

Audio of Monsignor Ocariz: “The Gift of a New Christmas”

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (*Mk* 1:3). The Advent liturgy offers us these prophetic words of Isaiah about John the Baptist, as we see in the Gospel. Advent is a time of waiting and preparation – not a passive waiting, but a preparation for the arrival of our Lord.

On Christmas we will celebrate the Incarnation, the Birth of the Son of God made a child for us. We have to prepare ourselves to contemplate this extraordinary mystery that is a manifestation above all of God’s love for us and our Lord’s self-giving for us. He who is omnipotent, the Creator, the Infinite One wants to become a small child through us and for us.

With the newness that Christmas brings us again each year, we have to prepare ourselves to receive this gift of God with enormous gratitude. We know very well that the Advent liturgy is also referring to our Lord’s second coming at the end of time. The second coming is, in a way, brought forward for each person with their own death at the end of their life on this earth. This is something that should not scare us, but rather help us see our own life as a preparation, as an advent: our Lord will come to bring us to Him. In a way, our whole life is a time of waiting until that day when Jesus will come to bring us to his side.

This is a time of active waiting. Our journey towards Bethlehem has to be a search for Jesus in all the dimensions of our ordinary life. But to achieve this we have to “make his paths straight.” What does it mean to “make his paths straight”? It means, for us, removing obstacles to our Lord’s coming to us, to our souls, and to our lives.

And what obstacles do we encounter? Many. Each of us can consider: what in my life could be an obstacle for our Lord to come more fully to me? To put it another way: what hinders opening up my soul, my day, my ordinary life so that our Lord may enter more fully with his strength, with his grace, with his goodness, with his joy? In a word, everything can be summed up in the great obstacle that is our own ego, our own pride. Without becoming discouraged, we will always have to fight against this pride whenever we see it rise up.

This requires, in the end, a conversion. A conversion that is, indeed, the fruit of our own effort, but above all the fruit of God’s grace. We need God’s grace for the light to see where we have to improve, where we have to open the way more fully to our Lord’s coming into our lives. And at the same time, we need the strength that our Lord gives us with his grace, so that we can do what He asks, so that we can respond.

Therefore seeing our own limitations, our limits, should not discourage us. It has to give us joy, not because these are limits, but because they are a light that allows us to improve, to open ourselves more fully to God’s gift. Above all, we are joyful when we see this grace of God, this

light of God as the fruit of something so great as the omnipotent love of God for each one of us. This love is manifested to us now in the coming of God who is made a child through us and for us. It is for this coming that we await and actively prepare ourselves.

Meditating on our Lord's coming to us naturally leads us to think about the Eucharist. It is there that we find all the strength – each day, if we want – to open our soul in Communion to the Lord's coming that is already a full reality. As a Father of the Church, Saint Leo the Great, says in a text that appears in the liturgy: “participation in the Body and Blood of Christ has no other purpose than to transform us into that which we receive.”¹ It progressively identifies us with Christ, because “preparing the way,” “straightening the paths”, “preparing ourselves for the coming of the Lord,” is to prepare ourselves to identify ourselves with Him. And we – or rather He! – does this fundamentally in the Eucharist, so that this identification may be real, so that our way of thinking is in accord with our Lord's, so that our reactions to people and circumstances are the reactions our Lord would have.

We can also identify ourselves with Christ during Advent by thinking about the simplicity of the Child, the availability of the Child, about how the Child let Himself be handled. By whom? By our Lady, Mary Most Holy.

And so we enter into another topic that I would like to consider in our prayer, in order to ask our Lady – we ask her now – that she may accompany us on the occasion of the great solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. May we accompany her on the way to Bethlehem in order to encounter Jesus more fully. And when we do, we will once again consider and contemplate the expression of God's infinite love found in this Child given to us.

Mary is conceived without any blemish, full of grace. “Full of grace” is the name the Archangel uses at the Annunciation: “Hail, full of grace” (*Lk* 1:26). Later he will call her “Mary” when he says “do not be afraid, Mary” (*Lk* 1:30). But the original greeting is, as it were, her own name: “full of grace.” What does this mean? Originally it means *completely transformed by grace*. And this is how we contemplate Mary; we know that she is our Mother, both the Mother of God from the moment of the Incarnation and also our Mother.

[This scene] made Saint Josemaría exclaim – with an admiration that we want to make our own – “Greater than you, only God.” As we look upon our Lady, we will say: “Greater than you, only God.” Mary receives a surprising vocation, and so she questions in order to know more fully what it involves. And when the Angel explains it, she replies with complete self-giving: *Fiat!* “Let it be done.” “Let it be done unto me according to your Word” (*Lk* 1:38).

The first Advent is the awaiting of our Lord's birth from the moment He is in her virginal womb. In this response of our Lady we see – as Pope Francis said in a homily – that the fullness

¹ Saint Leo the Great, *Sermon 12 on the Passion of the Lord*, 3, 7: PL 54, 357.

of grace transforms one's heart, and enables it to carry out that great act, that *Fiat!* of our Lady, which will change the course of human history (Francis, 8 December 2015). That "let it be done."

Because we all have a very specific vocation, we too have to respond to God like that: "Let it be done." In a text from the Epistle to the Ephesians that many or all of us have surely meditated on, Saint Paul says that the Lord God "chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and unspotted in his sight in charity" (*Eph* 1:4).

The text in Latin is interesting, because where it says "unspotted," the Latin says "immaculate" (which actually means the same thing). While in truth we are not immaculate, He calls us to become immaculate. And how? Through charity, through love, it says. Through love... Hence the universal call to holiness that Saint Josemaría always preached – and that the Second Vatican Council solemnly ratified – is not a holiness of not having defects, of being super perfect or being suited for a museum... It is rather the holiness that consists in love, in the fullness of love. Because we will be able with God's grace to love God ever more fully, despite our limitations, even though we continue having defects and limitations: to love God and to love others.

In the encyclical *Deus Caritas est*, Benedict XVI asked: is it possible to love God whom we do not see? Benedict could have carried out a philosophical and theological enquiry to answer this question, but he limited himself to the key point. Is it possible to love God whom we do not see? In reality, "God has become visible in Jesus Christ." There we have to put all our effort: in contemplating our Lord, Jesus Christ, in the Gospel, in our own personal prayer. Because in this way we will also have the strength needed to love others more, and also to imitate our Lady.

It is impressive to see how, immediately after the Annunciation, immediately after having, with her *fiat*, become the Mother of God, the first thing that "occurs" to our Lady, if we can speak in this way, is to think about her cousin. For the angel had told her that her cousin was expecting a child, but he hadn't told her to go see her. It was a sign of God's omnipotence, because her cousin Elizabeth was already old. And our Lady right away realizes that her cousin will need her help and sets off. And she sets off not simply to see her, to spend a few hours or a few days. Mary spent months with her, months!

Let us ask our Lady to obtain for us from God the grace we need, first of all, to help us discover the needs of the others, and then to have the resolve, the desire and effectiveness to serve, to help, to feel the needs of others as our own.

We see that Mary Immaculate, as the fruit of her fullness of grace, is able to discover the needs of those at Cana. Our Lord, his disciples and our Lady are invited to the wedding. But our Lady is the only one who realizes that the wine is running out. We might say: but it is such a material thing... But it was important for the couple, so that they would not look bad. As the fruit of her love and her fullness of grace, Our Lady discovers even these little details.

Mother, we do not have the fullness of grace, but with your help we want to resemble you in order to resemble Jesus more. We want to prepare ourselves in this Advent to receive the gift of a new Christmas. We want to make our life a gift for the others, and especially for those most in need. There are so many people who live alone, so many sick, isolated people, so many people who, due to the pandemic, are suffering serious economic difficulties in their families.

Finally, we turn to the motherly mediation of Mary, so that she may guide us, with Joseph, on our way to that permanent Bethlehem of our personal encounter with Jesus Christ.