

# Archbishop Lori's Homily: Advent Evening of Recollection

*Advent Evening of Recollection*

*Advent by Candlelight; Women in the New Evangelization*

*St. Augustine, Elkridge*

*December 2, 2017*

I am delighted to be with you to tonight and I thank you for your kind invitation. Special greetings and thanks to your pastor, Fr. John Williamson, for his dedicated service to your parish family day in and day out. My special gratitude to Cathy Carlin, Director of Family Catechesis, for your kind letter helping me understand by "ABC's"! And finally, my gratitude to all of you who are part of W.I.N.E. – Women in the New Evangelization –for your openness to the message of the Gospel and for your readiness to bear witness to the Christ for whom we wait in Advent with expectant hearts. It is this very theme of expectation, watchfulness, upon which I'd like to reflect with you this evening.

So, you may have seen advertisements on television about these new internet-based security systems you can buy for your homes. One popular system is called "Always Home" and it is basically a doorbell with a camera and microphone that connects with one's iPhone. When someone rings the doorbell, his or her 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 home bathing the children or can indicate that the cops are being called, etc.

Invariably the intruder, now caught on camera, hurries away. 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 have 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 and to protect the possessions and keepsakes we hold near and dear. If you've ever been broken into, it is a scary experience and so it's no

wonder that people are on the outlook to protect themselves.

Let's take another example, on-line security. Recently, we were rocked by news that massive amounts of our data, held in digital custody by Equifax, was breeched. Inasmuch as Equifax was the repository of millions of people's credit information, this breech was very serious indeed. In the wake of this revelation, many were angry. How could a firm as big as Equifax have failed to protect this data? And when it was breeched, why didn't it let its customers know so that 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 from a family member in the armed services and spoke freely about this to others - that parents could be unwittingly endangering the safety of American forces. In a post 9-11 world, the byword is "If you see something, say something." So, 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 neighborhoods, communities, and homelands, how much more should we be watchful about our interior life, 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 perfectly safe and indeed avail ourselves of every opportunity to grow our assets, while at the same time forfeiting our lives, if we are not watchful.

As you pay close attention to the Scripture readings and prayers in the Advent liturgy, you will 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, as the Lord commands, 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. Is that how we really 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, your wonderful patron, 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? Brothers and sisters, 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 joyfully expectant, let us 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 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 shit 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." Once we've domesticated, tamed the faith and made it our tool 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 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, and all this manifests itself as a type of sloth, which we normally think of as laziness. But vices can appear under all kinds of guises. Yes, it acedia can be a kind of spiritual laziness, such that we cannot rouse ourselves to give a damn 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. And by that 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 gone to see the sights of ancient Rome or Greece, maybe you've brought them to see our nation's founding documents - and there they are staring into a little screen giving and sending 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 kind 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 - whose prayer is Maranatha - "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Perhaps the first place to start is silence. How many people avoid any time of silence in their lives. People go to sleep with the television on or the radio. So many people can't imagine working at a desk with music playing. 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. None of us, myself included, is blessed with a calling 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." 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 disciple ... 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 spiritual awake, alert, and watchful - then we must avoid all that makes us spiritually drowsy. The moral virtues, by contrast, help us become spiritual 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 - 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. So 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. Mary kept a vigil of prayer throughout her whole life for Jesus. "If the Lord were to come again, would he find us watching in prayer? We hope so," she answers, "but we must *will* so!"

And third, let me allow Blessed John Henry Newman to provide a summary of 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. 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!"