

1st Sunday Advent Year "A"
November 26-27, 2016

Jesus Christ, our true hope.

Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matt. 24:37-44

[Ad te levavi animam meam: Deus meus, in te confido, non erubescam].

"To You have I lifted up my soul: O my God, I trust in you, let me not be put to shame." These words are taken from our Introit, read [or sung] at the beginning of Mass today. To lift up our souls to God is not only an act of worship, it is an act of trust and faith in God to receive the deepest desire of our souls. Why else would we lift our souls to God, but so that He might receive them? No one wants to be turned away.

It is no fun being turned away. Each year, high school seniors across the United States sit in their bedrooms in front of their computers or more likely their iPhones, clicking and refreshing, clicking and refreshing. It is that fateful day when they find out whether they have been accepted, rejected or wait listed to the school of their choice. The same angst will be repeated when applying for a job.

No one wants to be put to shame, especially before our loving God. No one wants to be turned away from His loving presence. And yet we know that God is also a just judge. Furthermore, when we plead our case, we are all too aware of our shortcomings. St. Paul exhorts us in the Letter to the Romans to throw off the deeds of darkness, for the night is past. We are to put on the armor of light, making no provisions for the desires of the flesh.

Even though we experience first hand the temptations of sin that swirl around us, they are difficult to discuss. But as we begin this new liturgical year, a season of hope, we must never become overwhelmed either by the sins of the world or our own. We are **not** slaves to our passions, no matter how much it seems we are. Our second reading in today's Mass is taken from the very passage

to which Saint Augustine turned on that providential day in the summer of 386 A.D., when while in a garden he heard a voice say, “Tolle lege, Tolle lege,” that is, “Take up and read, take up and read.” He thought at first it was a child’s voice. He opened the Scriptures and began to read in silence the very first words to which his eyes were drawn. In an instant, he recounted, all his shadows of doubt scattered. He read no further. It was God’s voice. He was finally free to give himself completely to Christ.¹

You may recall that Augustine had already been intellectually converted by this time to the truth of the faith. But his will had not made the final move to embrace the faith. That day it did. Like so many, he searched aimlessly for happiness before realizing through grace, that true happiness is not found in a thing, but in a person. He spent the rest of his life living for others. He understood well the temptations of the flesh and other sins and offered wise counsel to his flock about how small sins can multiply:

[D]o not despise these sins which we call ‘light’: if you take them for light when you weigh them, tremble when you count them. A number of light objects makes a great mass; a number of drops fills a river; a number of grains makes a heap. What then is our hope? Above all, confession.²

As Christians we must attack the sins of the flesh with all the weapons in our spiritual arsenal. Sacrifice and self-denial are too often forgotten. Consider some type of weekly penance on Fridays—it could take many forms. Some choose to abstain from meat products on Fridays, or pass over desert, or even skip lunch once per week. Perhaps try praying the Rosary or read the daily readings. These simple acts are powerful reminders that we can and must indeed deny ourselves, lest we too easily give in to sinful passions.

¹ Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Homily given in Pavia at the tomb of Augustine, April 2007.

² St. Augustine, In ep. Jo. 1, 6: PL 35, 1982.

We gain strength each time that we exhibit self-control with the help of God's grace. The fruitful reception of Sacrament of Penance is equally crucial and I encourage it sometime during this Advent. We should all rest secure in the hope of Christ's triumph on the Cross, even as we tremble on account of our sins. The Church wisely orders the liturgical seasons to reflect important themes, distinguishing the seasons with a special character, even while we continue to live our daily lives in the midst of the world.

Hope is an indispensable companion of faith. Pope Benedict XVI's 2007 encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, "In hope we were saved," [Rom. 8:24] is dedicated to the virtue of hope. He discussed at length the connection between faith and hope. "The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life." Our lives are to be lived with the certainty of hope. Advent is the season *par excellence* of this hope-filled expectation.

The First Sunday of Advent clearly calls us well beyond Christmas morning to the fulfillment of all time through Christ. We await the divine person of the Word made Flesh, even as we keep an eye towards the fulfillment of all time and all hope.

As we patiently wait this Advent season, *a period for devout and joyful expectation*,³ let us be spurred on by hope, immersed in joyful expectation that our salvation is near at hand, trusting that God's promises will be fulfilled.

³ General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar, para. #39