

Leading the FLOCK

BY BISHOP DANIEL E. THOMAS



“As We Await the Blessed Hope”

In these days so marked by the COVID 19 pandemic and all the ways it affects our lives, we all need to hear a message of hope! “As we await the blessed hope.” These are words well familiar to every Catholic, words we hear the priest pray in every Mass just after the Our Father. While I have always found impactful the prayer in which these words appear, called the embolism, they seem to have taken on even deeper significance during this unique 2020 Season of Advent. Here is the prayer in its entirety:

Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil,
graciously grant peace in our days,
that by the help of your mercy,
we may be always free from sin,
and safe from all distress,
as we await the blessed hope
and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

This Advent, I invite you to use this prayer as part of your own daily prayer. Allow it to penetrate your heart, mind and soul, for it highlights the nature of this Holy Season, the very purpose of Advent, and draws us into the hope for which we long.

No doubt many of us right now are not feeling very hopeful, with all that’s transpired this year and with all of life’s uncertainties. Where is all this

going? When will we have a vaccine? Will we ever get back to “normal”? We may not be feeling very optimistic, our confidence may be low and frankly we may not find our future prospects encouraging. This is not meant to be depressing, it’s simply facing the reality. But as people of faith, we know that despite all of the challenges, we are nonetheless called to be a people of hope facing every challenge with a sense of joyful expectancy, reassured ourselves and reassuring to others, displaying an optimism not born of ourselves, but of the one who Himself gives us hope in the very midst of the challenges, the one for whom we wait in Advent: Christ Jesus who is our Hope!

As we learn early on in our catechism classes, hope, together with faith and love, is one of the three theological virtues, that virtue by which we both desire and expect from God both eternal life and the grace we need to attain it (CCC 1817).

The Catholic Catechism helps us understand the hope we are called to and which even now the Lord is encouraging in us! The virtue of hope responds to the aspiration to happiness which God has placed in the heart of each person; it takes up the hopes that inspire our activities and purifies them so as to order them to the Kingdom of heaven; it keeps us from discouragement; it sustains us during times of abandonment; it opens

up our hearts in expectation of eternal beatitude. Buoyed up by hope, we are preserved from selfishness and led to the happiness that flows from charity (CCC 1818).

This is the hope that Advent brings, a hope the Lord desires us to experience here and now, a hope which unfolds from the beginning of Jesus' preaching the beatitudes, which trace the path that leads through the trials that await his disciples. "But through the merits of Jesus Christ and of his Passion, God keeps us 'in the hope that does not disappoint.' Hope is the 'sure and steadfast anchor of the soul...that enters...where Jesus has gone as forerunner on our behalf.' Hope is also a weapon that protects us in the struggle of salvation: 'Let us...put on the breastplate of faith and charity, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.' It affords us joy even under trial: 'Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation.' Hope is expressed and nourished in prayer, especially in the Our Father, the summary of everything that hope leads us to desire" (CCC 1820).

In this Advent time then, we are invited to be "witnesses to hope," the hope for which we wait at Christmas, the hope which even now is with us as he promised, as we look to the hope of eternal life.

In his book "Interior Freedom," Father Jacques Philippe, in reflecting on the exercise of freedom in the spiritual life, seems to be speaking directly to our current situation when he writes:

"We should not limit ourselves to accepting things grudgingly, but should truly consent to them – not to endure them, but in a sense 'choose' them (even if in fact we have no choice, and that's what most annoys us). Choosing here means making a free act by which we not only resign ourselves but also embrace the situation. That isn't easy, especially in the case of really painful trials, but it is the right approach,

and we should follow as much as possible in faith and *hope*. If we have enough faith in God to believe him capable of drawing good out of whatever befalls us, he will do so. Jesus says repeatedly in the Gospels, 'As you have believed so let it be done to you' (Mt. 8:16)".

If you've known someone who is not just hopeful but truly hope-filled, you've known someone who clearly has interior joy. Such joy is similar to that of Abraham of whom Saint Paul recounts: "He believed, *hoping against hope*, that he would become 'the father of many nations'...He did not doubt God's promise in unbelief, rather he was empowered by faith and gave glory to God, and was fully convinced that what God had promised he was also able to do" (Romans 4:18-21).

What God has promised he is able to do! We place our trust in Christ's promise relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit. "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful" (Heb 10:23). This Advent, we are encouraged and inspired that Christ who is our hope came to save us from our sins. He is preserving us even now in this pandemic, so that no matter our situation, if we consent in faith, he will deliver us from evil, grant peace in our days, help us with his mercy, keep us free from sin and safe from all distress, "as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ."



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