

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 1st Sunday of Advent; Bethlehem University

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BNS (Bethlehem University)

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A Backsliding Violinist

Way back, when I was in the third grade, I began to take violin lessons. At the beginning, I was very enthusiastic and would faithfully practice the violin an hour each day. But after a few years, I got tired of practicing the violin. There were so many other interesting things to do - riding my bike with my friends, playing sports, watching TV, reading a book - in fact, almost anything seemed more interesting to me than playing the violin. Weary of the instrument, I started to reduce my practice time. It soon became evident to my parents and certainly to my teacher that I was no longer making progress.

Backsliding as Christians

When it comes to the practice of the faith, something similar can happen to us. At some point in our lives, whether we were baptized as infants or discovered the Catholic faith later in life, we may have been very enthusiastic and joyful. Indeed, all of us can probably remember a stage in our lives when we were young in the faith, happy to be a part of the life of the Church, joyful to share in the Church's liturgy and in the Church's works of charity, and ready to learn more about the Bible and the Church's teaching.

But somewhere along the way, we may have grown weary. We found out that it is not as easy as it seems to be a practicing Catholic. To be sure, our first steps as Catholic Christians were easy and consoling but then came the difficulties of putting our faith into practice: weathering the storms of controversy and scandal in the

Church, having our attention diverted by various pleasures, pursuits, and worries. Little by little, practicing the faith may have become less and less appealing. We still think of ourselves as Christians and we want others so to regard us, but in fact we may find that we have all but stopped practicing the faith such that we are no longer making progress – we are in fact sliding backwards.

Lurking Enemies: Sloth and Presumption

Advent is meant to shake us from our complacency. It does not begin with the tender story of Jesus' birth in a stable but rather with the fearful event that will take place at the end of time and of the reckoning each of us will face when Christ comes again in glory as judge of the living and the dead. Against that backdrop, Jesus warns us against growing weary of our faith, becoming complacent in our sins, and allowing the cares and concerns of daily life to distract us from practicing our faith and living in hope. And so, in today's Gospel, Jesus says to us: "Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of life, that that the day (i.e., the day of judgment) catch you by surprise, like a trap." On the contrary, Jesus warns us "to be vigilant at all times and to pray that [we] will have the strength to escape [those] tribulations... and instead to be ready to "stand up straight" "before the Son of Man" confident that our "redemption is at hand" ...Let us ask ourselves: if the Lord were to come again in glory, would we be ready?

Dear friends, the season of Advent calls us to eradicate from our lives two deeply engrained attitudes which threaten to undermine our faith, namely, spiritual laziness or sloth and its companion, the sin of presumption. Both are insidious, hidden enemies of the soul and both must be rooted out if we are to be ready to welcome the newborn Savior at Christmas and to greet confidently our Redeemer and our Judge at the end of time.

Spiritual laziness or sloth overtakes us gradually. We start cutting corners in the practice of the faith. We pray less. We go to Confession less often. We start skipping Mass on Sunday. We put the Bible aside. We stop trying to overcome our vices and to develop virtues. Besides, we may tell ourselves, that we are tired and busy with too much on our plate. Pretty soon, we may stop practicing the faith altogether and simply give in to the world, the flesh, and the devil.

This is where the sin of presumption takes over. Presumption lulls us into supposing that our sins really aren't so bad after all, that we're a good person even without practicing our faith, and that, in any case, God is good so he won't mind if we ignore him on earth – in the end, we'll be happy with him in heaven. This sort of self-deception, as you can well imagine, is very dangerous to our souls.

Advent: the Antidote

Advent offers us not only a warning but also the possibility of a new beginning. It marks the beginning of a new liturgical year when we retrace the footsteps of Christ. The beginning of this new year of grace is an invitation to you and to me to welcome the Lord into our hearts and homes as never before. It is an invitation to replace spiritual laziness with zeal for holiness and discipleship and to replace presumption with spiritual vigilance and humility. And the path to genuine progress in the spiritual life is, in fact, practicing our faith – daily prayer, reading Scripture, Sunday Mass, frequent Confession, disciplining ourselves, and giving of ourselves in service to others. As Pope Benedict XVI famously said, “One who has hope lives differently.”

Living differently means not only practicing the faith but also spreading it and caring about those who also struggle to live their faith. With us tonight are members of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre and representatives and supporters of Bethlehem University – and thank you once again for your presence. You love your faith so much that you work hard to ensure that the light of faith remains brightly visible in the Holy Land in spite of many political and cultural challenges. And if we must struggle to keep the faith alive in the Holy Land, so too we must struggle in the increasingly secular culture in which we live to keep the faith alive in our hearts and homes, in our parishes, and in our places of work and leisure.

And if the flame of faith burns brightly in our hearts, then we shall not fear the Lord's coming but rather watch for it. And we shall not only love the Lord but also long for him. And we shall not only obey the Lord but indeed seek to become like him – the One who came into the world in humility to save us from our sins, the One who loves us like no other.

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!

