

# Archbishop Lori's Homily: Advent Evening of Reflection

*Advent Evening of Reflection*

*Baltimore Area Federal Association; Order of Malta*

*Cathedral of Mary Our Queen*

*December 7, 2017*

I am delighted once again to spend this evening of prayer and fellowship with you. My special gratitude to all of you for weaving the spirit of the Order of Malta into the fabric of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Thank you for your openness to the message of the Gospel and for your readiness to bear witness to the Christ and for the array of ministries that you represent and carry forward. And thanks for the opportunity to offer an Advent reflection. My thoughts tonight will center on the theme of watchfulness.

You may have seen advertisements on television touting new internet-based security systems for the home. One popular system is called "Always Home". Basically it is a doorbell hooked to a camera and microphone that in turn connects with one's iPhone. When someone rings the doorbell, that person's image is displayed on the homeowner's iPhone and the homeowner is able to talk to the would-be visitor and vice-versa. If the would-be visitor looks suspicious, the clever homeowner who happens to be at work can pretend to be at home bathing the children and thus indisposed, or can indicate that the police are being called, etc. Invariably the intruder, now caught on camera, hurries away. And all this can be yours if you'd but click on ring.com but it might cost you more than \$49.95!

We live in a world where we feel the need to protect what is ours. Even in neighborhoods deemed safe, home burglary is all too common, and so we take steps to protect our families from intruders as well as the possessions and keepsakes we hold near and dear. If you've experienced a break-in, then you know it is a scary experience. So, it's no wonder that people are on the outlook to protect themselves.

Let's take another example, on-line security. Recently the nation was rocked to learn

that a massive amount of personal data, held in digital custody by Equifax, was breeched. In the wake of this revelation, many were angry. How could a firm as resourced as Equifax have failed to protect this data? And why didn't Equifax let its customers know about this sooner so they could take immediate steps to protect themselves.

Yet another example. During World War II there was a catch phrase, "Loose lips sink ships". It meant, "Beware of unguarded talk." So, if a parent learned of the whereabouts of troops or ships in a letter from a soldier or sailor and then shared this information with others, that parent have endangered the safety of American forces. In a post 9-11 world, the byword is "If you see something, say something." We are to be on the outlook for suspicious packages, unattended luggage, or people who look like they're up to no good. Watchfulness. We need to watch what we say. We need to be on the outlook for threats to life and limb.

A final example of a different kind of watchfulness, that of a professional investor. Whatever else we know or don't know about the financial markets, we do know that they can be volatile and fast moving. Many professional investors get very little sleep. They're up in the wee hours of the morning watching the world-wide markets and studying the trends of American financial markets. They're looking for dangers but mostly they are looking for opportunities to grow the assets of their clients and their own as well. Watchfulness isn't just about danger. It's also about opportunity.

Four examples of watchfulness: Threats to the security of our home. Threats to our personal credit, savings, indeed our identity. Threats to our national security. Opportunities to grow one's wealth. All four require demand alertness. All four demand a readiness to take specific steps. All four require a kind of inner courage and resolve.

If we rightly guard life, limb, possessions, and the security of our homes how much more should we be watchful about our interior life, that is, about the inner life of our mind, our heart, our very soul. In the Gospels, Jesus poses this penetrating question to me and you: "What profit is there to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? What could one give in exchange for his life?" (Mark 8:37) If it is worth guarding our earthly lives and possessions, how much important it is to guard our interior lives,

our souls, the very seat and center of our existence, from all that could threaten us. We could manage to keep ourselves and our possessions safe and avail ourselves of every opportunity to grow our assets, while at the same time forfeiting our lives, if we are not watchful.

As we listen to the Scripture readings and prayers of the Advent liturgy, we notice a great emphasis on the theme of watchfulness. This Sunday's Gospel is a case in point, where Jesus says to his disciples: "Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come!" And the time to which Jesus refers is his second coming at the end of time. It's that second, glorious coming for which we pray at every Mass, just after the Our Father, when we pray the Lord to keep us "free from sin and safe from all distress as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ." To listen to this prayer, you'd think we were not only watchful; you'd also think that we were downright eager for the Lord's second coming. In fact, in the Opening Prayer for the First Sunday of Advent we pray for "...the resolve to run forth and meet [the] Christ" in the hope of being worthy of possessing the heavenly Kingdom.

Yet, is that really how we think about it? Would we really be happy if the world were to end tomorrow? If tomorrow dawned as judgment day, would we be ready or, would it catch us off guard, "like a thief in the night" as St. Paul says (1 Thess. 5:2)? St. Augustine, a foremost Doctor of the Church, sounds a similar note in one of his homilies found in the Liturgy of the Hours. Here is what he had to say: "For what sort of love of Christ is it to fear his coming? Brethren, do we not have to blush for shame? We love him, yet we fear his coming. Are we really certain that we love him? Or do we love our sins more?" He adds: "[Christ] will come whether we wish it or not... He will come, you know not when; and provided he finds you prepared, your ignorance of the time of his coming will not be held against you" (St. Augustine, Discourse on the Psalms, Liturgy of the Hours Vol. IV., p. 535).

So, we enter upon the enter upon this season in which the entirety of the Church's Tradition urges us to be watchful, vigilant, and even filled with joyful hope. I'd say that this season invites us to undertake a brief examination of conscience. Let us ask ourselves what undermines our watchfulness? Let us ask ourselves what we need to do to cultivate a spirit of watchfulness, an interior alertness that enables us to seize

the day of grace, the season of grace that the Church opens for us at the beginning of a new Year of Faith.

Thus, the bad news before the good news... and I assure you my point is not to belabor every possible danger and vice that could hinder or hamper our watchfulness, but simply to point out examples of such things to spur your own reflection and prayer as well as my own.

Perhaps the first vice might not seem like a vice at all, thus its danger. Isn't it a failure on our part to perceive how radical the Gospel really is and how much the Lord is truly asking of us? For many people the faith is an optional extra. It's just one of the places one might look for comfort in time of distress but it is not really a way of life and a way of love. When Jesus speaks about denying oneself and picking up the Cross, about losing one's life in order to gain it, he is talking about "a total shift in the center of gravity in one's life, a reckless abandonment to him that entails the letting go of all one's attachments and agenda, even one's hold on life itself." (Mary Healy, Gospel of St. Mark, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture, p. 169). Once we've domesticated, that is, tamed the faith and reduced it a tool of self-fulfillment rather than a way of life centered upon Christ, then we are in danger of losing our faith as other things promise more immediate, tangible, and palpable rewards... the rewards of comfort, pleasure, self-absorption. Because you are involved in evangelization, you realize how easily this can happen in people's lives. It's not that they renounced the faith. They just lost it, little by little.

A second example of a vice that can undermine watchfulness is sadness. I don't just mean being upset over bad news or the normal process of grieving. No, I mean a deep-seated and paralyzing sadness that the spiritual writers of old call "acedia". It's a lingering discouragement that makes it seem impossible even to take the smallest step in God's direction, that makes flourishing as a human being seem not worth the effort. This deep-seated discouragement manifests itself as a type of sloth or laziness, and indeed a person beset with acedia finds it hard to pray, to go to church, to address spiritual problems, to reach out to others in charity. But vices can appear under all kinds of guises. Thus acedia can be a kind of spiritual laziness, such that we cannot rouse ourselves to give two figs about our life and destiny. But it can also manifest itself in intense busyness, a superficial busyness, a contrived busying such

that we will avoid being with God in prayer. If you've ever sat down to pray & thought of a thousand other things you need to do, then the demon of acedia is lurking under the guise of duty.

A third vice that dampens even undermines watchfulness is our connectedness. By that word I don't mean our connectedness to God and to one another but rather our attachment to that mobile device that absorbs so much of our time and attention in the course of day. No one thinks that we're going back to the analogue world of 'information please' - but we do need to look critically at one's being absorbed in one's own virtual world. If you've ever taken young people on an amazing field trip - maybe you've brought them to see the sights of ancient Rome or Greece, maybe you've brought them to a place of breath-taking beauty - and there they are staring into a little screen sending and receiving messages and looking at Lord only knows what. If we're honest, we need to ask how often we check our iPhones, how often we're on social media, how often we'd prefer to look at a screen than our family members, co-workers, or the real world all around us. And while we can find wonderful things on-line, do we not have to admit that spending our days staring in a lighted screen, be it big or small, is mind-numbing. So while one can find Scripture, prayers, and spiritual messages on-line, let us be aware of the dangers to our soul of becoming digital creatures. Let us be aware of the addictive power of the screen and the many messages liminal and subliminal that undermine virtue and faith. How many people substitute on-line interaction for a real relationship with God grounded in the Sacraments and real relationships of love with family members and others.

If these are the things we need to beware of, what attitudes of mind and heart do we need to cultivate if we would be those faithful, watchful servants who are not only prepared for the Lord's coming but who also eagerly await the coming of the Savior - disciples whose prayer is Maranatha - "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Perhaps the first place to start is silence. Many people avoid any time of silence in their lives. People go to sleep with the television or radio on. So many people can't imagine working at a desk without music playing. But silence can be golden. Maybe you've observed an old couple at a restaurant. You can tell they deeply love each other. Who only knows what they've been through raising a family and living out

their vows in good times and bad. Yet, there they are and they are eating silently. They're not angry. Their hearts are attuned to each other. They don't need words.

If only we could be that way when we pray. A heart and mind that falls silent and puts itself in God's presence is a heart wherein God speaks, a heart in which his Word echoes and re-echoes. It is a heart that becomes watchful for God's presence, alert to his Word, a heart that knows how to crowd out all that distracts us from the presence of God. Even if we're not called to contemplative life but we are all called to moments of silent prayer during the day - maybe fifteen minutes, maybe more, when we "un-plug", "dis-connect" and stop talking, even to God, and instead listen attentively. That is when we will finally discover something wonderful deep within us - namely, our desire for God, our deep yearning for God's love as the only love that satisfies, the only love upon which to build our lives, the only love that, in the end, we have to share with one another. How beautifully the French philosopher Simone Weil put this: "Desire, oriented toward God, is the only force capable of raising the soul. Or rather, God alone comes to possess and lift the soul, but only desire obliges God to descend. God only comes to those who ask God come - and to ask often, for a long time, and ardently. God cannot prevent himself from coming to them." (Quoted in *Magnificat*, December 2017, p. 4). This we experience only when we allow ourselves to fall silent and to pray in accord with what is truly in the depth of our being - no matter how far we have strayed or how indifferent we have been.

Second is discipline ... discipline with regard to our appetites. Naturally we groan to hear such a suggestion in a season when food and drink and partying are so very common. But if we would be spiritually awake, alert, and watchful - then we must avoid all that makes us spiritually drowsy. The moral virtues, by contrast, help us become spiritually alert. A temperate person who uses the things of this world well and wisely is more likely to have opportunities to cultivate the faculties of the soul. A person who is pure of heart, steadfast in relationships, reliable in friendship, noble of purpose, a seeker of truth, a practitioner of reason... such a person will more likely be on the outlook not only against that which undermines one's life of faith but indeed he or she will be on the outlook for every opportunity to welcome the Lord into one's heart and home and thus to grow in the life of the Spirit. For such a person, far from being self-righteous and judgmental of others, will have created in his or her interior life a kind of a paradise, a kind of heaven, indeed a garden of

virtues and a haven of love where the Lord can dwell. This is the household we must create and this is the household we must guard.

Third is the habit of making good use of our time. We know neither the day nor the hour of the Lord's second coming nor do we know the day nor the hour of our passing from this earth. But we do have the day in which we live. As Mother Mary Francis, a wonderful Poor Clare, wrote: "Today is the absolute fullness of today. Let us be drawn to love and to give and to spread joy all about us. We are not promised tomorrow, and we cannot do anything much about yesterday, except to regret what was wrong about it. But we have today!" Every day is a gift whether we deem it a good day or a bad day. Even the most difficult day is a gift when we grow in grace. Even the most difficult day is precious when we use it to desire Jesus. "If the Lord were to come again, would he find us watching in prayer? We hope so," Mother Mary Francis answers, "but we must *will* so!" (Quoted in *Magnificat*, December 2017, p. 40)

Let us give the last word to Blessed John Henry Newman so as to summarize those virtues and attitudes that must be ours if we would be watchful and alert for the coming of Jesus, *whether in evening, as at the Last Supper, or at midnight, as in the Garden of Gethsemane, or at dawn, as when the cock crowed in the midst of his passion, or in the afternoon when he died on the Cross, or in the morning as when he arose from the dead* (cf. *Magnificat*, op .cit., p. 46). Cardinal Newman says, "He watches for Christ who has a sensitive, eager, apprehensive mind; who is awake, alive, quick-sighted, zealous in seeking and honoring him; who looks out for Him in all that happens, and would not be surprised, who would not be over-agitated or overwhelmed, if he found that He was coming at once!" (John Henry Newman, "Watching", in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. IV., London: Longmans 1920, pp. 322-323).