony, telling you of the eternal life which was with the Father and has been made manifest to us.”*** And then he says: ***“What we have seen and heard we are telling you”***. Who is doing this? John is doing it and telling us about it.

Now let me repeat these words: What we have seen and heard we are telling you, my dear friends. John and the other disciples saw the Lord present in the flesh and they heard his words and then repeated them to us. We did not see the Lord and we didn't even see his disciples, but we have seen those whose hearts were healed by him and by his disciples, and then were able to receive in their hearts the Word. Do you think you are less favored than they were?

Why did they tell us what they did? They answer, ***“that you too may be in union with us”***. That means union not just with them but with the Word and with the Father who sent the Word. What was worked through Jesus, by God's grace is worked through his disciples. We share the same faith and so are in union with them. We are all in fellowship with Jesus Christ, and so the Heavenly Father.

John adds: ***“We write this so that your joy may be complete”***. It is the same fullness of joy, the same fellowship, the same unity, the same love that were made flesh in Jesus Christ and in St. John. Now they are made flesh and are seen and touched in us.

THE ALL-EMBRACING LOVE OF CHRIST

A reflection taken from a letter by St. Cyprian of Carthage

The martyrdom of children marked the very beginning of Christ's life. For his name's sake, all those of two years old and under were put to death. Too young to fight in the usual ways, they were still made able to win a martyr's crown. By their innocence they were made able to bear witness to the innocence of all those who shed their blood for Christ. When even such as these are made martyrs, witnesses, clearly no one is immune from the peril of persecution and witnessing. Clearly, in the same way, no one is separated from the love and care of Christ that makes one a martyr. Martyrdom is not a work we do and not a glory we earn; these are gifts given us freely and unearned by God.

What a shameful thing it would be if Christ's servants—God's servants, were to recoil from suffering what their Master suffered. We are living in a world dominated by sin and must not be unwilling to suffer the consequences. It is a gift from God. We ought not to refuse the gift, even if we are able. The Son of God suffered in order to make us children of God. We must not refuse to persevere in that glorious status by suffering. We may have to put up with the world's hatred, but so did Christ and so did the holy children.

Listen to Christ: *"If the world hates you, remember that it hated me. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own. But you are not of the world; I chose you out of it, and therefore it hates you. Remember the saying I gave you, 'The servant is not greater than the Master'. If they persecute me, they will persecute you also."*

Such suffering is not due to what we make ourselves to be, but what God has given us along with the gifts of life and birth. There is no excuse for a servant to avoid what the martyrs had to endure. Our Lord and God practiced all he taught. We can't listen to the teaching and not be willing to live by it, and die by it.

Let none of us be so intimidated by the prospect of future persecution, or even the coming of the Antichrist, as not to be armed by the example of Christ, and the rest of God's servants, against whatever may happen. What if the Antichrist comes? Won't Christ come also? The enemy may rage and inflict wounds but Christ comes to heal.

There is no one who can take us from Christ's arms for he is our Good Shepherd. We know what to fear—that we should separate ourselves from God and God's Christ. There is nothing else to fear. The love and care we receive is a free gift and no persecution comes without that gift coming too.

LEARNING TO TREASURE GOD'S GIFTS TO US

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

The goodness and humanity of God our Savior have appeared. Let us give thanks to God for such a great consolation in the midst of a life that seems so unhappy and wandering, seems an exile. Before the humanity of God appeared, God's goodness was concealed. Of course, God was always good—for God's mercy is forever—but how were people to know that? People had no faith in promises which weren't confirmed by their own experience. The Lord had spoken through the prophets in many different ways and assured us that he was thinking thoughts of peace and not of affliction. But people were too aware of their afflictions to notice the rest. Now, at last, God has given evidence of the most convincing kind, for we do at least believe our own eyes.

God has come to live with us. What do we see now? Peace hasn't been only promised but has been sent; it is peace with God and with ourselves. What was promised has been given and more than we expected. It is as though God had sent a bulging purse down from heaven and then let it be torn open in Christ's passion—and behold it contained the price of our redemption and reconciliation.

It seemed only a small purse but it was very full. *"Unto us a child is given"*. It is a child but one in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead and of humanity. When the fullness of time came, then the fullness of the Godhead came and also recognition of the gift of humanity.

God came in a human body because only in this way could he show himself to those who live in the flesh and are flesh and blood. That was true from the beginning. By the sight of our humanity made God's own we can be convinced of God's goodness and of the goodness of his gift of humanity. God has taken my human nature. God has assumed not only my misery but my humanity. That demonstrates the depths of his compassion and the depth of his goodness—in redemption and in creation.

"O Lord, what is man that you are mindful of us? Why should you set your heart on us?" This ought to make us stop and think. We should realize how much God cares for us. It should teach us how God thinks of us and our humanity. It should teach us how God feels for us. We mustn't draw conclusion only from our own sufferings but remember God's humanity and God's sufferings. We must learn from what he became for our sakes how highly we have been exalted. God's humanity will be a revelation of his goodness to us.

Truly great is the goodness of God, and it is manifest in his humanity. We learn about its goodness through him. He has given us the most positive proof of goodness by the pains he took to both to enrich our humanity and to add his divine dignity to it.