

December 3, 2017 – 1st Sunday in Advent

This coming Friday is the Feast of the Immaculate Conception; it's a holy day of obligation. It is the Patron Feast of our country. We will have Mass at 8:30 a.m. on Friday and again at 7:00 p.m. on Friday. This is the month of extra Masses. I want to point out in the gospel, if you ever wondered where they got the schedule for Christmas; vigil, midnight, morning and daytime, its from this gospel. Because, that is when the master could come back. That's why we have those Masses at four different times. We are not to the point yet, where we have a midnight Mass. I'll have to wait for an associate for that to happen because, he will say the midnight Mass. I don't do those kinds of things. In 21 years in the priesthood I've done one. My first pastor in my first year said, "we both have to be there." Why? It only takes one priest. So, when we get an associate, we'll think about a midnight Mass. But, we won't get an associate for a long long time.

There was a young priest, he was going to give his first homily. He was very nervous. Sometimes that happens to young priests and even deacons; their brain shuts down, and it happened to him. He started his homily, he said, "Behold I come." His brain went blank. So, he decided to try again, "Behold I come." His brain went blank. So, he decided, maybe if I change body posture, put more emphasis on it, so he leaned into the pulpit and he said, "**Behold I come.**" The pulpit collapsed and he fell into the lap of a pretty woman in the front row. He got all red faced and embarrassed and he stammered, "oh I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to have that happen." She was unfazed, she just looked at him and said, "well I should have been expecting it, you told me three times you were coming."

God knows the limitations of our human nature very well. After all, he created us. He knows that we can only focus our attention, really focus it, on one or two things at a time. But, this was before texting and driving. You can only focus on one thing at a time. The Japanese have a concept for that and it means, do one thing slowly. That's what some of the drivers do on Hunt Hwy., one thing slowly. We can only focus on one, maybe two things at a time. But, on the other hand, if we have to focus our attention on the same thing over and over again and just try and keep it focused, we get depressed. It's a psychological study. If we have to focus on the same thing for hours at a time, we get depressed. These limitations are one reason God inspired the Church to have liturgical seasons. The mystery of our salvation includes: the whole bible, the whole life of Christ, and 2000 years of Church history. That's a lot for us to try and focus in on. So, we divide it into seasons, and so we have different aspects during different times of the year of our salvation history and of means to becoming holy. In Lent, we focus on the reality of sin and mercy and the need for repentance. During Easter, we focus on the power of God and the resurrection. During ordinary time, we focus on the everyday life and teachings of Christ and the wisdom they impart for our everyday lives. And now, during Advent, we focus on God's faithfulness. Saint Paul puts it briefly in our second reading, "God is faithful." God did not abandon the human race after original sin. He promised to send a savior, and He fulfilled that promise the very first Christmas. God also promised, that His savior Jesus Christ, will come again to bring our earthly exile to an end. Many people don't think about this being the exile. But, we're not in heaven so, we're exiled from heaven. Just as in the Old Testament God brought the chosen people out of Babylon slavery, out of Egyptian slavery, He's going to bring us out of the slavery of sin and death of this world. He will fulfill His promises. That's one of the key themes of this season of Advent.

The most familiar and universal symbol of this truth is the Advent wreath, which Catholic Christians have been using for a thousand years. It's a very old symbol. Its circular shape gives it no beginning or end. The eternity of God and His love. But also, the everlasting life that Christ offers us. The different types of branches are all from evergreen trees. Trees that remain green even during the darkest, dreariest days of winter. They remind us of Christ's love and how fresh and strong even in life's difficult moments, it remains. He never abandons us. Traditional wreaths include laurel, and holly. The laurel branch is the symbol, in ancient times, of victory. Reminds us of Christ's victory over sin and death in this life. The holly branches are bordered with small prickly little things, and they can get you very good if you're not careful. Reminds us of Christ's crown of thorns, and the suffering by which He won victory over sin and evil. The four candles represent the four weeks of Advent. In our time, people are saying they represent the 4,000 years of salvation history, from Adam and Eve to now. That won't happen a thousand years from now, unless they throw in some more candles. The light, all light in the Church represents Jesus Christ. His Word shows us how to live our lives and His Love expressed in the Eucharist, fills our heart with comfort, just like the light of Christ in the world. Light had a much greater symbolism before electricity. At night, it was very very dark. They would light a candle and all of a sudden, it would light up the whole room. Just like the lights here. We light the candles one at a time gradually over Advent. This shows us that our lives are gradual. That our holiness doesn't take place all at once. It takes place gradually. That salvation history and our salvation, didn't take place all at once. It took place over time. God had to set all the pieces in play; all the people in their right places for His son to be born at Christmas, so that we would have salvation at Easter. He promised us that He would send us a savior, He promised all of this and we rejoice that He did. In today's first reading, Isaiah says twice, (and I've got to tell you this is an interesting concept, brand new to the Jewish people and unheard of in the ancient world), "Lord, you are our Father." No other culture of people ever had a god that loved them. The ancient gods, pagan gods, were against us; trying to trick us, trying to fool us, trying to kill us. Only in our culture, only in our Tradition, do we have a God who loves us and we can call Him, Father. For the Jews, this was an interesting new concept; that God loved them. If you go back 1300 years and forward, before Isaiah, they felt God was a God of meanness, a God of retribution. But, He wasn't. He was our Father. And, He always fulfills promises by leading them back to Himself; by forgiving their sins. So, God is our Father. He is always looking after us, protecting us and loving us, even though we don't feel it sometimes, even when we don't think about it. When our fathers, growing up, went to work, did we think of them? The only time we thought about them was if we wanted to ask them for money when they came home or if Mom said, "wait until your Dad gets home." Then you thought about him coming home all day. But God is always there. Unlike our earthly fathers, God's love has no limits, no imperfections, no blind spots, no favorites. Advent is meant to be a time when we renew our awareness of God's perfect fatherhood in our lives. It's meant to be a time we lift our lives out of the hustle and bustle of life in the fallen world, and gaze with wonder and joy at the light of God's love. Society says, family traditions say; we have to have this food prepared, that food prepared, we have to buy the presents, we have to have them wrapped, we have to get them to the post office at a certain time so they can arrive on time, hopefully. All these things, we get caught up in. My Mom gets caught up in them. There's five of us boys, and between the five of us, we like three different kinds of fruitcake. Mom gets upset if she doesn't get all the fruitcake made. I just tell her, "Mom, don't worry, I still have half from last year." It does last a long time and she makes big ones. I tell her, "just breath, calm down." Christmas is her favorite season. I say, "don't get caught up in the kitchen, don't get caught up in this, that, or the other thing." My Dad, he has to get in the attic, get the boxes out and he dreads Christmas

every year. Then he has to put up the tree, and then he sits down because thankfully, Mom decorates it. But you know, I tell Dad the same thing, "you should enjoy Christmas." You could be like me and don't decorate at all. I'm decorating for myself? And then I have to take down for myself? No, it's not worth it. I'll just go to somebody else's house. That's how I do my Christmas. We can't be caught up in the hustle and bustle. We've got to focus on what's important. There is no better way, than by making a commitment to spend more time with God in prayer, between now and Christmas. Personal prayer; heart to heart. Nothing would please Him more and nothing would do more to heal and comfort our wounded souls and get rid of our distractions. We don't have to join a convent or monastery for four weeks. But, would it hurt us to say an extra decade of the rosary each day? Or maybe we could sit for fifteen minutes in the morning or evening, and read a spiritual book or part of the bible. Or, maybe we could go to daily Mass a couple times a week and offer our communion for family and friends, the concerns we have. Or maybe, we could go to adoration on a Saturday for an hour; from 9:00 to 10:00 a.m., which we have every week. Just something to add a little spiritual oomph to our Advent. There are special graces and blessings in the air during Advent. Graces that are probably the most important to our hearts, if we are ready and watching.

God Bless you