



A PASTORAL LETTER

On Re-awakening Eucharistic Faith

To be read at all Masses on the First Sunday of Advent

28th November 2021

My dear brothers and sisters,

Today marks the beginning of a new year in the life of the Church. Advent places all the turmoil of history and the upheavals of the present pandemic in one and the same perspective: that of Christ's return *"with power and great glory"*.ⁱ Our contemporaries might see time as an inevitable path of progress, whereby humanity throws off the moral constraints of Christianity. How often do we hear it suggested that it is inevitable that society will progress to removing all barriers to killing the unborn, or assisting the suicide of the sick, or rejecting the model of the family founded on marriage. Tragically, some see this as human progress. The Gospel offers a radically different itinerary, seeing this time as the moment of witness ushering in the dramatic struggle of the last days, marked by the trial of evil which does not even spare the Church.ⁱⁱ

Yet, as the Catechism reminds us, all time is moving towards the hour which we pray is hastened, when we say: *"Marana-tha! Our Lord, come!"*.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, *"whenever the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she ... turns her gaze 'to him who is to come,' knowing that, 'the Lord comes even now in his Eucharist and that he is here in our midst'"*.^{iv} Advent reminds us that our time must be marked by alertness as we heed Our Lord's call to: *"Stay awake, praying at all times to survive all that is going to happen, and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man"*.^v

The pandemic years have led to such a re-awakening in our parishes as many have recognised anew, the Eucharistic Presence of the Lord Jesus, and the need to participate actively in the Sacrifice of the Mass and the grace and forgiveness which awaits us in Confession. I am especially conscious of those who remain medically vulnerable and are unable to return to Mass this Winter. Let us not forget these most isolated members of our communities and help them remain connected to the life of the Church. Yet, we must also be aware of those who may have 'fallen asleep' and be in danger of losing the perspective of what ultimately matters in time and for all eternity. Let us think of those who may not with us at Mass and seek actively to help and encourage each one to make their return this Christmas and in the new year ahead. This involves not merely a change of priorities on a Sunday but the same re-awakening to the presence of Our Lord. Let our help for them begin with prayer and our own example.

Pope Francis has asked that this be a time marked by listening. Attentive listening is not always easy in our lives or relationships, nor is it easy when we come to the silence of prayer. We all too readily hear only the sound of our own voices; and can struggle to find the silence which allows us to be attentive to the presence of the Lord. Soon we will celebrate, that on the first Christmas night, while the whole world slept, poor shepherds alone heard the voice of Heaven. In one of the best loved Christmas Carols we sing of the silence of that Holy Night declaring: *“How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given ...”* In silence the Saviour was born for us. It is in an atmosphere of silence in every Mass, that we hear God’s Word and receive the wondrous gift of the Eucharist. As the Saint of Calcutta, Mother Teresa reminded us, it is in silence before the Holy Eucharist that we also learn to be attentive to the spiritual and material needs around us. Let us rediscover this precious silence in all our churches so we can once more hear *“the news of great joy”*;^{vi} and recognise *“Emmanuel God-with-us”*^{vii} in the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist. This would surely be the greatest outcome of this time of listening, which Pope Francis describes as leading us all to the supreme prayer of adoration – which is reverent silence in the presence of God.^{viii}

May this new year in the Church’s life be marked by such a re-awakening, so we recognise the purpose of our time. Let us be attentive to the reality of the Eucharist which contains the Church’s entire spiritual wealth, Christ Himself;^{ix} and aware of our constant need of grace and conversion in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. May we also be ready to help others to awaken in Eucharistic faith and in the words of the Gospel hold *“their heads high because our redemption is near at hand”*.^x

Let us ask Our Lady, Help of Christians to guide us all as we prepare to share the joy of Christmas,

+ Mark

Bishop of Shrewsbury

ⁱ Mk. 13:26

ⁱⁱ Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church no. 1403

ⁱⁱⁱ Catechism of the Catholic Church no. 671

^{iv} Catechism of the Catholic Church no. 404

^v Lk. 21: 36

^{vi} Lk. 2: 10

^{vii} Mt. 1: 23

^{viii} Cf. Homily of the Holy Father for Opening the Synodal Pathway, 10th October 2021 & Catechism of the Catholic Church no. 2628

^{ix} Cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* no. 5

^x Lk. 21: 28