

THE FIRST WEEK IN ADVENT

(2023-2024)

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The Vatican Website

Sunday

THE PAPAL ANGELUS MESSAGE

Pope Francis, First Advent Sunday, 3 December 2017

Today we begin the journey of Advent, which will culminate in Christmas. Advent is the time we are given to welcome the Lord who comes to encounter us, and also to verify our longing for God, to look forward and prepare ourselves for Christ's return. He will return to us in the celebration of Christmas, when we will remember his historic coming in the humility of the human condition; but he enters our heart each time we are willing to receive him; and he will come again at the end of time to "judge the living and the dead". Therefore, we must always be vigilant and await the Lord with the hope of encountering him. Today's liturgy introduces us precisely to this evocative theme of vigilance and waiting.

In the Gospel (cf. Mk 13:33-37) Jesus exhorts us to *take heed* and *watch*, so as to be ready to welcome him at the moment of his return. He tells us: "Take heed, watch ... for you do not know when the time will come.... Watch therefore ... lest he come suddenly and find you asleep" (vv. 33-37).

The person who *takes heed* is the one who, amid the worldly din, does not let himself be overwhelmed by distraction or superficiality, but lives in a full and conscious way, with concern first and foremost *for others*. With this manner, we become aware of the tears and the needs of neighbors and we can also understand their human and spiritual strengths and qualities. The heedful person then also turns *toward the world*, seeking to counter the indifference and cruelty in it, and taking delight in its beautiful treasures which also exist and are to be safeguarded. It is a matter of having an understanding gaze so as to recognize both the misery and poverty of individuals and of society, and to recognize the richness hidden in little everyday things, precisely there where the Lord has placed us.

The *watchful person* is the one who accepts the invitation to keep watch, that is, not to let himself be overpowered by the listlessness of discouragement, by the lack of hope, by disappointment; and at the same time it wards off the allure of the many vanities with which the world is brimming and for which, now and then, time and personal and familial peace is sacrificed. It is the painful experience of the people of Israel, recounted by the Prophet Isaiah: God seemed to have let his people err from his ways (cf. 63:17), but this was a result of the unfaithfulness of the people themselves (cf. 64:4b). We too often find ourselves in this situation of unfaithfulness to the call of the Lord: He shows us the good path, the way of faith, the way of love, but we seek our happiness elsewhere.

Being *attentive* and *watchful* are prerequisites so as not to continue to "err from the Lord's ways", lost in our sins and in our unfaithfulness; being attentive and being watchful are the conditions that allow God to permeate our existence, in order to restore meaning and value to it with his presence full of goodness and tenderness. May Mary Most Holy, role model for awaiting God and icon of watchfulness, lead us to her son Jesus, rekindling our love for him.

Monday

LEARNING DIFFICULT ADVENT LESSONS

A Reflection by Carroll Stuhlmueller

Advent proclaims a vision of God's Plan for all Peoples. We hear often from Isaiah, for instance, of a universal peace inaugurated when all learn to worship the One Lord. It represented a vague but wonderful hope that all would be united harmoniously and in full human dignity able to worship the One God in Jerusalem. But he couldn't help but speak of restrictions. We are being told that our hope comes with severe demands.

God's expectations can be measured by a simple question: Are you willing to invite to your family dinner table everyone who received Communion with you at church? Are you ready to forget injuries and grudges, and forgive unkind words and actions? Are you willing to extend your concern to all without limit?

How does one start? We hear in the Gospel that Jesus was asked to go to the home of a Roman Centurion, a person of different religion and ethnicity, a representative of a foreign and oppressive invader and ruler. Jesus accepted and went. But the Roman hesitated. He saw himself as totally unworthy and said so. A Roman centurion was humbling himself before Jesus simply for the sake of his slave!

Jesus points to this "outsider" as an example of a genuine follower and descendant of Abraham. Jesus advises his fellow Jews, and us, to look toward such outsiders for direction. I assure you, he says, I have never found this much faith in your midst.

During Advent we learn to be humble and grateful, and how to live worthily in the Temple of God. We must not put any restrictive clauses on the vision of all united around God in worship and charity. It may seem a fairy tale, impractical, and not now realizable but it is necessary to keep our hope as pure and exalted as were Jesus' own. Even that is only a glimmer of what God really wants.

We find a school of faith in such simple things as the birth of a child. The mysteries of faith can be illuminated by the normal natural marvels of daily life. We begin by looking toward strangers and forgotten people for the path that leads to Jesus and our own Jerusalem. These models will break down barriers. Simple things and events can make such a great difference.

Lord, I rejoice when I hear them say: Let us go to the House of the Lord. Lord, do not allow the joy of this moment to be tarnished by prejudice or lack of charity. Grant that we may live happily in the vision of seeing all strangers, infants, non-believers, and all the world moving toward that center of life which is Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tuesday

LETTING GOD FILL US WITH ENTHUSIASM

A Reflection developed from a text by Fr. Bernard Haring

Enthusiasm is a kind of joy in God that exists as a silent presence in the heart. It shows itself in a cheerful face. It grows deeper in dialogue with other people who are also gripped by faith. Often, it is seen as a quietly flowing brook that suddenly bursts into a flood that sweeps things in its path.

The Gospel of Luke gives us a matchless picture of infectious enthusiasm. The seventy disciples whom Jesus has sent out to proclaim the Good News come back and report enthusiastically about their experiences. Jesus takes their joy to a deeper level by pointing out to them that their names are “written in heaven”. Then we witness a peak experience in Jesus’ own enthusiasm: “*Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit, we are told, and broke out in praise, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants! Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will!’*” Enthusiasm is described as a state in which one is filled with the Holy Spirit.

What is unique about Christian enthusiasm is that it comes from following and serving the Gospel. It is also a model we can use to imagine the Church as Christ calls it into being. By contrast, in some spiritual exercises dedicated to his disciple, Pope Eugene III, St. Bernard depicts the Church of the time as a travesty of this. There follows a rather long list of killjoys. Then Bernard speaks of how one can open oneself and others to the joy of the Gospel. Wherever the Spirit of God blows, wherever people let themselves be filled with the Spirit, Pentecost keeps happening. St. Augustine of Canterbury was sent to convert the English as the abbot of a monastic community. The English had to be shown how Jesus’ gift could transform a person’s living, and dying. They were brought to Christ by seeing a community of believers do all the things they did to sustain their lives but in such a way that their lives, and especially their deaths, seemed good in a new and attractive way. England was, in a sense, converted by enthusiasm. I have the impression that for Luke a key to the triumphant advance of the Gospel is the enthusiasm of believers.

We have to seriously examine our consciences. What is going on with us, with our Church, that we sense so little of the Pentecostal storm of enthusiasm? To successfully clear the way for it we need times and places of silence, prayer, meditation, and above all faith that the Holy Spirit can move mountains. “Come, Holy Spirit!”

Wednesday

MY HEART IS MOVED WITH PITY FOR THE CROWD (Mt15:32) **From the Message of Pope Benedict XVI in 2006**

(We are on) a pilgrimage in which Christ Himself accompanies us through the desert of our poverty, sustaining us on our way towards the intense joy of Easter. Even in the “valley of darkness” of which the Psalmist speaks (Ps 23:4), while the tempter prompts us to despair or to place a vain hope in the work of our own hands, God is there to guard us and sustain us. Yes, even today the Lord hears the cry of the multitudes longing for joy, peace, and love. As in every age, they feel abandoned. Yet, even in the desolation of misery, loneliness, violence and hunger that indiscriminately afflict children, adults, and the elderly, God does not allow darkness to prevail. In fact, in the words of my beloved Predecessor, Pope John Paul II, there is a “divine limit imposed upon evil”, namely, mercy (Memory and Identity, pp. 19ff.).

In this light, I would like to pause and reflect upon an issue much debated today: the question of development. Even now, the compassionate “gaze” of Christ continues to fall upon individuals and peoples. He watches them, knowing that the divine “plan” includes their call to salvation. Jesus knows the perils that put this plan at risk, and He is moved with pity for the crowds. He chooses to defend them from the wolves even at the cost of His own life. The gaze of Jesus embraces individuals and multitudes, and he brings them all before the Father, offering Himself as a sacrifice of expiation.

Enlightened by this Paschal truth, the Church knows that if we are to promote development in its fullness, our own “gaze” upon mankind has to be measured against that of Christ. In fact, it is quite impossible to separate the response to people’s material and social needs from the fulfillment of the profound desires of their hearts. This has to be emphasized all the more in today’s rapidly changing world, in which our responsibility towards the poor emerges with ever greater clarity and urgency. My venerable Predecessor, Pope Paul VI, accurately described the scandal of underdevelopment as an outrage against humanity. In this sense, in the Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, he denounced “the lack of material necessities for those who are without the minimum essential for life, the moral deficiencies of those who are mutilated by selfishness” and “oppressive social structures, whether due to the abuses of ownership or to the abuses of power, to the exploitation of workers or to unjust transactions” (ibid., 21). As the antidote to such evil, Paul VI suggested not only “increased esteem for the dignity of others, the turning towards the spirit of poverty, cooperation for the common good, the will and desire for peace”, but also “the acknowledgement by man of supreme values, and of God, their source and their finality” (ibid.). In this vein, the Pope went on to propose that, finally and above all, there is “faith, a gift of God accepted by the good will of man, and unity in the charity of Christ” (ibid.). Thus, the “gaze” of Christ upon the crowd impels us to affirm the true content of this “complete humanism” that, according to Paul VI, consists in the “fully-rounded development of the whole man and of all men” (ibid., 42). For this reason, the primary contribution that the Church offers to the development of mankind and peoples does not consist merely in material means or technical solutions. Rather, it involves the proclamation of the truth of Christ, Who educates consciences and teaches the authentic dignity of the person and of work; it means the promotion of a culture that truly responds to all the questions of humanity.

Thursday

THE NEED FOR REPENTANCE

A Letter from St. Ambrose to Emperor Theodosius

The unprecedented massacre that took place in Thessalonica, was something I could not prevent from taking place though I had declared that it would be most atrocious when I entered pleas against it and did this so many times. You yourself knew it was a very serious matter because you ordered it not to be done more than once. It is something that can't be overlooked. You have sinned and need to be reconciled with God!

Are you ashamed, O Emperor, to do what King David did, the forefather of the family of Christ according to the flesh? I don't write this to disconcert you but to use the example of kings of old to call you to remove the sin by humbling yourself before God. You are human and you have encountered temptation—so conquer it. Sin isn't removed except by tears and penance. It is God alone who can say "I am with you" if we have sinned. God doesn't forgive unless we do penance.

I urge you, I ask you, I beg you, I warn you—for my grief is that you who were a model of pious conduct and had reached the apex of clemency won't allow the piety to be imperiled by your guilt. You even now mourn the many guiltless people who perished. The greatest of your deeds was always your piety. The Devil envied you this, your most precious possession. Conquer him now, while you still have the means to do so by repentance. Don't add another sin to your first sin, nor continue a line of behavior which has injured so many.

I, among many others, am a debtor to your piety. I cannot be ungrateful. I make no charge of arrogance against you but I do have one, fear. I dare not offer the Holy Sacrifice if you intend to be present. Can that which isn't permitted when the blood of only one individual is shed, be permitted when so many persons' blood has been shed?

I am writing with my own hand what you alone are to read. May the Lord free me from all my anxieties on your behalf. I have learned very definitely what I may not do. I learned it not from a human source nor through such a source. In my anxiety, on the very night that I was preparing to act, you appeared in my dreams and seemed to be coming to the church, but I wasn't allowed to offer the sacrifice if you were present. I say nothing of other things I could have avoided but accepted for love of you.

May the Lord make all go forward tranquilly. Our God admonishes us in many ways, by heavenly signs and by the warning words of prophets. He wills that we come to understand our guilt even through the visions of sinners. So, we ask Him to remove all such disturbances and to preserve the peace. You are our ruler so let the faith and the peace proper to the Church continue. It avails much if our emperors are pious Christians. We must all be examples for one another.

Friday

THE ANGELUS MESSAGE OF POPE BENEDICT XVI, THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, 8 December 2006

Today, we celebrate one of the most beautiful and popular feasts of the Blessed Virgin: the Immaculate Conception. Not only did Mary commit no sin, but she was also preserved from original sin, the common legacy of the human race. This is due to the mission for which God had destined her from eternity: to be the Mother of the Redeemer. All this is contained in the truth of faith of the "Immaculate Conception".

The biblical foundation of this Dogma is found in the words the Angel addressed to the young girl of Nazareth: "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you!" (Lk 1: 28). "*Full of grace*" - in the original Greek, *kecharitoméne* - is Mary's most beautiful name, the name God himself gave to her to indicate that she has always been and will always be the *beloved*, the elect, the one chosen to welcome the most precious gift, Jesus: "the incarnate love of God" (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 12). We might ask: why exactly did God choose from among all women Mary of Nazareth? The answer is hidden in the unfathomable mystery of the divine will.

There is one reason, however, which is highlighted in the Gospel: her humility. Dante Alighieri clearly emphasizes this in the last Hymn of Paradise: "Virgin Mother, daughter of your Son, lowly and exalted more than any creature, the fixed goal of eternal counsel..." (*Paradise*, XXXIII, 1-3). In the *Magnificat*, her canticle of praise, the Virgin herself says: "My soul magnifies the Lord... because he looked upon his servant in her lowliness" (Lk 1: 46, 48).

Yes, God was attracted by the humility of Mary, who found favor in his eyes (cf. Lk 1: 30). She thus became the Mother of God, the image and model of the Church, chosen among the peoples to receive the Lord's blessing and communicate it to the entire human family.

This "blessing" is none other than Jesus Christ. He is the Source of the *grace* which filled Mary from the very first moment of her existence. She welcomed Jesus with faith and gave him to the world with love. This is also our vocation and our mission, the vocation and mission of the Church: to welcome Christ into our lives and give him to the world, so "that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3: 17).

Dear brothers and sisters, may today's Feast of the Immaculate Conception illuminate like a beacon the Advent Season, which is a time of vigilant and confident waiting for the Saviour. While we advance towards God who comes, let us look at Mary, who "shines forth..., a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim People of God" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 68).

Saturday

ST JUAN DIEGO CUAUHTLATOATZIN (1474-1548)

The Vatican Website

Little is known about the life of Juan Diego before his conversion, but tradition and archaeological and iconographical sources, along with the most important and oldest indigenous document on the event of Guadalupe, "*El Nican Mopohua*" (written in Náhuatl with Latin characters, 1556, by the Indigenous writer Antonio Valeriano), give some information on the life of the saint and the apparitions.

Juan Diego was born in 1474 with the name "Cauhtlatatzin" ("the talking eagle") in Cuautlitlán, today part of Mexico City, Mexico. He was a gifted member of the Chichimeca people, one of the more culturally advanced groups living in the Anáhuac Valley.

When he was 50 years old he was baptized by a Franciscan priest, Fr Peter da Gand, one of the first Franciscan missionaries. On 9 December 1531, when Juan Diego was on his way to morning Mass, the Blessed Mother appeared to him on Tepeyac Hill, the outskirts of what is now Mexico City. She asked him to go to the Bishop and to request in her name that a shrine be built at Tepeyac, where she promised to pour out her grace upon those who invoked her. The Bishop, who did not believe Juan Diego, asked for a sign to prove that the apparition was true. On 12 December, Juan Diego returned to Tepeyac. Here, the Blessed Mother told him to climb the hill and to pick the flowers that he would find in bloom. He obeyed, and although it was wintertime, he found roses flowering. He gathered the flowers and took them to Our Lady who carefully placed them in his mantle and told him to take them to the Bishop as "proof". When he opened his mantle, the flowers fell on the ground and there remained impressed, in place of the flowers, an image of the Blessed Mother, the apparition at Tepeyac.

With the Bishop's permission, Juan Diego lived the rest of his life as a hermit in a small hut near the chapel where the miraculous image was placed for veneration. Here he cared for the church and the first pilgrims who came to pray to the Mother of Jesus.

Much deeper than the "exterior grace" of having been "chosen" as Our Lady's "messenger", Juan Diego received the grace of interior enlightenment and from that moment, he began a life dedicated to prayer and the practice of virtue and boundless love of God and neighbor. He died in 1548 and was buried in the first chapel dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe. He was beatified on 6 May 1990 by Pope John Paul II in the Basilica of *Santa Maria di Guadalupe*, Mexico City.

The miraculous image, which is preserved in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, shows a woman with native features and dress. She is supported by an angel whose wings are reminiscent of one of the major gods of the traditional religion of that area. The moon is beneath her feet and her blue mantle is covered with gold stars. The black girdle about her waist signifies that she is pregnant. Thus, the image graphically depicts the fact that Christ is to be "born" again among the peoples of the New World, and is a message as relevant to the "New World" today as it was during the lifetime of Juan Diego.