

Happy new liturgical year! We have just begun year “A” (last Sunday was the last one of Year “C”). As far as Sunday Masses go, there is a three year cycle (A,B &C). This time of preparation for Christmas is one which is filled with various graces which God is waiting to bestow upon those who show that they desire such a gift.

If one was not already familiar with the liturgical calendar and readings, he/she would probably be surprised to see that the readings we have for today, the first Sunday of Advent is not so much about Advent, but rather are a continuation of the theme we had for the end of the liturgical year: that of final judgment. However, if we look more closely, we come to see that such readings are also based upon our having hope precisely due to the Word becoming Incarnate, the beginning of the fulfillment of the plan of salvation. Let us then consider these readings under that aspect.

The first reading is from Isaiah, who prophesized much concerning the coming of the savior. As has been mentioned before, the prophecies in Scripture often refer to two different coming events: those which are to occur before the final judgment, and the second coming of Christ and His being the Judge of the living and the dead. Here Isaiah speaks of the coming of the savior, the establishment of His Church in this world, which is all due the coming of the Savior. As we read on, however, we see that it also refers to the eternal, heavenly Kingdom and Church in the next life, where there is true unity and universal peace (not to be found in this life entirely). The two go together, as the latter, the Eternal Church has members precisely because earlier the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity became Man and dwelt among us.

Saint Paul continues with the idea of the eternal kingdom, telling the faithful to “awake from sleep” and “put on the armor of light” by following Christ. This may seem to refer only to the final judgment (as well as individual judgment), but if you think about it, we have the grace to persevere at hand precisely because the Word became flesh, making it possible for us to receive the gift of becoming temples of the Holy Spirit. That is why awaking from sleep is the theme of an Advent hymn.

The Gospel is clearly about the final days and the second coming of Christ. Jesus then spoke of the time of judgment coming unexpectedly, saying "You do not know on which day your Lord will come". What I wish to concentrate upon now are the final words of this Gospel, being those which are most directly related with the coming of Christ for the first time. "...You also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come." From this we can reflect upon two things: 1. the incarnation, and 2. our being prepared for judgment. As for the incarnation, just as now days very few are prepared for the time of judgment, so back then very few were prepared for the coming of the Savior. And even among those who were awaiting, many were expecting a triumphant king, rather than a poor child who was born among animals. But we know that this Child is the one Who made salvation possible, and thus will someday judge each one of us accordingly. The question to ask now, particularly at the beginning of the Advent season, is: Am I ready? Am I expecting God properly?

How can we be prepared for the time of judgment? There are theories about when the end of the world will come, but that actually does not really matter, for one thing we do know for sure is that each one of us will undergo individual judgment, some possibly after 80 years, some 30, and some within days or months. We do know, however, that it will be something we will experience at the end of our lifetime. But even then, it is true that we do not know the hour no matter what our age is. What did our Lord say? "You must be prepared." How, then, can we better prepare ourselves?

This is what the time of Advent (as well as Lent) is for. It is good for us to take advantage of this season, not only so that we may gain a clearer view of God's love for us, but also so that we may come to see how we can be more open to His grace, coming to love Him all the more as a result. Let us then consider some useful practices for this coming time.

During the penitential seasons, it is good to have two kinds of acts: those which are just for the season, primarily *penitential acts*, and those which begin at this time but are intended to continue, which are *virtuous acts* (i.e. good habits, to overcome vices which are bad habits). In general, it is better to concentrate on a smaller number, so that one may be able to center his/her attention on it. When it comes to penitential acts (just for the season), two or three are fine, while

when it comes to a virtuous act (what is to be continued) it is good to concentrate on one in particular.

For a practical example, let's say one decides during advent to not eat sweets, and to not use the internet for entertainment; and in place of the latter, to read a certain spiritual book (or pray an extra rosary, spend more time with the family, go to an extra Mass and the like). Then for the virtue, the same person will strive to be careful with his/her use of speech, particularly when it comes to speaking about others negatively. With this resolution there should be certain times during the day when this person will stop and pray for this grace (such as after the Angelus, on the way to work, and the like). There should also be the resolution to not give up, and thus if one catches himself being unnecessarily critical about another (etc.), rather than just give up, he will change the conversation and afterwards pray to God for the grace to continue. As can be seen from this example, what is important is that this virtuous resolution has prayer as being part of it. Also it is vital that one be ready to humbly rise again after falling (never giving up), trusting in God rather than oneself.

This is how we can prepare ourselves for our time of judgment, for in simply trying to do such acts as the one above, one is truly making an act of love to God. And this is the end we are seeking: that we come to love God entirely, while knowing that in persevering in trying to do so, we are also meriting for other souls as well, due to the merits of Christ and it being His will that we partake in them as well for others. The other penitential acts which are just for the season, also support our doing so as well as they cause us to be more open to receiving grace, showing that all is related.

Loving Mother Mary, please help us to take advantage of this advent season, so that we as well as many other souls may come to love God to our fullest extent; all through Thee and thus to God with the Divine Love of the Holy Spirit. Amen.