

First Sunday of Advent, C – December 2, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 750 words

“The description we hear from the lips of Jesus [on] this first Sunday of Advent sounds [rather] like a nightmare: omens in the heavens, nations in dismay, roaring oceans, people dying of fright, apocalyptic visions in the sky, the day assaulting us like a weapon and ambushing us like a trap. [But t]he only way to escape the horrors of a bad dream is to wake up. And that is why [Christ] warns us not to ‘become drowsy.’”¹ The season of Advent exists precisely for this purpose: to help us wake up if we are asleep, or to be stronger in our wakefulness. This is a season of preparation, not only for the great feast of Christmas, but indeed, for our Lord’s return at the end of time if we live to see it, or his return at the end of our lives – whenever that moment may come.

Yes, this is a season of preparation, and so we are called to do penance. Even if our whole confused world is already filled with the sights, sounds, and tastes of Christmas – and has been for weeks now – yet here in the Church we see the penitential purple; we experience a more subdued form of worship, with the Gloria being omitted and the chants and hymns somewhat more somber; and we Catholics, are called to prepare. We fast before we feast! This is the rhythm of a Catholic life. The world today tells us to feast constantly: to indulge, to scratch every itch; to “just do it”. But the Lord invites us to take a longer view and see this life as a practice for the life to come – thus, even though we do rehearse its joys, yet we also chasten ourselves with penance.

Therefore: Are we awake, or have we given in to drowsiness – or even spiritual slumber? We need a basic Catholic checkup:

1. When was the last time you made a good confession? Can you count it in weeks or would it rather be months or even years? We should go regularly, to make true progress on the way. God gives us special graces in every good confession, even to overcome our faults and lesser sins. Regular, even frequent confession has always been encouraged by the saints and the great teachers of our faith. Will you receive the sacrament this Advent? We make time for all kinds of things – do we make time for regular confession?
2. Are you beginning and ending each day with prayer? Do you start out the day by giving it to God or to your smartphone? By giving thanks or by sighing about all that must be done? Do you end your day by asking God’s forgiveness for all failings and resolving to do better, including thinking through what that resolve requires? But giving thanks: what a needful thing in our time! Do you find new ways to thank God each day? To ask him for both needs and wants? To pray for your loved ones and your enemies?

Then, finally:

3. What about love of neighbor? Do we look for opportunities to serve – or encounter them begrudgingly? Do we strive to forgive, difficult though it be – seeking God’s help to do so? Do we strive to see Christ in the poor and help them in meaningful ways, affirming their dignity as persons? Do we faithfully support the Church, not only financially but also through getting involved? Do we pray for vocations and for the clergy? Have we considered that our bishop will be retiring soon, and started praying for his replacement?

¹ Peter John Cameron, O.P., *To Praise, To Bless, To Preach* [Year C] (1999: Huntington, IN; Our Sunday Visitor Publishing), page 21.

In sum, to profit from this Advent and serve God wakefully and not drowsily, we should be concerned not only with being right with him, but with actively loving both him and our neighbor. If we make earnest about pursuing these worthy goals, especially during this penitential season, we will have made a preparation for Christmas – and the Lord’s return – that is truly worthy of the name of ‘Catholic’ that we bear. Our faith is such a gift and we Catholics have so much to offer our world! Let us live out these liturgical seasons! It is so easy to give in to handwringing and lament: “How hard it is to observe Advent when the whole world is already in Christmas!” But living the Catholic faith has always required intentionality and resolve: may the Lord grant us this grace and help us to be ready to meet him when he comes. Amen.