

NOW IS THE TIME

PREPARING THE WAY
OF THE LORD



Advent Reflections From

POPE FRANCIS

Prayer Before Reading

Jesus, God's Word made flesh,
you reveal the depths of God's love
and desire to be with us,
to live in us and through us
to change the world.

Empower us
with your Holy Spirit
so that we might be willing
to embrace our humanity
and live fully with you. *Amen.*
—*St. Jane Frances de Chantal*

Our Daily Advent Prayer

O loving God,
you desired to come
and dwell with us.
You have given us signs
of your hidden presence
in our world and in ourselves.
Help us to recognize
your unimaginable nearness
and to rejoice in the immensity
of your gracious love.
O Emmanuel, God-with-us,
desire of the nations,
savior of all people:
come and set us free. *Amen*

Acknowledgements

All reflections have been adapted from the encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, weekly papal audiences, addresses and homilies of Pope Francis.

INTRODUCTION

Jesus began his public ministry with the message that “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Turn your lives around and believe this good news” (Mark 1:14-15). Our Church year begins with Advent when we once again hear and respond to this message of Good News. God’s redeeming presence is itching to break into our hearts, into our lives and into our world to re-create the world as God intended it to be before sin disordered and disfigured it. God’s plan to restore God’s original order for all creation was inaugurated with the covenant community of Israel and fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

During Advent we once again focus on preparing a way for God to come into our hearts and into our world by intentionally seeking God’s presence which is already at work in us in our thoughts, prayers and actions. So to help us make the most of our Advent season, let us rely on the guidance of Pope Francis about how we might carry out some of the fundamental tasks of Advent: waiting, hoping, rejoicing and praying as we begin now to respond to God’s good news and live as God desires. Now is the time to discover God’s presence for a renewed relationship with God and with others. And when we do, everything changes and a whole new world begins.

—Steve Mueller, *Editor*



Prepare His Way to Come to Us

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.”

(Mark 1:3)

What is this kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims? We think immediately of the afterlife: eternal life. Of course it is true that the kingdom of God will extend without limit beyond earthly life, but the good news that Jesus brings us is that we do not need to wait for the kingdom of God in the future: it is already at hand. In some way it is already present and we may experience spiritual power from now on. God comes to establish his lordship in our history, today, every day, in our lives. And where it is welcomed with faith and humility, there love, joy and peace blossom.

The condition for entering and being a part of this kingdom is to make a change in our life, which is to convert, to convert every day, to take a step forward each day. It is a question of leaving behind the comfortable but misleading ways of the idols of this world—success at all costs; power to the detriment of the weak; the desire for wealth; pleasure at any price. And instead, preparing the way of the Lord. This does not take away our freedom, but gives us true happiness. With the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, God himself abides among us to free us from whatever breaks down our relationships with God and others.

What changes in my life do I most want to make this Advent?

Jesus Is Coming

“Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”
(Matthew 11:3)

The name Advent, from the Latin word for “coming,” reminds us of God’s coming, which is the root of our hope, the certainty that among the tribulations of the world, God’s consolation comes to us. This consolation is made not of words, but of presence—of God’s presence that comes among us. This announcement marks our Advent starting point. We know that, despite any favorable or contrary event, the Lord will not leave us alone. He came two thousand years ago and will come again at the end of time, but he also comes also today in my life, in

your life. Yes, this life of ours, with all its problems, anxieties and uncertainties, is visited by the Lord. Here is the source of our joy. The Lord has not grown tired and will never tire of us but wishes to come to visit us.

But the darkness of the world may often be preferred to the light of the Lord. To the Lord who comes and invites us to go to him, one may answer “no, I am not going.” Often it is not a direct “no,” but an insidious one. What happened in Jesus’ time? While something new and upsetting was about to arrive, no one cared, because everyone thought only of their own needs.

*How might I open my heart more fully to Jesus
who desires to be with me?*

Welcome Jesus

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

Advent invites us to lift our gaze and open our hearts to welcome Jesus. During Advent we do not just live in anticipation of Christmas. We are also called to rekindle the anticipation of the glorious return of Christ—when he will return at the end of time—preparing ourselves, with consistent and courageous choices, for our final encounter with him. We remember Christmas, we await the glorious return of Christ, and also our personal encounter: the day in which the Lord will call us to be with him.

During these four weeks we are called to leave behind a re-

signed and routine way of life and to go forth, nourishing hope, nourishing dreams for a new future. So we must be on guard against allowing ourselves to be oppressed by a selfish lifestyle or by the phrenetic pace of our days. The disciple is one who awaits the Lord and his kingdom. Jesus reminds us that the expectation of eternal life does not relieve us of the duty to render the world more just and more livable now. On the contrary, this very hope of ours of possessing the eternal kingdom impels us to work to improve the conditions of earthly life, especially for our weakest brothers and sisters.

*What might I do today to recognize
and share Jesus' presence with me?*

Stay Awake!

“Stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”
(Matthew 24:42)

Staying awake does not mean to have one's eyes materially open, but to have one's heart free and facing the right direction, that is, disposed to giving and to service. The slumber from which we must awaken is constituted of indifference, of vanity, of the inability to establish genuinely human relationships, of the inability to help someone who is alone, abandoned or ill. The expectation of Jesus who is coming must therefore be translated into a commitment to vigilance. Jesus proposes life as a vigil of diligent expectation, which heralds the bright day of eternity.

Being vigilant in life is the attitude of faithfully awaiting the

Lord, of being ready. He presents himself each day, knocks at the door of our heart. Those who open it will be blessed, because they will have a great reward. Indeed, the Lord will make himself a servant to his servants in the great banquet of his kingdom where he himself will serve them. To be able to enter one must be ready, awake and committed to serving others. Thus vigilance also means, in a concrete sense, being attentive to our neighbor in difficulty, allowing oneself to be called upon by his or her needs, without waiting for someone to ask us for help, but learning to prevent, to anticipate, as God always does with us.

*How might I be more attentive to those around me
who might need my help today?*

Watch for the Lord

“You know the time; it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep.
For our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”
(Romans 13:1)

Vigilance is necessary to discover God’s presence because God is constantly passing through our lives. The Lord always walks with us and many times takes us by the hand to guide us and lead us to make sure that we don’t fall on this difficult journey. In fact, those who trust in God know that a life of faith is not something static, but is dynamic. The life of faith is a continuous journey going towards ever new stages, that the Lord himself indicates day after day. He is Lord of the surprises, the Lord of novelty.

Vigilance also means being ready for the final and definitive encounter with the Lord. Each

of us will find ourselves facing that encounter one day. We all have that date and day awaiting us for that final encounter with the Lord. Jesus reminds us that life is a journey to eternity, which is why we are called to make all our talents bear fruit, without ever forgetting that here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is to come (Heb 13:14). In a sense, every moment becomes precious, and so we must live and act on this earth with our feet on the earth, walking on the earth, working on the earth, doing good things on the earth, but with a longing for heaven in our hearts.

*What might I do today to be better prepared
for my final encounter with Christ?*

You Do Not Know the Hour

“Watch, therefore; you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning.”

(Mark 13:35)

During Advent, we are called to expand the horizons of our hearts, to be amazed by the new life that presents itself each day. To do this, we must learn not to depend on our own certainties, on our own established strategies, because the Lord comes at a time that we do not imagine.

Advent is a constant reminder of the visits of the Lord to humanity. The first visit occurred with the Incarnation—Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. The second takes place in the present—the Lord visits us constantly, each day, walking alongside us and being a consoling presence. There will be the third and last visit which we proclaim each time

that we recite the Creed: “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.”

Keeping this in mind, there also comes an invitation to sobriety, not to be controlled by the things of this world, by material reality, but rather to govern them. If, by contrast, we allow ourselves to be influenced and overpowered by these things, we can forget our final encounter with the Lord is important. Thus everyday matters must have this horizon, and must be directed to that horizon. This final encounter with the Lord who comes for us is an invitation to be vigilant, because in not knowing when he will come, we need to be ever ready.

What material things most distract me from attending to God’s presence with me?

Watch and Wait with Hope

“Stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come.”
(Matthew 24:42)

Jesus wants to awaken us. So he urges: “Stay awake.” “Be careful, watch out.” Watching was the work of the sentinel, who watched while remaining awake while everyone else slept. To keep watch is not to give in to the sleep that envelops everyone. To be able to keep watch we need to have a certain hope: that the night will not always last, that dawn will soon come. It is the same for us. God is coming and God’s light will illuminate even the densest darkness.

But it is up to us today to keep watch, to be vigilant: to overcome the temptation that the meaning of life is to accumulate things. But this is a temptation

for the meaning of life is not to accumulate. It is up to us to unmask the deception that one is happy if one has so many things, to resist the dazzling lights of consumption, which will shine everywhere in this month, and to believe that prayer and charity are not lost time, but the greatest treasures. When we open our hearts to the Lord and to our brothers and sisters, there comes the precious good that things can never give us. Jesus warns us not to place trust in ephemeral goods, to use things without attachment and selfishness. We can be so attached to money, and have many things, but in the end we cannot take them with us.

*What attachments to things might be keeping me
from finding greater happiness?*

Hope for the Weary

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.”
(Matthew 11:28)

The message that God’s word wants to bring us is surely that of hope, the hope that does not disappoint. Hope is a little like leaven that expands our souls. There are difficult moments in life, but with hope the soul goes forward and looks ahead to what awaits us. We shall be in God’s presence, through the pure grace of the Lord, if we walk faithfully along the way of Jesus.

People always followed Jesus to hear his word—a word that gave hope! He speaks to the weary, worn out under the unbearable weight of neglect and indifference. Human indifference causes the needy so much pain! And worse is the indifference of Christians! On the fring-

es of society so many men and women are tried by indigence, but also by dissatisfaction with life and by frustration. So many are forced to emigrate from their homeland, risking their lives. Many more, every day, carry the weight of an economic system that exploits human beings, imposing on them an unbearable burden, which the few privileged do not want to bear. To these Jesus addresses his invitation: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened” (Mt 11:28). But he also says this to those who have everything, but whose heart is empty and without God. Even to them. Jesus’ invitation is for everyone. But especially for those who suffer the most.

What most keeps me from going to Jesus with my daily burdens?

Hope Does Not Disappoint

“Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

(Romans 5:5)

Hope is the virtue of those who, experiencing conflict—the struggle between life and death, good and evil—believe in the resurrection of Christ, in the victory of love. How many difficulties are present in the life of every person? Yet as great as these may seem, God never allows us to be overwhelmed by them. In the face of those moments of discouragement we experience in life, in our efforts to evangelize or to embody our faith, always know in your heart that God is by your side. God never abandons you! Let us never lose hope! Let us never allow it to die in our hearts!

So often, hope is dark. Everybody sometimes feels attracted

by the many idols which take the place of God and appear to offer hope: money, success, power, pleasure. Often a growing sense of loneliness and emptiness in the hearts of many people leads them to seek satisfaction in these ephemeral idols. But instead let us embrace spirituality, generosity, solidarity, perseverance, fraternity, joy. These are values whose deepest root is in the Christian faith. Let us always go forward to find Jesus for we know that hope does not disappoint. Yes, evil is present in our lives, but it does not have the upper hand. The one with the upper hand is God, and God is our hope!

*When have I most felt like God had abandoned me
and how did I respond?*

God Hopes Too

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”
(Romans 15:13)

Hope is a gift of God. We must ask for it. It is placed deep within each human heart in order to shed light on this life, so often troubled and clouded by so many situations that bring sadness and pain. We need to nourish the roots of our hope, primarily the certainty of God’s closeness and compassion, despite whatever evil we have done. There is no corner of our heart that cannot be touched by God’s love. Whenever someone makes a mistake, God’s mercy is all the more present, awakening repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace.

So God hopes too. While this may seem paradoxical, it is true. God’s mercy gives God no rest.

God is like that Father in the parable, who keeps hoping for the return of his wayward son (Lk 15:11-32) or the shepherd who won’t rest until he finds the lost sheep (Lk 15:5). So if God hopes, then no one should lose hope. For hope is the strength to keep moving forward. It is the power to press on towards the future and a changed life. It is the incentive to look to tomorrow, so that the love we have known, for all our failings, can show us a new path. In a word, hope is the proof, lying deep in our hearts, of the power of God’s mercy. That mercy invites us to keep looking ahead and to overcome our attachment to evil and sin through trust and abandonment to God.

*How have I most been moving forward in hope
with God’s help this Advent?*

Hoping to Meet Jesus

“I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you.” (John 16:22)

Hope is not something abstract. Hope instead means living in expectation of our concrete and definitive encounter with Jesus. And wisdom consists in being able to rejoice in the little encounters of daily life that prepare for that definitive encounter with Jesus. We know that God is with us now leading us on our journey. What we seek on our journey, that which we will receive in the end, is life with God. But we need to seek it each day and hope is what carries us forward on the journey toward that goal. Hope is perhaps the smallest virtue and

sometimes the most difficult to understand.

Living in hope is journeying towards a reward, yes, toward a happiness that we do not have now but we will have then. Hope is also a concrete virtue. It is not an idea, it is not being in a good place, but it is an everyday thing because it is directed towards an expected encounter. Jesus always emphasizes this part of hope. And every time we encounter Jesus in the Eucharist, in prayer, in the Gospel, in the poor, in the life of the community, we take another step toward this definitive encounter.

*How has my experience of Jesus now increased
my hope of meeting Jesus at my death?*

Keep Your Eyes Fixed on Jesus

“Let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

The author of the letter to the Hebrews speaks about hope and tells us that we must have the courage to go forward in running the race that lies before us. Then he says what is the very core of hope: “keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus.” This is the point: if we don’t keep our eyes fixed on Jesus it is difficult for us to have hope. We can perhaps be optimistic, be positive, but hope?

Hope is learned only by looking to Jesus, contemplating Jesus through our prayer. This contemplative prayer helps us to hope and teaches us to live

from the substance of the Gospel. And this is why we must practice this contemplative prayer in order to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. From here comes hope. And also in this way, our Christian life moves within the framework of memory and hope: the memory of the entire past journey, the memory of so many graces received from the Lord; and hope, looking to the Lord, who is the only one who can give us hope. And to look to the Lord, to know the Lord, we pick up the Gospel and we spend time praying in contemplation.

*How might I take more time to read
and contemplate Jesus in the Gospels?*

Lord, Give Us Hope

“I am weary with crying out; my throat is parched.
My eyes fail, from looking for my God.” (Psalm 69:4)

The spirit of tiredness takes away our hope. Tiredness is selective. It always causes us to see the negative in the moment we are living, and forget the good things we have received. When we feel desolate and cannot stand the spiritual journey, we seek refuge either in idols or in complaint. This spirit of fatigue leads us Christians to be dissatisfied and everything goes wrong. Jesus himself taught us this when he said we are like children playing games when we are overcome by this spirit of dissatisfaction.

Some Christians give in to failure without realizing that

this creates the perfect opportunity for the devil. They are afraid of consolation, afraid of hope, afraid of the Lord's caress. This is the life of many Christians. They live complaining, they live criticizing, they mutter and are unsatisfied. We Christians often can't bear the journey. We prefer failure, that is to say desolation. Those who spend their lives complaining are those who prefer failure, who fear to hope, who cannot trust in the resurrection of Jesus. Let us Christians ask the Lord to free us from this disease. May the Lord always give us hope for the future and the strength to keep going.

*What most makes me give in to complaining
instead of following Jesus' ways?*

Surprised by God's Love

“See, I am doing something new!
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19)

Anyone who is a man or a woman of hope—the great hope which faith gives us—knows that even in the midst of difficulties God acts and he surprises us. God always surprises us and always saves the best for us. God asks us to let ourselves be surprised by his love, to accept his surprises.

Let us trust God! Cut off from God, the experience of joy and hope runs out. If we draw near to God, if we stay with God, what seems to be cold water, difficulty, sin, is changed into the new wine of friendship with

God. If we walk in hope, allowing ourselves to be surprised by the new wine which Jesus offers us, we have joy in our hearts and we cannot fail to be witnesses of this joy.

Jesus has shown us that the face of God is that of a loving Father. Sin and death have been defeated. Christians cannot be pessimists! They do not look like someone in constant mourning. If we are truly in love with Christ and if we sense how much he loves us, our heart will light up with a joy that spreads to everyone around us.

*How might I be more open to the way
God wants to surprise me today?*

The Lord Is Near!

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! The Lord is near.”
(Philippians 4:4).

Today is called *Gaudete* Sunday, that is, the Sunday of joy. In the Liturgy the invitation rings out several times to rejoice, why? Because the Lord is near. Christmas is near. Thus the Christian message is called the Gospel; i.e., “Good News,” an announcement of joy for all people.

To have this Christian joy, first, we must pray; second, we must give thanks; and third, we must bring others the Good News. This is the vocation of Christ and the vocation of Christians as well. To go to others, to those in need, whether their needs be material or spiritual.

We have less than two weeks left until Christmas. In these

days, in order to have this joy in preparation for Christmas, first, pray: “Lord, let me live this Christmas with true joy.” Second, give thanks to the Lord for the good things God has given us, above all our faith. Third, think of how we can go to help those in difficulty and with problems to bring them a little peace and joy. Let us think to whom we can go to bring a little relief, a little peace, to those who suffer.

Pray, give thanks and help others. And like this we will arrive at the birth of the Anointed One, the Christ, as ones who have also been anointed in grace, prayer and acts of grace and help towards others.

*How might I best be most willing to serve
and help others who need so much?*

Our Joy Is Jesus Christ

“All you peoples, clap your hands; shout to God with joyful cries.”
(Psalm 47:2)

The joy of Christmas is a special joy. But it isn't just for Christmas day, it is for the entire life of a Christian. It is a serene and tranquil joy, a joy that forever accompanies the Christian. Even in difficult moments, this joy becomes peace. The Christian never loses this peace, even in suffering. This peace is a gift from the Lord. Christian joy is a gift from the Lord.

Christian joy, like hope, is founded on God's faithfulness, on the certainty that God always keeps his promises. The prophet Isaiah exhorts those who have lost their way and have lost heart to entrust themselves to the faithfulness of the Lord, for

God's salvation will not delay in bursting into their lives. All those who have encountered Jesus along the way experience a serenity and joy in their hearts which nothing and no one can take away.

Our joy is Jesus Christ, his faithful love is inexhaustible! Therefore, when a Christian becomes sad, it means that he has distanced himself from Jesus. But then we must not leave him alone! We should pray for him, and make him feel the warmth of the community. God is always with us in order to help us to go forward. God loves us so very much and that is why God is with us, to strengthen us, to help us go forward.

*How might I draw closer to Jesus
and re-experience the joy he promises?*

Hearts Filled with Joy

“Where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.”

(Matthew 6:21)

The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dig-

nified and fulfilled life. It is not God's will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ.

The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew. I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved.

How might I put aside my interests to make more room for others, especially those in need at this time?

Missionaries of Joy

“You will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses.” (Acts 1:8)

The Church is apostolic because she is sent to bring the Gospel to all the world. She continues in history the mission that Jesus entrusted to the Apostles. Christ invites all to “go out” and encounter others. He sends us, he asks us to spread the joy of the Gospel! Once again let us ask ourselves are we missionaries by our words, and especially by our Christian life, by our witness? Or are we Christians closed in our hearts and in our churches, sacristy Christians? Are we Christians in name only, who live like pagans? We must ask ourselves these questions. Let us rediscover today all the beauty

and responsibility of being the Church apostolic and proclaim the Gospel by our life and by our words.

St. Paul indicates the conditions for being “missionaries of joy”: praying constantly, always giving thanks to God, giving way to his Spirit, seeking the good and avoiding evil (1 Thes 5:17-22). If this becomes our lifestyle, then the Good News will be able to enter so many homes and help people and families to rediscover that in Jesus lies salvation. In him it is possible to find interior peace and the strength to face different life situations every day, even the heaviest and most difficult.

*With whom might I share my experience
of God’s “Good News” today?*

The Spirit Urges Us Forward

“Why are you downcast, my soul; why do you groan within me? Wait for God, for I shall again praise him, my savior and my God.” (Psalm 42:6)

Sadness is not a Christian attitude. Even if life isn't a carnival, and there are so many difficulties, you can overcome them and go forward but, it takes daily dialogue with the Holy Spirit, the one who accompanies us. But how can one not be sad? To counter sadness, we pray to the Lord to keep the renewed youth of the Spirit within us. It is the Holy Spirit, who ensures that we continue to be renewed and youthful in our faith.

The Holy Spirit is the one who makes us able to carry our crosses. The Holy Spirit renews everything. The Holy Spirit accompanies us in life and sustains

us. We need a daily dialogue with the Holy Spirit, who is always with us. It is the great gift that Jesus left us this support that keeps us going.

The Holy Spirit helps us to repent and makes us look ahead. Talk to the Spirit who will give you support. In life there are difficult times but at such times we feel that the Spirit helps us move forward and overcome the difficulties we face. The Holy Spirit is the strength of God who gives us consolation and strength to continue forward. Let us be docile to the Holy Spirit, to that Spirit who comes to us and makes us go forward on the path of holiness.

How might I be more attentive to the urging of the Holy Spirit to move forward on my spiritual journey?

Strive for Harmony

“Complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. Humbly regard others as more important than yourselves.” (Philippians 2:1-3)

To have joy when preparing for Christmas, first pray: “Lord, let me live this Christmas with true joy.” Not with the joy of consumerism that leads me to Christmas with anxiety, because “ah, I’m missing this, I’m missing that.” The true joy which we experience in the family is not superficial. It does not come from material objects or from the fact that everything seems to be going well. True joy comes from a profound harmony between persons, something which we all feel in our hearts and which makes us experience the beauty of togetherness, of mutual support along life’s journey.

But the basis of this feeling

of deep joy is God’s presence in the family and God’s love, which is welcoming, merciful and respectful towards all. And above all, a love which is patient. Patience is a virtue of God and God teaches us how to cultivate it in family life, how to be patient among ourselves, and lovingly so with each other. God alone knows how to create harmony from differences. But if God’s love is lacking, the family loses its harmony, self-centeredness prevails and joy fades. But the family which experiences the joy of faith communicates it naturally. Let us think where I can go to bring a little relief, a little peace, to those who suffer.

How might I bring some relief or help for those who are suffering some hardship today?

“I Am Coming Soon”

“Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!”
(Revelation 22:20)

“Thy kingdom come,” Christians persistently pray in the Our Father. Jesus has come, but why is this kingdom so slow to come about? The world is still marked by sin, inhabited by many people who suffer, by people who do not want to reconcile and do not forgive, by war and many forms of exploitation like child trafficking. Many men and women still live with closed hearts.

All these facts show that Christ’s victory has not yet been completely attained. It is above all in these situations that praying “Thy kingdom come,” is like

saying: “We need you, Father! We need you, Jesus. We need you, Lord, to be everywhere and forever in our midst!”

We might also pray the words of hope with which the Holy Spirit sealed all the Sacred Scriptures: when the Lord says “Yes, I am coming soon” and the Church responds: “Come, Lord, Jesus.” “Thy kingdom come” is like saying “Come Lord Jesus.” And indeed Jesus comes, in his own way, every day. We have to trust in this. And when we pray “Thy kingdom come,” we feel him say in our heart: “yes, yes, I am coming, and I am coming soon.”

*What might I do today to welcome Jesus more fully
into my heart and into my life?*

Be Mindful and Pray

“Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test.
The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” (Mark 14:38)

The attitude to best experience the time of awaiting the Lord is that of prayer. To be mindful and to pray: this is how to live the time between now and Christmas. Inner listlessness comes from always focusing on ourselves and being blocked by our own life, with its problems, its joys and its suffering, but always centered on ourselves. This is wearying and closes us off to hope.

Advent invites us to commit to vigilance, looking beyond ourselves, expanding our mind and heart in order to open ourselves up to the needs of others and to the desire for a new world. It is the desire of many people tormented by hunger,

by injustice and by war. It is the desire of the poor, the weak, the abandoned. This is a favorable time to open our hearts, to ask ourselves concrete questions about how and for whom we expend our lives.

Prayer turns our thoughts and our hearts to Jesus who is about to come. We await Jesus and we wish to await him in prayer which is closely linked to vigilance, opening oneself to others, being mindful, not withdrawing into ourselves. But if we think of Christmas only in the light of consumerism, of seeing what I can buy in order to do this and that, of a worldly celebration, Jesus will pass by and we will not find him.

*How might I give more time to prayer this week
as I prepare to celebrate Christmas?*

Persevere in Prayer

“Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil with good.”
(Romans 12:21)

God invites us to pray insistently not because God is unaware of our needs or because God is not listening to us. On the contrary, God is always listening and knows everything about us lovingly. On our daily journey, especially in times of difficulty, in the battle against the evil that is outside and within us, the Lord is not far away but by our side. We battle with God beside us, and our weapon is prayer which makes us feel God's presence beside us, God's mercy and also God's help. But the battle against evil is a long and hard one requiring patience and endurance to prevail.

This is how it is: there is a

battle to be waged each day, but God is our ally, trust in God is our strength and prayer is the expression of this trust. Therefore Jesus assures us of the victory, but at the end he asks: “when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Lk 18:8). If faith is snuffed out, prayer is snuffed out, and we walk in the dark. We become lost on the path of life. Pray always, but not in order to convince the Lord by dint of words! God knows our needs better than we do! Indeed persevering prayer is the expression of faith in a God who calls us to fight with him every day and at every moment in order to conquer evil with good.

How might I be more attentive to God-with-me today?

Changing the World

“And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:12)

Today is a good day to get closer to the crib, the manger, to say thank you. Let us receive the gift that is Jesus, in order then to become a gift like Jesus. Becoming a gift is giving meaning to life. And it is the best way to change the world. We change, the Church changes, history changes when we stop trying to change others but try to change ourselves, making our lives a gift.

Jesus shows us this. He did not change history by pressuring anyone or by the force of words, but with the gift of his life. He didn't wait for us to become good before he loved us, but he

gave himself freely to us. May we not wait for our neighbors to become good before we do good for them, for the Church to be perfect before we love her, for others to respect us before we serve them. Let's begin with ourselves. This is what it means freely to accept the gift of grace.

Before we go in search of God, let us allow ourselves be sought by him, who seeks us first. Let us not begin with our abilities, but with his grace, because he, Jesus, is the Savior. Let us contemplate the child and let ourselves be enveloped by his tenderness. We have no more excuses not to let ourselves be loved by him.

*How might I give myself more fully to helping others
in our hectic Christmas preparation?*

Now Everything Changes

“You have been born anew, not from perishable but from imperishable seed, through the living and abiding word of God.” (1 Peter 1:23)

When the Son of God is born, everything changes. The Savior of the world comes to partake of our human nature. No longer are we alone and forsaken. The true light has come to illumine our lives so often beset by the darkness of sin. Now we once more discover who we are! Through Advent we have been shown the way to reach the journey's end. Now must we put away all fear and dread, for the light shows us the path to Bethlehem. We must set out to see our Savior lying in a manger. This child teaches us what is truly essential in our lives.

In a society so often intoxicat-

ed by consumerism and hedonism, wealth and extravagance, appearances and narcissism, this child calls us to act soberly, in other words, in a way that is simple, balanced, consistent, capable of seeing and doing what is essential. In a world which all too often is merciless to the sinner and lenient to the sin, we need to cultivate a strong sense of justice, to discern and to do God's will. Amid a culture of indifference which not infrequently turns ruthless, our style of life should instead be filled with empathy, compassion and mercy, drawn daily from the wellspring of prayer.

What changes in my life have set me on a more challenging, yet more rewarding path?

God's Abounding Love Revealed

“The grace of God has appeared, saving all and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age.” (Titus 2:11-12)

God’s grace has appeared. Today we realize that, while we were not up to it, God made himself small for us. As we went about our own deeds, God came among us. Christmas reminds us that God continues to love us all, even the worst of us. To me, to you, to each of us he says today: “I love you and I will always love you, you are precious in my eyes.”

God does not love you because you think right and behave well; God just loves you. God’s love is unconditional, it’s not up to you. You may have misconceptions, you may have

made a complete mess of things, but the Lord does not give up loving you. How often do we think that God is good if we are good and that God punishes us if we are bad?

It’s not like that. In our sins, God continues to love us. God’s love does not change. God is not fickle but faithful and patient. This is the gift we find at Christmas. We discover with amazement that the Lord is absolute gratuity, absolute tender love. God’s glory does not dazzle us. God’s presence does not frighten us. God was born in utter poverty, to win our hearts with the wealth of his love.

*How have I experienced both birth and death
in my life this Advent and Christmas?*

Rejoice! Our Savior Is Born

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

Tonight we are called to let ourselves be drawn in by the feeling of exultation. It is a joy that touches our innermost being, as we await Jesus, who has already come to bring salvation to the world, the promised Messiah, born in Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary.

Christian joy is not a superficial or purely emotional cheerfulness, nor is it the cheerfulness of worldliness or of consumerism. Rather it entails a more authentic joy, the taste of which we are called to rediscover. True joy touches our innermost being as we await Jesus, the promised Messiah, born in Bethlehem who came to bring salvation to the world.

It is heartfelt joy, which leads

us forth and gives us courage. The Lord comes. He comes into our life as a liberator to free us from all forms of interior and exterior slavery. He shows us the path of faithfulness, of patience and of perseverance because, upon his return, our joy will be overflowing. Christmas is near, the signs of his approach like nativity scenes and Christmas trees are evident along our streets and in our houses. These outward signs invite us to welcome the Lord who always comes and knocks at our door, knocks at our heart, in order to draw near to us. He invites us to recognize his presence among the brothers and sisters who pass beside us, especially the weakest and most needy.

*When have I most experienced the joy that comes
from God's presence with me?*

Jesus Is the Smile of God

“For your love is better than life; my lips shall ever praise you!”

(Psalm 63:4)

When we look at a new-born baby, we are led to smile at it, and if a smile blossoms on its small face, then we feel a simple, naive emotion. The child responds to our gaze, but his smile is much more powerful, because it is new and pure, and in us adults it awakens a certain nostalgia for childhood. This happened in a unique way between Mary and Joseph and Jesus. These new parents made a smile blossom on the lips of their new-born child. But when this happened, their hearts were filled with a new joy.

Jesus is the smile of God. He came to reveal to us the love of our heavenly Father, his good-

ness, and the first way he did so was to smile at his parents, like every newborn child in this world. And they, because of their great faith, were able to accept that message. They recognized in Jesus' smile God's mercy for them and for all those who were waiting for his coming.

Beholding the manger we too relive this experience: to look at the child Jesus and feel that God is smiling at us there, and smiling at all the poor of the earth, at all those who await salvation, who hope for a more fraternal world, where there is no more war and violence, where every man and woman can live in his or her dignity as son and daughter of God.

*How might I spend time just enjoying the smile of God
who lovingly looks at me today?*

God Is with Us

“Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means “God is with us.” (Matthew 1:23)

Today as we contemplate the birth of Jesus, we must note that the Gospel of Christ is not a fairy tale, it is not a myth nor just an uplifting tale. The Gospel of Christ is the full revelation of God’s plan for human beings and the world. It is a message that is both simple and grandiose, that prompts us to ask ourselves: what concrete project has the Lord placed in me, as he continues to make his birth present among us?

The nativity scene is like a living Gospel, reminding us of one essential thing: that God did not remain invisible in heaven, but came to earth, becoming a human child. God is not a distant

lord or a detached judge, but a humble love, descended down to us. The child in the crib conveys his tenderness to us. The child with open arms tells us that God has come to embrace our humanity. It is good to stand in front of the nativity scene and there to confide in the Lord about our lives, to talk to God about the people and situations we care about, to share our expectations and concerns. We remember that Jesus came to us, that he became human like us, and that he accompanies us. In everyday life we are no longer alone, for he lives with us. He doesn’t magically change things, but if we accept him, everything can change. Happy Christmas!

*What might Jesus be calling me to do in the coming year
to imitate his loving concern for others?*