

Homily
1st Sunday of Advent - C

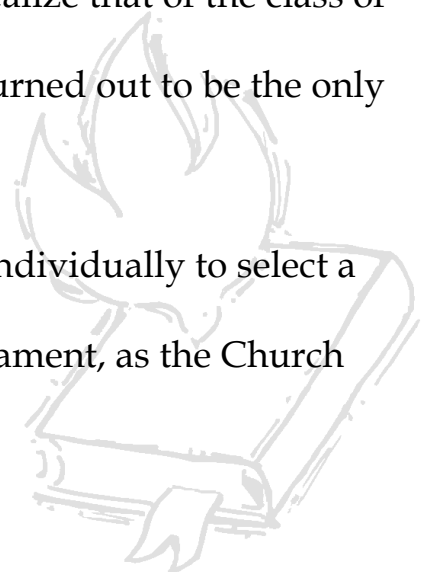
Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
December 01-02, 2018

Jer 33: 14-16
Ps 25: 4-5, 8-9, 10, 14
1 Thes 3: 12 - 4: 2
Lk 21: 25-28, 34-36

I preface my homily today by telling you about my own confirmation which took place in 1982. At the time, I was a seminarian for the Rockford Diocese, attending Holy Name Seminary in Madison, Wisconsin. There was a moment in our history when high school seminaries were very popular in this region of the world; since then, the high school I attended was subsequently closed.

The bishop at the time was Most Rev. Cletus O'Donnell, who lived in the back part of the seminary and was very friendly with me at the time. I enjoyed my time up at Madison and as he encouraged me to continue my studies in the seminary, I slowly began to realize that of the class of 21 students who graduated with me in 1983, I turned out to be the only one who was ordained a priest.

At the confirmation liturgy, we were asked individually to select a name of a saint as the bishop conferred the sacrament, as the Church



tried to instill in us a sense of spirituality that we were challenged to follow by attaching a name of a saint to our own name. Most of my classmates went the generic route, picking names like Peter, Paul, James and John. Being the radical that I was, I chose *St. Athanasius of Alexandria*, the deacon and bishop from the fourth century.

If you read the life of St. Athanasius, you learn that the man was a recluse in life. Egyptian by birth and Greek by education, Athanasius lived a self-imposed monastic life during his formative years and attended the council of Nicea as a deacon, along with his local bishop in 325 AD (this was the council that wrote the Nicene Creed which we pray practically every Sunday). Athanasius soon after became a bishop himself in Alexandria, vigorously defending the faith against a heresy called *Arianism*, which professed that at one time in life, the Son of God did not exist. Athanasius' stance in defense of the Son's co-eternal existence with the Father and the Spirit caused great strife in his time that he was exiled from his people on numerous occasions. After reading his biography, I have no idea which I would choose to select this name for confirmation, me being gentle and mild myself (heh heh).

The reason I mention this biography is because I decided to turn this Advent to one of the classic texts that Athanasius wrote called “On the Incarnation of the Word,” which originally served as a type of catechism for those who wished to enter the Catholic faith for the first time. Originally, Athanasius wished for his writings to be burned as he referred to them as babble and nonsense. Luckily for the Church, what Athanasius considered as weak theology serves as a foundation for how we understand the life of Christ, both on earth and in heaven.

In his writings, Athanasius became very personal in his reflection concerning the existence of the Son in our understanding of the faith. For Athanasius, he wrote that his understanding of the Son’s existence came as a result of deep contemplation. Athanasius goes so far to say that through contemplation, by focusing all our attention constantly on the image of the son, we never lose focus of the divine plan and our role in it and, as a result, we recognize the special gift of immortality that God has provided us in our lives. The fourth century saint writes, (*De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, #4)

...for it is God alone Who exists, evil is non-being, the negation and antithesis of good. By nature, of course, man is mortal, since he was made from nothing; but he bears also the Likeness of Him Who is, and if he preserves that Likeness through constant contemplation, then his nature is deprived of its power and he remains incorrupt. So is it affirmed in Wisdom: "The keeping of His laws is the assurance of incorruption." (Wisdom 6: 18)

... porque solo Dios existe. El mal es el no ser, la negación y la antítesis del bien. Por naturaleza, por supuesto, el hombre es mortal, ya que fue hecho de la nada; pero también tiene la semejanza de quien es, y si conserva esa semejanza a través de la contemplación constante, entonces su naturaleza queda privada de su poder y permanece incorrupto. Así se afirma en la Sabiduría: "El guardar Sus leyes es la garantía de la incorrupción" (Sabiduría 6: 18)

Athanasius continues on later on in his writings that this gaze into the life of Christ, allowing Christ to speak to us in words that we understand, makes us realize our own purpose in life and the means by which we achieve eternal salvation: (#46)

Christ alone, using common speech and through the agency of men not clever with their tongues, has convinced whole assemblies of people all the world over to despise death, and to take heed to the things that do not die, to look past the things of time and gaze on things eternal, to think nothing of earthly glory and to aspire only to immortality.

Solo Cristo, utilizando el lenguaje común y mediante la agencia de hombres no inteligentes con sus lenguas, ha convencido a asambleas

de personas de todo el mundo para que desprecien la muerte y presten atención a las cosas que no mueren, que miren más allá de las El tiempo y la mirada en las cosas eternas, para no pensar en la gloria terrenal y aspirar solo a la inmortalidad.

It is the gaze into the divine that inspired me in writing today's homily, I was thinking about the everlasting gaze on which we need to focus in order to find meaning this Advent Season. As we begin our new liturgical year on this First Sunday of Advent, I remind myself how the commercialism of the season often distracts us from the gaze into Christ that allows us to be saved. Jeremiah warns us of the consequences of taking our eyes off the prize and our purpose in life during today's first reading. Our Lord reminds us to the gaze into the teachings of the Church that serve as a roadmap for fining everlasting life in today's gospel. Only through that constant focus of the divine do we find our purpose. So, we gaze into the candles of this Advent wreath, reminding us of the light that will continually penetrate the darkness of our indifference and sinful behavior towards God.

As I celebrate each day Mass with the Poor Clare sisters at the Annunciation Monastery in Minooka, my eyes seemed to be fixed on an

image called “The Pietà,” or “Lord Have Mercy” in English, a replica of the sculpture that the artist Michelangelo created in the year 1500. As I gaze at that image during each Mass which I celebrate, I reflect how the death of Jesus Christ is so much linked to the birth of Jesus Christ in that these two events that marked the beginning and death of Jesus’ life on earth, two images which become central for our life of reflection and prayer.

From my perspective at Mass, I often gazed to the back of Church at St. Patrick’s Church where I once served as pastor, viewing three images which reminded me of this Advent gift of preparation and sacrifice. The first image was of Our Lady of Guadalupe, our mother and patroness, whose selfless life serves as the model of humility that all of us are called to follow. The center image was that of a clock which tells me that I had better get this Mass finished in an hour, lest upset the traffic crowd who wants to get in for the next Mass. The third image was that of St. Patrick, a slave who returned to his land of captivity to minister to those who sought out God’s mercy through the most difficult times.

When I looked at the images of Guadalupe and St. Patrick, they reminded me of how they modeled this life of Christ crucified and I remind myself what my response to Christ's love in this world must be. As Christ sacrificed his life to preserve the truth, so I am called to prepare myself do the same. And so I am drawn to stare at the statue in the same way I am drawn to stare at a crucifix, the *Pieta* or an image of the Sacred Heart. In these moments of grace, in this gaze of entering the divine ecstasy, for that fleeting moment I experience the life of immortality and everlasting hope. And then the next moment, when I turn away from the gaze of Christ, so then I turn away from God and get caught up in the material world. When I turn from the truth and create a faith based on my own needs rather than God's will, it is then that the soul begins to falter.

As we begin our journey into the Advent Season and our new liturgical year, the Church makes us prepare for the birth of Christ by not beginning our journey at the manger but instead at the end of all time ("The Two Comings of Christ"). I started thinking about all the

hustle and bustle of the Christmas shopping rush and I started reflecting on the *reason* why I celebrate Advent in the first place.

I start thinking to myself that if the gaze is missing from the Advent Season, then the present buying and the gift giving loses its purpose. But when I raise my head to God and look at the icon of our Lord at the manger, on the cross, at the altar or at the Pietà, the gaze on the last day becomes the same look that exists between two people who are deeply in love with each other. As one theology professor once taught me, on that last day, as we gaze into the presence of God, the last word we speak before falling completely into the silence of God's love is the word "Yes." "Yes, Lord, everything now makes sense. The gifts, the love, the reason for our life has all been revealed by your presence in my life."

Over the next year, the Gospel of Luke will teach us that the message of love and the key to this presence of God depends on whether we wish to sacrifice our lives and our worldly needs for the sake of others or whether we live this life solely for our own needs and desires. In order to prepare for Christmas, in order to *truly* prepare for what we are

about to celebrate, we will be challenged by God to begin each day by recognizing why this presence of God is really important.

If the season of Advent is to have meaning, then we must be challenged to put Christ ahead of decorations, schedules and everything else that pales in comparison to God. Let us all follow the example of St. Athanasius - let us take time to enter into the life of Christ and realize that the greatest gift of Christmas is not found under a tree but is sought within our soul. Let us realize that the last day, this divine *Parousia*, is the gift we seek above all others, this gift of everlasting contemplation, gazing into the eyes of the infinitely loving God for the rest of our existence. Let us give thanks to God on this day, the next day, the last day, and every day in between. Let us never forget to raise our heads and gaze at the icon of love. This is our prayer.