

1st SUNDAY OF ADVENT – A (November 27, 2022)

I hope you all had or are having a very blessed Thanksgiving weekend, and I also wish you all a very happy new year—the new church year, that is. The new liturgical calendar begins on this first Sunday of Advent, the season in which we certainly prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus into our world at Christmas. But the first part of Advent has a different focus—preparing ourselves for the time when Jesus will come again in the fullness of his power and glory to bring ourselves and our world to its eternal fulfillment. This was also an important aspect of our celebration of the feast of Christ the King last weekend; in that sense we can say that the second coming of Christ is the bridge between the old and new church years.

Every time that we begin a new year (church or calendar) or celebrate a birthday or anniversary or remember how long it has been since the death of a loved one, we are once again aware of how time keeps racing by—the days flow into weeks which flow into months, which...well, you get the idea. And the older one gets, the faster the time seems to fly by. That's true not just for us older folks (notice I said "us older folks")—I'm hearing that a lot from our young people as well.

One reason for that is undoubtedly the fact that we have so many things going on; we check off items on our 'to-do' lists, but more get added on all the time. In the midst of all this frantic 'busy-ness', do we ever take the time—do we ever make the time—to stop and ask ourselves: where am I going? What am I doing? What's the purpose of all this? Do I remember that, among the various important tasks and responsibilities I have, my first and foremost reason for being here is to prepare for the life beyond this one? There most certainly is life beyond this earthly life, and every person who has ever lived or who will ever live will come to know that reality face to face. And none of us knows when we will experience that event. That's precisely why Jesus urges us in the gospel to 'stay awake for you do not know on which day your Lord will come...at an hour you do not expect.'

So...how are we doing?? As time continues to march forward and we each come closer and closer to that unknown time when we leave this earthly life, how are we each doing in our relationship with God, with others, within ourselves? Note: I'm not asking if we are yet perfect. Jesus, of course, did say that we must be made perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48), but I suspect we all have a way to go on that path (I know I certainly do). But still...are we making progress in the spiritual and moral life, or are we not?

The current issue of Our Sunday Visitor has a number of really good articles about Advent and what our focus should be during this holy season. One of them offers some powerful questions for each of us to grapple with, and they do so from the perspective of the constant forward progress of time. The author asks: "Where were you at this time last year? Aren't you in a different place this year?" I'm not thinking here as much about financial or health matters as I am about our lives as the children of God that we are. Think about where you were and what you were doing twelve months ago. How was it going in your marriage, with your children or parents or siblings...or others? What was your prayer life like last Thanksgiving or Christmas? How did you handle or respond to the temptations or weaknesses you have struggled with for a long time? How did you speak or think about others...especially those who hurt you or who you

just don't like at all and who consistently rub you the wrong way, whether in public or private life?

After considering such things, now ponder: where am I now? Have I made any forward progress in any of these arenas of life? And if not, why not? Have we used fruitfully and gratefully the time God gives us each day to draw closer to him and neighbor in love, or have we not? One of the best treatments of this subject of time is "Eternity in the Midst of Time" by Fr. Wilfrid Stinissen, a Belgian priest (I'll have details in an upcoming bulletin if you want to check it out). He reinforces this point in saying: "Every second is given to us in order to grow into the love we have already received. Time is the...divine environment ...for all who have not yet *reached* perfection but are in the process of *becoming perfect*."

That's so good, and it's so precisely on point. For one thing, it's completely in line with Jesus' call to becoming perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. And it also reminds us that time itself is indeed God's gift to us—a gift to use wisely and gratefully so that we can see and use the opportunities to grow in love and joy and gratitude that God gives us. St. Paul in our second reading tells us that "it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep. For our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed." In other words, time marches on! Let's wake up from the sleep, the delusion of thinking that we don't need to change or grow in the life of conversion and love and prayer and discipleship. Let's resist the temptation to think that we can put off that response to a future time that we may in fact not ever have. "You also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come." Jesus' words, not mine.