

# An Advent Reflection

Most Reverend John C. Wester

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As we approach the holy season of Advent, I thought it would be good to reflect on the meaning of this beautiful time which more and more has come to be neglected in many places. Since the church's liturgical year begins with the first Sunday of Advent, it is worthwhile to pause and consider the importance of this time of preparation and watchful waiting. Too often, the season of Advent is overshadowed by the "holiday season" as we move too quickly into celebrating Christmas. By the time that the actual solemnity of Christmas arrives, many of us are burned out. We are already tired of all the "Christmas hype." Christmas has become anticlimactic.

The word advent comes from the Latin for "coming" or "arrival". What is the arrival we are awaiting? The general norms for the liturgical year help us understand the season a little bit better by explaining: "The season of Advent has a twofold character: It is a time of preparation for Christmas when the first coming of God's Son ... is recalled. It is also a season when minds are directed by this memorial to Christ's second coming at the end of time. It is thus a season of joyful and spiritual expectation." You will notice that this is not a penitential season. It is a season of joyful hope, a time of preparation and waiting. This season is not just about preparing for the birth of Christ at Christmas, but for the Christ who is continually being born in our midst and transforming the church ever more into his body in the world.

In the late autumn of the year, as the world darkens, the church is called to gather and quietly wait in hope for the coming of Christ, her bridegroom, the Light of the World. I am reminded of a song by Marty Haugen: "For you, O Lord, my soul in stillness waits, truly my hope is in you." Is our hope really in Christ? Have we really allowed ourselves to wait in silence and ponder the great mystery of salvation? Have we been changed by our reflection on this mystery so that we live differently as our relationship with the risen Christ deepens? In the darkness, we watch for the coming Lord. We must not let our busyness distract us from that, lest we be caught unawares like the foolish virgins in Matthew's Gospel. The season calls us to be attentive to our preparations for the final day and attentive to the quality of our life in union with Christ.

The liturgies for the Sundays of Advent are intended to focus our attention on these realities and to guide our preparation for Christ's coming. The theme for the first Sunday of Advent calls us to be spiritually attentive. On the second Sunday of Advent, we hear John the Baptist's call to repentance and preparation. The Baptizer is calling us to be prepared and vigilant as we invite Christ into our hearts, but also as we await the final judgment. The third Sunday, or Gaudete Sunday, introduces Jesus as the one who will fulfill the covenant and bring forth the kingdom. On the final Sunday, we hear the gospel stories that immediately precede Christ's birth. During these four weeks, we prepare for the Light, which comes into the world, both in Christ's birth, and as we await his final return in glory.

As we renew our sense of the liturgical celebration of time, I encourage us all to remain faithful to the celebration of the four weeks of Advent. As I mentioned earlier, it is so easy to be consumed by the hype of the "holiday season": to decorate our churches and houses for

Christmas, to spend more time shopping than in prayer, and to host Christmas parties before the season has arrived. I know it is an enormous challenge to remain faithful to the Advent season when we are surrounded by a society which, while claiming to be Christian, does not take the time to reflect and prepare as the church calls us to do.

As Catholics, we must celebrate Advent differently. Our reckoning of time is itself a sacramental witness to the fullness of the paschal mystery. If we were to skip the Advent season or any other season, we would impoverish that witness. We are very lucky to have a church which has provided us with seasons to bear witness to the great mysteries of our faith. As Christians, these celebrations and our observance of time help us witness the truth and beauty of the risen Christ.

This Advent, I call on every Catholic in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe to strive to enter into the spirit of the season. As we move forward, I strongly encourage our schools, parishes, and each individual household to celebrate the four weeks of Advent with rich prayer. We must practice and model what we preach in order to instill the rich traditions of our faith in young and old alike.

The season of Advent refocuses us and reminds us that Christ has changed the world. Darkness has covered this hemisphere, and the world itself is quiet. Because we know that Christ reigns over all of creation, we strain in the darkness to see the light of Christ, our coming King. May our observance of this season renew us and be an example of patience, silence, and joy to our hurried and anxious society.