

TOO MUCH INFORMATION?: MANAGING LIFE'S COMMITMENTS IN ADVENT

Since Advent is about receptivity and preparation for the coming of our Savior, we would do well to assign ourselves a **letter grade** on how well we have lived the season this year. Once again, I myself am falling short of the ideal by a long shot. **Saint Bernard of Clairvaux** (†1153 A.D.) is credited with a sobering maxim, “Hell is full of good intentions or desires.” *L'enfer est plein de bonnes volontés ou désirs*. Ouch! I try each year and each year something different seems to impede that ideal. Four funerals in the span of eight days, along with a Permanent Diaconate Ordination and Extraordinary Form Confirmation will do that to you. It is all good and vital ministry, and yet once again, Advent takes the hit and suffers the consequences.

Thanks to online shopping, I have largely avoided the rush of old to malls and stores for gifts for family, etc. As we have grown older (no more minor aged nieces or nephews), our family has transitioned to exchanging far fewer gifts, employing a drawing by lot. Everyone agrees that we have what we need, and the real joy comes in spending some time together, **not in accumulating** gifts, however well-intentioned. In the final weeks of Advent, I try to observe a modified “fast,” not as I would in Lent, but yet trying to step back and spiritually prepare by holding off on Christmas sweets. No candy, no nuts, no dessert beginning December 17, the initiation of the *O Antiphons*, my favorite liturgical piece of Advent. Sure, I'll grab a handful of raisins to stem hunger's tide— but fasting has **never hurt** me. Why not readily embrace it? Why am I so slow to learn these spiritual lessons?

St. Leo the Great (†461 A.D.) gave us good food for thought on this count: “What is more effective than fasting, by which we approach God, and, resisting the devil, we overcome indulgent vices. For fasting has always been food for virtue: chaste thoughts, reasonable desires, and more sound deliberations profit from fasting. And through these voluntary afflictions, our flesh dies to concupiscence and our spirit is renewed for moral excellence.” (Homily for Advent). Rather than fix our gaze upon the dessert tray, instead we turn towards the manger, mostly complete, but lacking its central figure. Gazing upon the stable at the end of Advent is profitable, and **disciplining our bodies** produces a different kind of fruit. It produces longing— the kind of spiritual longing that only our Savior can satisfy. With but an occasional stomach growling brought about by fasting, combined with an expectant heart, the age-old prayer of Israel – O come, O come, Emmanuel –rings forth with deeper meaning.

Let me illustrate with an example. I am not entirely sure of their origin, but I receive notifications entitled “MyAnalytics,” sharing with me information I cannot recall ever requesting. It is akin to the screen time notifications about which I have written. In any case, I dug a little deeper. Apparently, I have 113 active e-mail collaborators. One metric entitled “Well-being” measures whether or not by schedule you had any “quiet days.” Quiet days are days **without significant activity** outside your working hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. In the past month, I scored a resounding “0” and frankly did not need a computer to tell me that. The thought of “working hours” ending at 5:00 p.m. made me chuckle. Yes, there are ministerial duties seven days a week; I wouldn't know how else to live. But I am not alone. Introduce me to the parent who is not occupied each and every day- I'd love to meet that Mom or Dad!

Still, absent time to recharge, the spiritual battery becomes corroded. In the past four weeks **between 3:00 and 4:59 a.m.** I learned that I read 130 and **sent 41 e-mails**. Talk about “big brother” watching! Hey, if I am up, why not be productive? The only hour during which I sent e-mails more often is between 2:00-3:00 p.m. I appear to equally distribute my e-mails across the entire day. Do I get points for consistency? For the record, I also pray the Breviary on my iPad, but obviously this program does not record that! It forced me to consider whether I should equally try to track my spiritual activities in terms of prayer. Those stats would be equally enlightening. When do I pray each day? At what specific times and with what consistency? I have long **admired the monks** who adhere to rigorous schedules of communal prayer in choir. Their prayer literally frames the rest of their day. While that is not realistic for a diocesan priest (not to mention parents!), nevertheless, the ideal ought to remain.

As we approach these final days and hours of Advent, step back and consider the **treadmill of life** on which

you find yourself. Inquire whether there may be a way to make adjustments such that you free yourself up to experience the Lord in a new and different way. Allow your **physical hunger** to lead to a **spiritual hunger**. Say “No” to extra food and if you must attend “holiday” parties at work or school, as is understandable in our culture, at least try to be more reserved. We wait, watch and listen to God’s voice, heeding the prophets of old, looking East towards our salvation. Thank you for joining us today in worship. May this season fill your hearts with longing for our Savior. He is coming and is on the way.

- The President of the Pontifical Academy of Life recently claimed that anyone who teaches that **Judas** is in hell is **a heretic**. Say what? Now I certainly do not relish traversing this earth trying to populate hell and acknowledge that we cannot know with certainty the state of anyone’s soul at death. After all, we have **St. Dismas**, the “good thief” as an example of one who was told at the hour of death that he would be with the Lord that very day in paradise. But Judas? I think that Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia just gave me an idea for a future column to explore that topic in greater depth.
- **Harvard University** students demanded radio stations stop playing *White Christmas* because it fosters white supremacy. The Anti-Defamation League responded in turn that the criticism of Irving Berlin’s song is anti-Semitic. Sometimes, you just can’t win!
- I have long said that if people **complain about the length** of Mass, they mustn’t be football fans. After all, those games routinely approach three hours in length, while Mass is about an hour. However, with the conferral of Confirmation by Bishop Cozzens, followed by a Solemn Pontifical Latin Mass in the Extraordinary Form (EF- 1962 liturgy before the reforms of Vatican II), we hit the **three-hour** mark last Saturday. Whew! The Gregorian chant was **stunningly beautiful**, the ceremonies intricate, and 120 young people were filled with the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. While I readily support the EF as a legitimate option, it is clear why the Church simplified the ceremonial rubrics at Vatican II.
- Today’s bulletin is a “double” issue. If you are reading this on the 4th Sunday of Advent, it is **not too late** to donate towards Christmas flowers or enter a Communal Mass intention name. Envelopes are in the pews. Please **come back** for Christmas Eve or day. If you first see this bulletin on Christmas, I sincerely welcome you and thank you for joining us to worship our Newborn King.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector