

Embracing the word of God this Advent

Advent is supposed to be a time for joyful waiting, peaceful hope and quiet patience. Too often, however, it is a time of excessive buying, impatient waiting in lines and endless rushing. How do we balance these two extremes – quiet waiting versus crazy rushing? The answer will not be found in some helpful tips column or time-management blog. It is found by going back to the Gospels. Back to the reason for all this celebration in the first place. Back to the story of a divine child born in a humble manger. We can find the peace and joy we seek through *lectio divina*.

Lectio divina means “sacred reading.” This ancient practice, which is gaining renewed popularity, is slow and quiet contemplation of the word of God. As recently as this past September, Pope Francis wrote of the importance of *lectio divina* in his apostolic letter *Aperuit Illis*, in which he declared the Third Sunday of Ordinary Time to be Sunday of the Word of God. He wrote, “We urgently need to grow in our knowledge and love of the Scriptures ... otherwise, our hearts will remain cold and our eyes shut, struck as we are by so many forms of blindness” (No. 8).

Pope Francis promised us, “God’s word has the power to open our eyes and to enable us to renounce a stifling and barren individualism and instead to embark on a new path of sharing and solidarity” (No. 13). The season of Advent is a perfect time for us to embark on that new path. Walking softly and gently through Scripture, we will be well prepared to approach the Christmas crib with a renewed appreciation of all that this divine birth should mean in our lives today.

Understanding *lectio divina*

Lectio divina is a powerful way to give God a voice in our prayer conversation. We all know praying is talking with God, but most of the time we are the ones doing all the talking. *Lectio divina* helps us have a



a meaningful two-way dialogue with God. We listen for God's voice to come down through the ages and whisper into our souls what we need to hear right now amidst all our Christmas preparations and traditions. This quiet time helps us hear God not only in the still moments, but also in the noise of pre-Christmas crowds, carols, rushing and parties.

Pope Benedict XVI outlined the five traditional steps in *lectio divina* for us in his apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*:

1) Reading

We begin by slowly and thoughtfully reading a Scripture passage. We need to be fully present for this reading. That means we want to find a quiet time and place. Early morning can be an ideal time, because then we can carry the scriptural conversation with us all day. However, the time is not as important as the stillness. We may want to start with a prayer, such as the one offered in this In Focus (A prayer before Advent spiritual reading).

2) Meditation

Once we have carefully read the passage, we ask ourselves, "What is God saying to me personally right here, right now?" That may require us to read the passage a second time. Sometimes a particular word or phrase might jump out at us. At other times we might want to concentrate on the scene – trying

to imagine all of the emotions and sensations that would surround us if we were physically present in that reading. This is not an intellectual process of trying to know in our minds all we can about the scripture passage. Rather, it is a spiritual practice of trying to feel in our hearts all we can of God's word.

3) Prayer

After we have thought quietly about the text, it is time to talk to God about it. This is a time of highly personal prayer. It is not reciting some memorized words written by someone else. It is voicing to God, in our own words, exactly what we feel about the passage. We can imagine a friend has just said these words to us. How would we respond? What questions would we ask? What troubles or excites us? Does the story remind us of something else in our lives? We want to pour all of that out to God. We don't want to do all the talking here. We must also sit silently and wait for God to whisper answers or new inspiration into our hearts. Pope Benedict suggests that during this time we consider all forms of prayer. Does the reading remind us of a petition we want to place before God for ourselves or someone else? Are we inspired to thank or praise God because of something we read?

4) Contemplation

After we have had a good conversation with someone, we may respond, "OK, let me think about that." That is what we do in the fourth step of *lectio divina*. We take time to think about what came to mind during our prayer time with God. In *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict encouraged us to ask, "What conversion of mind, heart and life is the Lord asking of us?" (No. 87). During Advent, we might find ourselves considering whether we need to do Christmas in some new or different way.

5) Action

Often our prayer and contemplation may lead us to some ideas

for action. If that action seems to be more than we can handle in the midst of an already busy season of preparation, Pope Francis tells us not to be discouraged. He reminds us that God is forever patient with us: "He (God) always invites us to take a step forward, but does not demand a full response if we are not yet ready" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 153). In other words, it's OK if our response is simply to make a note on our 2020 calendars to schedule an action we just don't have the time to do before Christmas. Our Advent *lectio divina* may even inspire a perfect New Year's resolution for us. Just be sure to write it down now!

A prayer before Advent spiritual reading

Thank you, dear Lord, for these few quiet moments to be with you this day.

May my prayer and reflection be fruitful.

Please sit with me as I read your word.

Point out to me the places where I need to pay special attention.

Help my mind to stay focused on what you are saying to me.

Please open my heart to the messages you wish me to hear.

Open my eyes to the new insights it is time for me to see.

Give me the grace and the courage to do one good thing because you have inspired me to do it.

May I see the star you have placed in the sky for me alone,

and may I follow it faithfully and joyfully to you in the manger this Christmas morning.

May this time of spiritual preparation lead me to a Christmas that is good and holy, full of peace and joy, generosity and gratitude, awe and simplicity, beauty and love.

Grant me a Christmas that is overflowing with all the magic and wonder of that first Christmas.

Amen.

Putting It All Together

Although there are five distinct steps to the *lectio divina* process, we cannot expect that each step will happen methodically at carefully timed intervals. Like a conversation with a good friend, our thoughts and ideas will bounce around. God certainly can take us through all of these steps in just an instant. We might find that as soon as our mind latches onto a word, emotion or phrase from Scripture, we already know what God is calling us to do. Or we may pray and contemplate but no action comes to mind until hours or days later. We just need to keep our hearts always open to all five facets of this rich gift of biblically inspired conversation with God.

An excellent way to begin any conversation is by asking questions. We do not get to know another person if we do all the talking. Rather, we get to know someone better when we ask them questions. And so it is with *lectio divina*. By asking questions, we invite the Almighty do some of the talking! We get to know God's heart a little better.

With that thought in mind, the following reflections are offered on the Gospels for the four Sundays in Advent. The many questions are basically conversation starters for our Advent talk with God. You may find you have different thoughts, questions and emotions. That's OK. That is the beauty of this tradition. We will each get to know God in the way that we need to feel him most in our lives right now.

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First Sunday of Advent, Dec. 1

Mt 24:37-44 – The unknown day and hour

“In those days before the flood ...” (Mt 24:38).

- Is the image of a sudden flood more vivid for you in light of the flooding and storms of the last year?
- Are there people who you want to place in God’s hands since this holiday season will be different for them because of traumatic storms in their lives over the last year?
- Is God calling you and your family to help someone this Christmas who has suffered loss from any kind of disaster?

“Therefore, stay awake!” (Mt 24:42).

- We are told to “stay awake.” Is pre-holiday stress actually keeping you awake? Are you longing for a good night’s sleep? Can you talk to God about what keeps you awake?
- Do you need God to wake you up to the ways in which you are unprepared for your own end days?
- Would it help you to repeat the words “stay awake” this Advent season as a mantra to help you be alert to the temptation of excessive materialism and waste encouraged by secular Christmas ads and pressures?

“If the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming ...” (Mt 24:43).

- Have you ever experienced a crime like burglary, theft or vandalism? Worries about these kinds of crimes can be more intense during the holiday season. Are you lifting these worries up to God?
- If your family were to lose everything to natural disasters or crime, would you still have reason to thank God? What would you thank God for in those circumstances? Do you thank God for those things even when you are abundantly blessed?
- Is there something you can do to make Christmas a little

brighter this year for someone who recently experienced a sudden or traumatic loss?



Second Sunday of Advent, Dec. 8

Mt 3:1-12 – The preaching of John the Baptist

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Mt 3:2).

- John the Baptist is saying, “Repent.” How does that word make you feel? Do you think the word applies to you, to someone else or to our world today?
- Do you know in your heart where you need to repent, or do you need to ask God to show you where you are failing?
- Forgiveness goes hand in hand with repenting. Is there someone you must forgive? Could being forgiven or offering forgiveness to someone else help you more joyfully approach the crib this Christmas and cuddle the infant Jesus in your arms?

“Prepare the way of the Lord ...” (Mt 3:3).

- Are you spending more time preparing for a spiritual Christmas or a material Christmas? How could you shift the balance a little in favor of the crib rather than the tinsel?
- When your Christmas preparations are more about material things than spiritual things, would it help to get your priorities in order by frequently praying Isaiah’s words, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.”
- Christ doesn’t just come on Christmas morning. He comes

to us in the Eucharist at every Mass. How do you prepare yourself to receive our Lord in this miraculous way? Is God calling you to be more thoughtful and prayerful in the reception of the Eucharist?

“All Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him ...” (Mt 3:5).

- Can you imagine yourself in that crowd? Is it like the pushing and shoving at a door-buster sale or a long line to see Santa on a Saturday afternoon? How do crowds make you feel?
- These people are not waiting in line for a Christmas bargain. They are pushing and shoving to be baptized. If you were not already baptized, would you be in that line seeking baptism now? Is baptism a gift or a burden for you?
- Is there someone you wish would be baptized or who would take their baptism more seriously? Have you lifted that person up to God? What is God’s response to your concerns?

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Third Sunday of Advent, Dec. 15

Mt 11:2-11 – The messengers from John the Baptist

“Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” (Mt 11:3).

- The question John’s disciples ask might remind us of children asking, “Is that the real Santa?” What makes you believe that Jesus is real? Do you recognize that

belief as a gift? Have you thanked God for that gift?

- Is there someone you know who is as uncertain as John's disciples? Do you need to talk to God about that?
- Are you unintentionally "looking for another" in the way you live your life? What things do you seek more than you seek God? Do you need to realign your priorities?

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them" (Mt 11:4-5).



- Are your eyes open to seeing the miracles around you? Have you received a "miracle" in your life this year? Have you adequately thanked God for it?
- Our Lord's physical healings are a sign of the great spiritual healing Jesus offers to all of us. What do you need healed in your life right now? Can you approach Jesus about that? Are you praying for healing in our Church, our world, our country or your community?
- The world is still hungry for miracles, but now it is we who must help the blind to see, the lame to walk. Is there a Christmas donation you could give to help someone be healed? Ask God what miracle he is calling you to give this Christmas?

"And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me" (Mt 11:6).

- Jesus seems frustrated that he just can't please people.

Are you difficult to please in your relationship with Jesus or his Church? Do you need to talk to God about this?

- Have you taken offense at Jesus this year? Do you need to improve your trust in him or your love for him? Have you asked him how you could do that?
- Do you need to discuss your concerns or criticism about the Church with someone? Do you need to educate yourself more about the work of our Church? Have you tried reading some of Pope Francis's beautiful documents on the Church in the 21st century?

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Fourth Sunday of Advent, Dec. 22

Mt 1:18-24 – The birth of Jesus

“Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about” (Mt 1:18).

- Historians say if Joseph would have quietly divorced Mary, she and the divine child she carried probably would have been stoned to death. Do you feel devotion to St. Joseph for the role he plays in Christ's birth?
- It can be difficult to play a supporting role, yet Joseph humbly played a key supporting role in the Bethlehem miracle. Is God calling you to quietly play a supporting role in someone else's life right now?
- Joseph is the chosen protector of Jesus. Who or what is God calling you to protect? The unborn? Creation? The poor? Immigrants? How are you doing that?

“The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream ...” (Mt

1:20).

- It is through a dream that St. Joseph knows what God wants of him. What role do dreams play in your spiritual life – either waking dreams or dreams that come to you in your sleep?
- Christmas is a time of dreams – visions of sugar plums dancing in the minds of sleeping children. Are your dreams this Advent inspired by God or by man? Do you need to talk to God about your dreams?
- Are you dreaming your own selfish dreams, or are you dreaming of ways to grow closer to God? Are you dreaming of ways to care for your family? Are you dreaming of ways to help someone in need? Have you asked God to help you evaluate your dreams?

“Do not be afraid” (Mt 1:20).

- What are you afraid of right now? The angel’s message to Joseph is meant for us, too. We do not need to be afraid. Can you talk to God about bringing more hope and trust into your life?
- Christmas holidays give many of us a break from the stress and anxiety of our workday lives. But for Joseph the stress and fear were just beginning. Will you have more or less reason to be fearful and stressed this Christmas week? What about others in your life? What about those whose 24/7 schedules in health care, the military or as first responders will demand them to be working this Christmas? They are among the humble Josephs in our world today. Do you and your family lift them up in prayer?
- Christmas will happen again this year because Joseph was not afraid. Are you afraid or hesitant to do some good deed? A last-minute gift to leave on the doorstep of a lonely neighbor? A check to write for a special charity? A phone call to heal a rift? How is God calling you to let goodness, holiness or kindness be born this

Christmas week?

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