

Order of Malta, American Association

What Are the Things I Should Be Doing to Prepare for Christmas?

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[Daily Prayer of the Order of Malta]

It's Thanksgiving. The grandchildren are at grandma and grandpa's house. They find their grandparents old television console in the living room. After the initial shock in learning this model does not have a remote control, one of the children approaches the old T.V., then turns it on. Nothing happens. Off then on again the switch goes. "Grandma, it's broken. It won't come on." Then imagine the amazement on those little faces when grandma tells them to wait a minute. The T.V. will come on. And then she pronounces that strange phrase: "But first it has to 'warm up!'" Remember that term for televisions or radios? "Warming

up!” What a lost expression that one is. In this age of instant Internet access, to wait for a television to “warm up” is ancient language. We don’t wait. We don’t like to wait for anything!

But Advent is waiting. The four weeks of Advent are the Church’s waiting period for Christmas. What a strange idea this is—waiting on Christmas. Stores don’t wait for Halloween to be over to get started on Christmas. Advent used to be 40 days. A time to do penance, just like lent. But around the fifth century, Pope Saint Gregory the Great shortened Advent to four weeks. He made the Advent theme one of joy filled anticipation, something like the painful but happy expectation of a mother to be. Pope Gregory said living in the misery of a world without God was penance enough. So Advent became a symbol of waiting. The Old Testament prophets talked about the day of salvation. They didn’t have the foggiest idea when the Messiah would be born in

history. But for them, it was going to be the big day when everything would get set straight. And ever since then so-called modern day prophets have been predicting the end of the world. Christ coming in majesty at the end of time. As far back as the second century, a man named Montanus said Christ would be coming any day now. A lot of people thought Jesus would reappear before the year 1,000. An American named William Miller set the date for 1843. When Jesus didn't show up, Miller moved it to 1844. After a few more years of pushing the date back, some of his followers got tired of waiting, so they formed their own groups. We call these folks the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Seventh Day Adventists. The Chosen People had to wait on the Messiah to come in history. Now we wait on Him to come again in majesty at the end of time. Advent symbolizes all this waiting.

This year—given all that’s going on around us—we also might use this Advent Season to focus on the virtue of hope. So much these days discourage us; 2020 is probably a good year to focus on waiting: Be patient, but we can’t wait for 2020 to be over! But we also will focus on hope. So, what should we be doing to get ready for Christmas? Let’s concentrate on cultivating the virtue of hope. Let me begin with a story about a couple I know from here in Indiana.

This couple always hoped one day to visit New York City. And they got their wish. One afternoon the couple climbed into a New York Taxi Cab headed for the Empire State Building. New York City traffic was horrendous. The cab driver kept honking his horn he screamed at the other drivers. He dashed in and out between cars; cut corners. The man and his wife held on for dear life in the back seat. They just hoped to get out alive! Finally they

arrived at the Empire State Building. They took the long elevator ride. Then climbed the steps onto the observation deck over 100 floors up. The couple looked straight down at the streets below. It all looked so different! It was amazing. They saw order and design where, only a few minutes before, they feared for their lives. Dozens of yellow taxis moved together, stopping at red lights and going on green ones. They heard no horns or shouting. It all looked so safe, so orderly, so calm. So different!

We must have hope. Human beings cannot live without hope. Call it either a blessing or a curse, but unlike animals, we have the ability to think about the future. But too often that means worrying about the future. To live healthy lives, we always need something to look forward to. In the next couple weeks we have at least two things to look forward to: One is for the FDA to approve a *Coronavirus* vaccine for safe use. The other is the end of the

enrollment period for Medicare. It should put a stop to all of the *Medicare* Supplemental Insurance commercials on T.V. Old Joe Namath can go back into retirement. We all need something to hope for. Almost 25 years ago Jack Nicholson played in a movie called *As Good as It Gets?* Jack Nicholson plays a depressed man who meets regularly with a therapist. In one scene, he stomps out of the office after an appointment with his analyst that did not go well. He stops, turns to the people in the waiting room then shouts: “*Did you people ever stop to think? What if this is as good as it gets?*”¹ Human nature would have us wish otherwise. Sure, we always want life to get better. We all hope things will go from bad to good then from good to better. Hope keeps us going.

Yet we can concentrate so much on hope, we skip the present. We get so caught up in looking to the future, we ignore the now. Our culture always wants to jump the gun on things. Get

¹ *As Good As It Gets*, TriStar Pictures, December 25, 1997.

ahead of the curve. Hope is one thing, but droning on for months ahead of time is another. All the talk about the recent election wouldn't be so bad if we had not already been talking about it for months. And soon we will start hearing about the 2024 election. Christmas is another good example. Stores have been pushing Christmas since before Halloween. Hallmark Christmas movies—you know, the ones that all have the same basic plot—have been on TV for weeks. During this bleak pandemic, people seem to be putting up Christmas decorations even earlier to cheer up. Christmas has become about food and presents. We concentrate on what we have to do to get ready for Christmas: shopping—decorating—planning—figuring out how to celebrate Christmas in a pandemic. We tend to concentrate so much on the build up to Christmas. But at midnight on December 25, it comes to a crashing halt. Back to life as usual. Some people are so pumped up before Christmas; they get so tired they deflate when it does

come. We might get the impression we are the ones who will make it happen. We don't enjoy the future when it becomes the present.

Look forward, but live in the present. Keep our eye to the future, but live in the moment. In last Sunday's Gospel, when Our Lord says, "*Be watchful! Be alert!*"² He means right now. Watch how we live. Be aware of God. Advent wants us to notice what is going with us now. Advent is a wake-up call to see just how what we are doing with God's current graces and blessings. There is little doubt that we could all be doing better. The first reading last Sunday was from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. We're like the people the Prophet Isaiah spoke to when he asks: *Why do You let us wander, O Lord, from Your ways, and harden our hearts so that we fear You not?*"³ The world "fear" used here does not mean

² Mark 13:33

³ Isaiah 63: 17

“being afraid.” Fear here—means “Fear of the Lord: respect for God’s role in our lives. Advent wants us to step back to think of our lives from a supernatural, God-centered perspective. Because when we think of our lives from a self-centered point of view, the future is filled with worry—not hope. Isaiah goes on to say: *“No ear has heard, no eye ever seen any God but You doing such deeds for those Who wait for Him.”*⁴ When we rise above our own little self-centered world, we can see God’s ways. Then change our ways. Of course, the way for us to do this is through the Sacrament of Penance—confession. That’s one of the main things we should do to prepare for Christmas: make a good confession. Advent pulls us back so we will see what God did—and what God continues to do. Hope promises He does not plan to stop.

⁴ Isaiah 64:3

The couple staring down from the top of the Empire State Building saw a completely different scene than what they had just experienced in big city traffic. When they were only worrying about themselves. Hope can become real when we step back to see life from God's point of view. So, what should we be doing to prepare for Christmas? Rise above the frantic rush of life. Look at the big picture. The best is yet to come. Hope is always here; we just need to step back to find Him again and again and again.

[Closing Prayer and Blessing]