

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last Sunday we started Advent, a very special liturgical season, that is also the beginning of the liturgical year. Throughout the liturgical year, the Church commemorates the mysteries of Christ, Lord and Savior of all humanity, and the very first mystery to be contemplated is that of the Incarnation. The Son of God who always existed “was made flesh” by being conceived in the most pure womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, fulfilling the plan of salvation drawn up by his Father from the very beginning of human history. We contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation in a very unique way as we celebrate the feast of the Nativity of the Lord, Christmas. And through Advent we prepare ourselves to solemnly celebrate Christmas.

Thus, Advent, as Lent, is a time of preparation which not only provides us with the means to be well prepared for the celebration of Christmas -which is getting closer and closer- but also helps us to get into the spirit of preparation for the coming of the Lord. The Lord, who came 2000 years ago in the humility of our flesh, comes into our lives every day in many ways, but in a more special way, through his Word, through the Sacraments, and through our brothers and sisters, especially the poor and needy. The same Lord will come again in power and majesty, at the end of time. Advent helps us to be prepared to receive Him, in an attitude of hope and joyful expectation.

However, Advent is often overshadowed by an anticipation of the celebration of Christmas. As soon as the celebration of Thanksgiving is over, the Christmas season begins for many people, and we can see how the stores, the squares, the streets and even our houses are decorated with beautiful Christmas ornaments; anyone would think that Christmas is already here. Likewise, many of us spend these days in a whirlwind, filled with preparations of all types. People spend a lot of time shopping and preparing everything they need to share with family and friends in holiday gatherings. People don't stop.

That is why the Church, through her Liturgy, invites us to get into the spirit of Advent. The Church does this in a very special way, presenting us three key figures that represent in a unique way the spirit of this time of preparation. The first key figure is that of John the Baptist, the voice crying out in the desert, asking us to prepare the way for the Lord who is already coming (cf. Jn. 1:23). Furthermore, we turn to the prophet Isaiah, the prophet who guides our journey during this time of waiting. His words are used extensively in the liturgies of this Season.

There is another key figure that perhaps stands out even more and is that of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is the Mother of the Lord and his most faithful disciple and is the one who best personifies the attitudes that Christians should identify with throughout the season of Advent. The Blessed Virgin Mary is, for the Christian community, the best model to follow during this time of preparation, because no one like her has waited in such a singular way for the arrival of the Lord and Savior, for Mary “lived better than anyone waiting for the Messiah, she gave birth to him and she introduced him to the shepherds and the wise men”. [Aldazábal, J., *Celebrating the Feasts of Mary*].

There are many reasons to highlight the presence of Mary in this season of waiting. She symbolizes better than anyone the hope that we, as Christians have in the fulfillment of God's promises and in the arrival of the fullness of the Kingdom. She reveals to us with her words and with her life that God is in favor of the poor and marginalized. In his apostolic exhortation *Mariialis cultus*, Pope St. Paul VI, states that Advent “should be considered as a time particularly suited to devotion to the Mother of the Lord” (MC, 4).

Hence, it is not a coincidence that the Advent Liturgy highlights the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary by celebrating a very important Marian solemnity, in the middle of the season of Advent. It is the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, that will be celebrated this week, on December 8th; in which we affirm the truth of faith that proclaims that Mary, the Mother of Jesus was preserved free of original sin from the

moment of her conception. This feast is “a joint celebration of the basic preparation for the coming of the Savior and of the happy beginning of the Church without spot or wrinkle” (MC, 3). It is important to note that Mary is the patroness of the United States under her title of the Immaculate Conception.

This is not the only Marian feast we celebrate in Advent, though. In addition to the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, we have another important feast to honor Mary. It is the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of the Americas, which is celebrated on December 12th. When talking about the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, some think that this is an exclusive devotion of the Mexican people, or of the Latin American people. But this could not be more wrong, since Our Lady of Guadalupe has been proclaimed as the patroness of the entire American continent, and of the Philippines, as well. In 1754, Pope Benedict XIV confirmed the patronage of Our Lady of Guadalupe throughout the territory that was then known as New Spain (from Arizona to Costa Rica). In 1910, St. Pius X proclaimed her as the Patroness of Latin America; in 1935, Pius XI appointed her Patroness of the Philippine Islands, and in 1945 Pius XII gave her the title of Empress of America. More recently, Pope St. John Paul II, in the Apostolic Exhortation “*Ecclesia in America*”, confirmed the assertion of the bishops of the entire continent: Our Lady of Guadalupe is the patroness of all America and Star of the first and new evangelization (EA 11).

In conclusion, the celebration of the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe -which as we have seen is not exclusive to Latin American peoples- is properly inserted in the season of Advent, since Our Lady, who with her apparitions prepared the natives so that they could welcome the message of the Gospel, is the same one that accompanies us, as a pilgrim people on our way of preparation for the advent of our Lord.

This has been a very difficult year for all of us, and yet, many of us have been strengthened through the intercession of the Virgin Mary. I have heard the testimony of many families who, throughout this year, have been strengthened through the recitation of the Holy Rosary. Pope Francis addressed a letter to the faithful around the world last April 25 asking us “to rediscover the beauty of praying the Rosary at home”. From the Lourdes grotto in the Vatican gardens, the pontiff led the recitation of the rosary praying for the end of the pandemic on May 30. In that occasion he recited this prayer: “In the present tragic situation, when the whole world is prey to suffering and anxiety, we fly to you, mother of God and our mother, and seek refuge under your protection”.

The arrival of the Advent season has coincided with a new surge of coronavirus cases throughout the state, and with the imposition of increasingly restrictive measures to contain the advance of the pandemic. Faced with such a disconcerting reality, many may be tempted to lose hope. But in those moments of difficulty and trial, let us remember that we can turn to Mary, like the son who, faced with danger, runs into his mother's arms. The Blessed Virgin, who appeared to St. Juan Diego in the Tepeyac (Mexico), invites us to trust, with the same words with which she comforted and strengthened the native Juan Diego: “Don't be afraid. Am I, who am your Mother, not here?” Despite how uncertain the future may seem to us, knowing that we have the intercession and special protection of our Blessed Mother should encourage us to live this Advent as the time when we are confirmed in the “hope that does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom. 5: 5).

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