

ADVENT PASTORAL LETTER

Christmas celebrates the entrance of Jesus Christ into our lives. The divine Son of God assumed human nature at his conception, and Christmas celebrates his birth as both fully divine and fully human. In him, the divine and human natures are one.

We call this the ‘mystery of the Incarnation’. And like all mysteries of faith, the Incarnation reveals experiences God seeks too to give us.

These are experiences of being empowered spiritually as we draw on the divine life Jesus shared with us through Baptism to overcome all that was not created in human nature originally by God. As we do so, the human and divine within us become increasingly one within us; the divine becomes increasingly ‘incarnate’.

Why Jesus came

Jesus taught that he came to share his divine life with all who believe in him. ^[1] He does this through the Holy Spirit as we receive Baptism., ¹

We grow in personal experiences of the Incarnation – the human and the divine becoming more one within us – as we nurture this life in the ways Jesus taught. We find ourselves gradually thinking, feeling, seeing others, speaking and behaving more like Jesus.

Second, so that we can share his divine life, Jesus shares with us his divine nature. ^[2] Whereas he is divine by nature, through Baptism, we become divine by adoption. We share in his relationship with God the Father, becoming ‘adopted’ sons and daughters of God.

We grow in personal experiences of the Incarnation as we find ourselves drawn into greater intimacy with God. We grow in these experiences too as we are drawn closer to our fellow baptised and into God’s family – the community worship and life within the Church.

Lastly, the Risen Jesus shares with us his divine love, the ‘love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit’. ^[3] This empowers us to love in ways which reflect Christ’s compassion and mercy to others; ways that go beyond the capacity of human love, especially in situations when it is difficult, and even seemingly impossible, to forgive or ‘turn the other cheek’; to love enemies and to pray for persecutors; to resist temptations to be unfaithful in marriage.

^[1] John 10:10

¹ John 6:63

^[2] 2 Peter 1:4

^[3] Romans 5:5

New creations

We are born human, but when the Risen Jesus shares with us his divine life, nature and love through Baptism, we become ‘new creations’. ^[4] We are no longer simply human and incapable of finding freedom from human weaknesses and sinfulness.

To the extent that we respond to the divine within us, we become more ‘Christ-like’: ‘a new person is there to see’ ^[5] This is why St Paul prayed for the Ephesians ^[6] ‘may your hidden self grow strong’.

The purpose of Advent

The purpose of Advent is for Christians to prepare to celebrate again the birth of Christ and his entrance into our lives as baptised people. It is a time to ask ourselves ‘What more can I do to incarnate the divine within me?’

Personal conversation with Christ within

During the Last Supper, Jesus promised that, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, he would ‘make a home’ with his followers. ^[7] St Paul made awareness of Christ within the basic test of Christian faith.^[8]

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith, test yourselves. Do you not recognise that Jesus Christ is in you ...?

From Abraham, through Moses and the prophets, God has called people into conversation, ‘the dialogue of salvation’. This dialogue reached its climax with the coming of Jesus. Conversation with Christ fulfils a believer’s spiritual potential, be they a child or the holiest person on the planet.^[9]

To nurture the divine within, I need to ask myself: ‘Is there any issue in my life I do not share in conversation with Christ within me?’ ‘Any joy, sorrow, blessing, hurt, grief, temptation?’ ‘Any personal question, confusion or relationship difficulty?’

‘Do I share with Christ personal challenges against thinking, feeling, speaking or behaving like him?’ ‘To be forgiving and compassionate like him?’

Praying the scriptures

Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit would lead us to ‘the complete truth’, drawing upon his own teachings. ^[10] This truth includes our understanding of God, Jesus’ teachings and truths of faith.

^[4] 2 Corinthians 5:17

^[5] 2 Corinthians 5:17

^[6] Ephesians 3:16

^[7] John 14:23, 17

^[8] 2 Corinthians 13:5

^[9] Paul VI: Ecclesiam Suam 70#2

^[10] John 14:26

But it also includes truths about ourselves, the purpose and meaning of our lives, the direction of our lives, guidance for important decisions and questions such as the meaning of personal sufferings.

Praying the scriptures means asking the Holy Spirit to guide our thoughts as we read a passage slowly several times and then reflect upon the question: ‘How does this passage relate to my daily life?’

Celebrations of the Eucharist

In many ways, attitudes to the Mass reveal whether people have faith as Jesus taught. He taught that his Body and Blood are essential for nourishing the divine life, and so the divine love, within. Without this communion with him, we have ‘no life’. ^[11]

Jesus taught Christianity to be a spiritually ‘empowering’ faith. It is not primarily an ethnic or set of values. It is about the ‘hidden self’ growing stronger so that we can live his teachings increasingly as the human and divine within us become more united in our lives.

The sacred silences within the ritual of the Mass are moments when we are meant to relate the blessings of the Mass to our lives. We need beforehand to answer questions such as

- for what sins since I was last at Mass am I seeking forgiveness in the Penitential Act?
- for what specific intentions am I praying in the silence after the celebrant’s invitation ‘Let us pray’?
- where in my life am I seeking guidance through the Word?
- where in my life do I need spiritual strength to respond to situations as Jesus would?
- what in my life will I share with Jesus in the silence after Holy Communion?

The other sacraments

All the other sacraments nurture the divine life and love within us. Confirmation strengthens them with the fullness of the Holy Spirit; Reconciliation restores the baptismal relationship with God, healing the damage to the divine life within due to sin; Anointing of the Sick strengthens the divine life within in the face of frailty and suffering; Holy Orders empowers to serve as Jesus’ companions as he provides for his followers; Marriage empowers an ever deepening communion between husband and wife that strengthens love and against daily life marriage challenges.

May our hidden selves grow stronger

Let us tell others why we celebrate Christmas – because Jesus has become part of our lives!

And may we all pray and reflect on our need for the human and divine within us to become increasingly one. May we renew the means Jesus gave for this to happen so that our hidden selves grow increasingly strong.

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^[11] John 6:53-55