



## AN ADVENT PASTORAL LETTER

***“I rejoiced when I heard them say: ‘Let us go to God’s house’”***

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

**27<sup>th</sup> November 2022**

My dear brothers and sisters,

As Advent approached, I received a global report entitled: *“Persecuted and Forgotten?”*<sup>i</sup>. The report documents, country by country, the ways in which Christians across the world live under daily threat. This fearful situation is not the description of some distant time, it is how the faith is being lived in 2022. Many are gathering, as we have gathered this Sunday, under threat of retribution and violence. Their brave witness remind us of what brings us together, Sunday by Sunday in the face of perhaps trivial difficulties and minor inconveniences.

The Second Vatican Council taught, *“It is only through Christ’s Catholic Church ... that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained”*<sup>ii</sup>. In the Church we find not merely the support of a human community, but the path to everlasting happiness and all the means Christ willed for our salvation: the fullness of faith, the fullness of grace in the Sacraments, and the ordained ministry of bishops and priests in apostolic succession<sup>iii</sup>. What could we have asked of the Lord that is not given to us in His Church? Isaiah’s breathtaking vision of all nations coming to worship the Lord, walking in His paths and following His ways, is now fulfilled<sup>iv</sup>.

The dark days in which Advent begins, invite us to recognise the light of faith anew. Recently travelling to a meeting, I found myself passing from brilliant sunshine into fog and semi-darkness. As I struggled to see the way ahead, I knew I could trust the road and its signs which assured me I was *en route* to my destination. If moments come in our lives when we cannot see the way ahead, we know we can trust the road on which we set out and draw confidence from the signs which point unfailingly to our destination. Such is the light and grace we receive in the life and the teaching of the Church.

At the beginning of Advent, the Apostle warns us not to fall asleep along the way<sup>v</sup>, for we must heed the Gospel's urgent call: "You ... must stand ready because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect"<sup>vi</sup>. This was true of Christ's first coming in Bethlehem when only poor shepherds recognised His Advent. Our Lord tells us it will also be like this when the Son of Man comes in glory, as many will be found sleeping<sup>vii</sup>. We must confess that this is true of His coming to us now in grace and, supremely, in the silence of the Eucharist. How easily we can fail to recognise the riches of grace and truth which have been given to us! Today we hear it said, it is the Church herself that must change and abandon the narrow way the Gospel proposes<sup>viii</sup>, the road countless saints walked before us. Yet, every genuine reform of the Church demands the very opposite in a renewed faithfulness and a striving for holiness, which is the fulness of the Christian life and the perfection of charity<sup>ix</sup>.

As Christmas approaches, we must treasure all we have received as Catholic Christians and be ready to share this greatest gift with those who may momentarily have lost their way or are still to find it. The prayer with which we begin this first Mass of Advent<sup>x</sup>, invites us to run to meet Christ who always awaits us in His Church; when we confess our sins in the Sacrament of His mercy; and above all, in His Holy Eucharist.

At the beginning of this Advent, we might think of someone in our lives we can help by means of our prayer and then, by a word of encouragement, to return to the Church this Christmas, echoing the beautiful words of the Psalm: "I rejoiced when I heard them say: 'Let us go to God's House'"<sup>xi</sup>. On my visit to parishes, I see the witness of your faithfulness. Remembering today those Christians who will begin Advent at personal risk and exposed to violence, may your example with its own quiet heroism, help many to find in the Church Christ founded, the sure road to everlasting happiness.

I wish you a blessed Advent and a truly happy Christmas,

+ Mark

Bishop of Shrewsbury

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<sup>i</sup> Cf. Aid to the Church in Need, Report on Christians oppressed for their faith 2020-2022

<sup>ii</sup> *Unitatis Redintegratio* No. 3

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church no. 830

<sup>iv</sup> Cf. Is. 2: 1-5

<sup>v</sup> Cf. Rom. 13: 11-14

<sup>vi</sup> Mt. 24: 44

<sup>vii</sup> Cf. Mt. 24: 37

<sup>viii</sup> Cf. Mt. 7: 13, 14

<sup>ix</sup> Cf. *Lumen Gentium* no. 40

<sup>x</sup> Cf. Collect for the First Sunday of Advent

<sup>xi</sup> Psalm 121