

ADVENT: A TIME TO BE WITNESSES OF HOPE

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Advent: time of waiting in the Lord

Advent is a time of waiting, a time in which our hope should be strengthened... to become witnesses of hope for the world. Advent is a time in which we trustingly await the visit, the manifestation of God who became man to save us, to redeem man...to redeem every human reality...to draw man and his reality close to God, to divine life. It is a time of joyful and expectant waiting since what we await is the coming of our Salvation...it is the time that the patriarchs and prophets were waiting and longing for, and the time of so many sighs, the time that Our Lady waited, yearned for...and that came to pass when by the power of her purity of faith and her undivided love, by and with her fiat, the Word became Flesh. The time in which St. Joseph, with his total donation of himself to the gift of the Mother and the Child became a collaborator with and guardian of, together with Our Lady, the great mystery of the Incarnation. Advent...a time of waiting, a time to set out on the journey to encounter the Savior...a time of prayer, of purification, a time to grow in faith, hope and love, a time to ask fundamental questions, and of responses that give a new direction to our life. "Advent," says our Holy Father, Pope Francis, returns us to the horizon of hope, a hope that does not disappoint because it is founded on the Word of God. A hope that does not disappoint, simply because the Lord never disappoints! He is faithful!" (Angelus, December 1, 2013)

Advent is a time of waiting and preparation to contemplate and participate in the manifestations of God...of a God who became flesh and dwelt among us, who becomes flesh and enters into the history of all of our personal, family, community, ecclesiastical, and world realities. Because we have seen and come to believe in the love that God has for us, because we believe in a God who has entered history...and does not cease doing so, we are witnesses of hope. We believe in a God who is love, who has not abandoned us, nor left us alone or as orphans, but who is among us, who has entered into the stables and mangers of humanity, in its poverty in order to enrich it, has entered into scarcity to fill it with good things, in humanity's sin to purify it and liberate it, into its sufferings to embrace them...He has become man to redeem man. Christmas is the most profoundly human celebration of faith and hope, because it allows us to feel deeply the love of God for humanity, who has wanted to take on our humanity and make it His.

Because of this, we always live in Advent, which means "awaiting the presence, the coming of God," since we live in the constant expectation of seeing an "incarnation of God" in our human realities. We live with Christian hope...we believe, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI teaches us in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*: "*St. Paul reminds the Thessalonians: you must not 'grieve as others do who have no hope' (1 Th 4:13). Here too we see as a distinguishing mark of Christians the fact that they have a future: it is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness. Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well. The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.*" (no. 2) Because our whole present, even though it may contain painful and dark situations, has a future...in which "there will be a visitation of God" ... "a coming of God"... A visit in which He will come to "dwell among us" and to "be close to us" in which He will come to "illumine any darkness." Because of this everything in our present life has traces of the beauty of Advent...we do not walk towards an uncertain future as if it were an abyss or emptiness, our future does not end in emptiness, but will be full of the presence of God and His interventions. When we see all things as part of a constant Advent, there is always space, availability to advance along the way, even though it may be through the

desert, without finding a place to stay, but trusting that even though it might be in a stable, God will be born, there will be a visit, Emmanuel will be present.

“Redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey.” (Spe Salvi, no 1)

Advent: Time of hope and prayer

“Wait for the LORD, take courage; be stouthearted, wait for the LORD!”
(Ps. 27:14)

Two virtues which sustain our heart in the waiting is courage or fortitude, (fidelity on the journey) and stoutheartedness which is to live without fear because we feel and know that we are in the hands of the One who loves us with an infinite, eternal, faithful, permanent, and unchangeable love... and that He is stronger than everything and everyone. *Rom 8:31-36 What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us.”* Hope is a gift that changes the life of the one who receives it, as the experience of many saints show us. In what does such a great and “trustworthy” hope consist? In a word, *it consists in the knowledge of God, in the discovery of His Heart as that of a good and merciful Father.* Jesus, with his death on the cross and with his resurrection, has revealed His face, the face of a God who is so great in love that He has given us an unbreakable hope that not even death can undermine, since the life of the one who trusts in this Father opens to the perspective of eternal happiness.



But to learn to hope (to trust in surrender, hope with faith in the fulfillment of His promises) in God in this way requires a life of deep prayer in which we enter into interior dialogue with the Heart of God, with the reason for our hope. It is in prayer that we learn to hope in God...to hope with God, and to hope in what God will do, even when it surpasses our understanding. To hope in God...! Prayer is the school of witnesses to hope!

The first place where the heart learns to “hope in God”, to be a witness of hope is prayer:

1. We grow in the virtue of hope through prayer and reflection on the Word of God...
In Psalm 131: 5-7, the psalmist expresses to us his experience of hope: *“I wait for the LORD, my soul waits and I hope for his word. My soul looks for the Lord more than sentinels for daybreak. More than sentinels for daybreak, let Israel hope in the LORD, For with the LORD is mercy, with him is plenteous redemption.”*
2. Prayer sustains the hope of the one who waits, many times in loneliness and the darkness of uncertainty.
“A first essential setting for learning hope is prayer. When no one listens to me anymore, God still listens to me. When I can no longer talk to anyone or call upon anyone, I can always talk to God. When there is no longer anyone to help me deal with a need or expectation that goes beyond the human capacity for hope, he can help me[25]. When I have been plunged into complete solitude ...; if I pray I am never totally alone. The late Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, a prisoner for thirteen years, nine of them spent in solitary confinement, has left us a precious little book: Prayers of Hope. During thirteen years in jail, in a situation of seemingly utter hopelessness, the fact that he could listen and speak to God became for him an increasing power of hope, which enabled him, after his release, to become for people all over the world a witness to hope—to that great hope which does not wane even in the nights of solitude.”
3. Prayer purifies the motivations of our desires, of our hope, of our expectations... Spe Salvi, 33-34
St. Augustine illustrated the intimate relationship between prayer and hope in a beautiful way in a homily on the *First Letter of St. John*.

- He defines prayer as an exercise of desire. He defines prayer as an exercise of desire. Man was created for greatness—for God himself; he was created to be filled by God. But his heart is too small for the greatness to which it is destined. He must grow in the beatitudes in order to “see God, inherit his land, be called a child of God, to be consoled, to receive mercy, and to receive the kingdom.”
- It has to be expanded, prepared. “It must be stretched. “By delaying [his gift], God strengthens our desire; through desire he enlarges our soul and by expanding it he increases its capacity [for receiving him]”. Augustine refers to Saint Paul, who speaks of himself as straining forward to the things that are to come (cf. Phil 3:13)”
- He then uses a very beautiful image to describe this process of enlargement and preparation of the human heart. “Suppose that God wishes to fill you with honey [a symbol of God's tenderness and goodness]; but if you are full of vinegar, where will you put the honey?” The vessel, that is your heart, must first be **enlarged and then cleansed, freed** from the vinegar and its taste. This requires hard work and is painful, but in this way alone do we become suited to that for which we are destined[26].
- through this effort by which we are freed from vinegar and the taste of vinegar, not only are we made free for God, but we also become open to others. It is only by becoming children of God, that we can be with our common Father. To pray is not to step outside history and withdraw to our own private corner of happiness. When we pray properly we undergo a process of inner purification which opens us up to God and thus to our fellow human beings as well.
- In prayer we must learn what we can truly ask of God—what is worthy of God. We must learn that we cannot pray against others. We must learn that we cannot ask for the superficial and comfortable things that we desire at this moment—that meagre, misplaced hope that leads us away from God...because we deceive ourselves.
- We must learn to purify our desires and our hopes. We must free ourselves from the hidden lies with which we deceive ourselves. God sees through them, and when we come before God, we too are forced to recognize them. “But who can discern his errors? Clear me from hidden faults” prays the Psalmist (Ps 19:12 [18:13]). Failure to recognize my guilt, the illusion of my innocence, does not justify me and does not save me, because I am culpable for the numbness of my conscience and my incapacity to recognize the evil in me for what it is.
- 34. For prayer to develop this power of purification, it must on the one hand be something very personal, an encounter between my intimate self and God, the living God. my encounter with God awakens my conscience in such a way that it no longer aims at self-justification, and is no longer a mere reflection of me and the voices of the world.
- Only in sincere prayer can we speak to God and how God speaks to us. In this way we undergo those purifications by which we become open to God and are prepared for the service of our fellow human beings. We become capable of the great hope, and thus we become ministers of hope for others. Hope in a Christian sense is always hope for others as well. It is an active hope, in which we struggle to prevent things moving towards the “perverse end”. It is an active hope also in the sense that we keep the world open to God. Hoping and drawing His visit, His incarnation, through prayer into the history of today.

Advent: a time for fundamental questions that give a reason for our hope

In Advent, we set out towards an encounter with the Mystery of the Incarnation, to the encounter with God who has loved humanity to the point of the foolishness of the Incarnation, that He has not spared anything to save us... Advent is a time of waiting trustingly that God will



reveal himself to us as God who is love...entirely love...and that we must go out to encounter Him. Like the Magi, the shepherds...we have to go out to encounter him where he wants to reveal himself (like Our Lady and St. Joseph), and so Advent is a time of pilgrimage, a time to walk towards the goal (Christ himself)...and to encounter the mystery of Christ who definitively enters human history, your history, as a baby in a manger, with littleness, poverty, purity, meekness, humility, justice, peace. He enters this way to ask us fundamental questions along our journey. Before the manger, we should contemplate the truth about the human person...He is the way, the truth and the life... our journey must end in Him...and find the truth that He reveals to us, the life that He offers us.

In Advent, together with Our Lady and St. Joseph, who set out on their journey towards Bethlehem, towards the stable and the manger...we should ask ourselves: where are you going? What are you waiting for, what do you desire? What are you expecting to find in the manger? What does it mean for your life to contemplate God made man who became a child? When Our Lady appeared to Juan Diego, and I do not think that we should pass over without notice the detail that the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe lies in the middle of Advent, the heart of our journey, like a star that should illumine our way...in their first encounter, Our Lady asks Juan Diego, "*Juan Diegito, where are you going?*"

Advent, the manifestation of God becomes man in our history, always evokes questions in the human heart...some to eliminate His presence...others to welcome the effects of His visit. In the Gospel of St. Matthew, chapter 2: 1-11: When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage." After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." They were overjoyed at seeing the star!



The Virgin Mary, star and sign of hope (SS 50)

Human life is a journey. Towards what destination? How do we find the way? Life is like a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy, a voyage in which we watch for the stars that indicate the route.

- The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives. They are lights of hope. Certainly, Jesus Christ is the true light, the sun that has risen above all the shadows of history. But to reach him we also need lights close by—people who shine with his light and so guide us along our way. Who more than Mary could be a star of hope for us? *With her "yes" she opened the door of our world to God himself*; she became the living Ark of the Covenant, in whom God took flesh, became one of us, and pitched his tent among us (cf. Jn 1:14).

- Holy Mary, you belonged to the humble and great souls of Israel who, like Simeon, were “looking for the consolation of Israel” (Lk 2:25) and hoping, like Anna, “for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Lk 2:38). Your life was thoroughly imbued with the sacred scriptures of Israel which spoke of hope, of the promise made to Abraham and his descendants (cf. Lk 1:55). In this way we can appreciate the holy fear that overcame you when the angel of the Lord appeared to you and told you that you would give birth to the One who was the hope of Israel, the One awaited by the world.
- Through you, through your “yes”, the hope of the ages became reality, entering this world and its history. You bowed low before the greatness of this task and gave your consent: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). When you hastened with holy joy across the mountains of Judea to see your cousin Elizabeth, you became the image of the Church to come, which carries the hope of the world in her womb across the mountains of history.
- But alongside the joy which, with your Magnificat, you proclaimed in word and song for all the centuries to hear, you also knew the dark sayings of the prophets about the suffering of the servant of God in this world. Shining over his birth in the stable at Bethlehem, there were angels in splendour who brought the good news to the shepherds, but at the same time the lowliness of God in this world was all too palpable. The old man Simeon spoke to you of the sword which would pierce your soul (cf. Lk 2:35), of the sign of contradiction that your Son would be in this world.
- when Jesus began his public ministry, you had to step aside, so that a new family could grow, the family which it was his mission to establish and which would be made up of those who heard his word and kept it (cf. Lk 11:27f). Notwithstanding the great joy that marked the beginning of Jesus's ministry, in the synagogue of Nazareth you must already have experienced the truth of the saying about the “sign of contradiction” (cf. Lk 4:28ff). In this way you saw the growing power of hostility and rejection which built up around Jesus until the hour of the Cross, when you had to look upon the Saviour of the world, the heir of David, the Son of God dying like a failure, exposed to mockery, between criminals. Then you received the word of Jesus: “Woman, behold, your Son!” (Jn 19:26). From the Cross you received a new mission.
- From the Cross you became a mother in a new way: the mother of all those who believe in your Son Jesus and wish to follow him. The sword of sorrow pierced your heart. Did hope die? Did the world remain definitively without light, and life without purpose? At that moment, deep down, you probably listened again to the word spoken by the angel in answer to your fear at the time of the Annunciation: “Do not be afraid, Mary!” (Lk 1:30). How many times had the Lord, your Son, said the same thing to his disciples: do not be afraid! In your heart, you heard this word again during the night of Golgotha. Before the hour of his betrayal he had said to his disciples: “Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). “Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (Jn 14:27). “Do not be afraid, Mary!” In that hour at Nazareth the angel had also said to you: “Of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:33). Could it have ended before it began? No, at the foot of the Cross, on the strength of Jesus's own word, you became the mother of believers.
- In this faith, which even in the darkness of Holy Saturday bore the certitude of hope, you made your way towards Easter morning. The joy of the Resurrection touched your heart and united you in a new way to the disciples, destined to become the family of Jesus through faith. In this way you were in the midst of the community of believers, who in the days following the Ascension prayed with one voice for the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:14) and then received that gift on the day of Pentecost. *The “Kingdom” of Jesus was not as might have been imagined. It began in that hour, and of this “Kingdom” there will be no end. Thus you remain in the midst of the disciples as their Mother, as the Mother of hope.* Holy Mary, Mother of God, our Mother, teach us to believe, to hope, to love with you. Show us the way to his Kingdom! Star of the Sea, shine upon us and guide us on our way!



You who are totally pure and transparent to receive God and communicate Him, guide us on the path of the purification of our expectations, our hopes, and our desires. Be the star that guides us on the journey towards our encounter with the true face of Christ, with Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. May we walk with you towards this encounter, may we hope with your Heart in the great things that the Almighty does, the great things that he does in humble and poor hearts, in the God who has definitively entered into human history.

