

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know
when the time will come. (Mark 13:33)*

Watching, Waiting, Desiring

This weekend marks the start of Advent. The word *advent* refers to the coming or arrival of a notable person, thing, or event. In the Christian sense of the term, of course, it refers to the coming of Christ—both his first coming in Bethlehem and his second coming when all will be consummated in the eternal marriage of the Lamb. “Be watchful! Be alert!” says Jesus in this Sunday’s gospel. “You do not know when the time will come.” What keeps us alert and watchful? *Desire*. The final words of the Bible express the summation of human longing: “The Spirit and the bride say come!” Great saints such as Augustine, Gregory, and Bernard all tell us that Christ keeps his bride waiting to increase and *stretch her desire*. Desire is the faculty that not only pines after the divine gift but also receives it when it is given, so the wider our desire, the more we are capable of receiving. Christ wants us to be as wide open to his gift as possible, stretched in our desire unto infinity, because that’s

what he has to offer us: the wild ecstasy of infinite bliss in union with him. Come, Lord Jesus, come!

Scripture: Isaiah 63:16b–17, 19b; 64:2–7; Psalm 80:2–3, 15–16, 18–19; 1 Corinthians 1:3–9; Mark 13:33–37

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

People of the whole Judean countryside and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledge their sins. (Mark 1:5)

Glory Dwelling in Us Bodily

For the second Sunday of Advent, the Church offers us readings that proclaim the coming of God's glory: "Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together." If God's glory is the outward "irradiation" of his inner goodness, as St. John Paul II tells us, then our deepest yearning is to share in this glory, to be penetrated and permeated by it, and to have God's "glory dwelling in our land." Let us ponder the Christmas mystery anew: this

deepest of human desires is fulfilled in Mary! She is the “land” in which the glory of God dwells—*bodily*. This is why God took on flesh: to reveal “the glory of the Lord” so that “all people shall see it together.” But if all humanity is to see God’s glory, we must be “eager to be found without spot or blemish,” for only the pure of heart can “see God.” If purity is “the glory of God in the human body” as John Paul II expressed, then it is an utter gift. It is not something we accomplish on our own. It is something we *open* to by “acknowledging [our] sins” and allowing our bodies and souls to be washed clean in the waters of Baptism.

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1–5, 9–11; Psalm 85:9–10, 11–12, 13–14; 2 Peter 3:8–14; Mark 1:1–8

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.

In all circumstances give thanks.

(1 Thessalonians 5:16–18)

Rejoice in the Lord

This weekend we celebrate “Gaudete Sunday” (from the first word of the introit: “Rejoice in the Lord”). In the second reading St. Paul pairs the call to “rejoice always” with the call to “pray without ceasing.” A true understanding of Christian prayer is the doorway into a true understanding of Christian joy. Pope Benedict XVI reminded us: “The Fathers of the Church say that prayer, properly understood, is nothing other than *becoming a longing for God*.” As St. Augustine put it, “Desire is your prayer; and if your desire is without ceasing, your prayer will also be without ceasing.” Christian joy comes to us as we learn to let go of all of our God substitutes (our idols) and direct our deep desire for love and happiness toward the one who alone can fulfill it: “In my God is the joy of my soul,” says Isaiah. It is in God that our soul rejoices. This is what it means to be made “perfectly holy” and blameless in “spirit, soul, and body.” This is what it means to desire nothing but “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” At his coming, Isaiah teaches, he will be clothed “like a bridegroom,” we will be clothed “like a bride,” and we will “rejoice heartily in the Lord.”

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1–2a, 10–11; Luke 1:46–48, 49–50, 53–54; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24; John 1:6–8, 19–28

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. (Luke 1:35)

The Mystery Now Manifested

The familiar account of the annunciation is the subject of this Sunday's gospel. Here, according to the letter to the Romans, "the mystery kept secret for long ages [is] now manifested." What is it? *God wants to marry us!* While the prophets of the Old Testament spoke of God's love for Israel in this way, now, through the conception of God's Son in the womb of the Virgin, we learn, as Pope Francis asserts, that God's "spousal love" for humanity is not just a "manner of speaking." These are "real and true nuptials!" exclaims Francis. While Mary had "no relations with a man," the virginal union Mary experienced with God when the "power of the Most High" overshadowed her was an experience of everything to which the marital embrace is meant to point. The doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, therefore, is in no way a negation of human sexuality, as many tend to

think. Rather, it is the deepest possible affirmation of the real purpose and meaning of sexuality: to point us to union with God. As St. John Paul II observed, Mary's virginity is motivated by her "desire for total union with God." "She wanted to be his faithful bride."

Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:1–5, 8b–12, 14a, 16; Psalm 89:2–3, 4–5, 27–29; Romans 16:25–27; Luke 1:26–38

THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD (CHRISTMAS)

*For a child is born to us, a son is given to us;
upon his shoulder dominion rests. (Isaiah 9:5a)*

Christmas Fills Us with Wonder at the Mystery of the Woman's Body

There is a constant proclamation of a fundamental truth throughout the Christmas season that is essential but often overlooked: *God comes to us through woman's body!* "For a child is born to us, a son is given us," proclaims Isaiah in the Midnight Mass readings for Christmas. And in the gospel the angel announces that "a savior has been born for you

who is Christ the Lord.” To recognize woman’s body as the “portal” through which Eternity enters time, through which the Infinite enters the finite so we can be taken into Eternity, into Infinity; to recognize this is to be filled with awe and wonder at the mystery of woman. It is to be filled with the “spiritually mature fascination” St. John Paul II spoke of in his Theology of the Body. It’s a holy fascination in woman’s “mystery” that untwists the distorted fascination so prevalent in our world today. “The Bible (and subsequently the liturgy) honors and praises throughout the centuries ‘the womb that carried you and the breasts that you sucked’ (Lk 11:27). These words are a eulogy of motherhood, of femininity, of the feminine body in its typical expression of creative love” (TOB 21:5). These words, prayerfully pondered, will take us into the glory of the mystery and gift of Christmas.

Scripture (Mass at Midnight): Isaiah 9:1–6; Psalm 96:1–2a, 2b–3, 11–12, 13; Titus 2:11–14; Luke 2:1–14

THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH

*They took him up to Jerusalem to present him
to the Lord. (Luke 2:22b)*

Participating in the Family of God

After celebrating the Nativity of the Lord on Christmas, we now celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. Sometimes I feel sorry for Joseph. What would it be like to be the only sinner in your family? It would seem that whenever something went wrong in the Holy Family, it was Joseph's fault. But imagine how loved Joseph was by Jesus and Mary in his faults, failings, and sinfulness. *That's* what allowed Joseph to grow in holiness. Are we loved any less by Jesus and Mary in our faults, failings, and sinfulness? Holiness does not mean we have it all together. Holiness means we have all of our broken, wounded humanity "presented to the Lord," as we read in this Sunday's gospel. The Presentation of the Lord in the Temple is much more profound than we may first realize. From all eternity, the Son offers *himself* to the Father in love. But now, as a newborn babe, it's Joseph and

Mary who “present him to the Lord.” What this means is that a human family is now participating in the life of the Trinity. That is holiness: to participate in the life and love of the God who himself is a family: Father, Son, and Spirit. Lord, here we are, as we are. We present ourselves to you with all our faults, failings, and sinfulness. Help us to live in the knowledge that we are part of your Holy Family. Amen!

Scripture: Sirach 3:2–6, 12–14 (or Genesis 15:1–6; 21:1–3); Psalm 128:1–2, 3, 4–5 (or Psalm 105:1–2, 3–4, 5–6, 8–9); Colossians 3:12–21 (or Hebrews 11:8, 11–12, 17–19); Luke 2:22–40

THE OCTAVE DAY/
SOLEMNITY OF THE
BLESSED VIRGIN MARY,
MOTHER OF GOD

*When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son,
born of a woman. (Galatians 4:4)*