

My friends in Christ, our pilgrim's journey of faith through the Season of Advent continues, and in today's Gospel text, we encounter Saint John the Baptist – the messenger chosen by God, as foreseen by the Prophet Isaiah, to “prepare the way of the Lord,” to “make straight His paths.”

Because as Father Haspedis reminded us in his homily last weekend, Advent is a season that helps us to prepare for the Lord when He comes; the very word “Advent” reveals this truth, insofar as the English word “Advent” is based upon two Latin words: *ad* (meaning “toward”); and *venire* (a verb meaning “to come”). Because the Lord is coming to us...and Advent prepares us for this.

The Advent of our King is truly a momentous event; and it is right and just that we do what we *need* to do in order to be prepared, to be ready; and we do well to make *every* effort in this regard.

In the world of film, it is award season, and actors and filmmakers make every effort (to the extreme sometimes, it seems) to make themselves presentable for the awards ceremonies. Glamour on the red carpet as the stars go by and cameras flash...and all of *that*, just for the *smallest* chance of winning some trinket in the form of a little golden man called “Oscar.” If *they* are so precautious as to make every effort to be prepared for *Oscar* when *he* comes...do *we* not have a far greater urgency to be prepared *ourselves* for *Jesus* when *He* comes?

Now, I am not necessarily talking about our fancy clothes (our “Sunday best”), our outward appearance when we come to Mass, so much as what Saint John the Baptist is about in his ministry of preparing the way for the Lord. As we just heard in our Gospel text, he “appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

Repentance! But why *this* theme of repentance – of *all* Gospel themes that could have been emphasized during Advent? Our own parish patron Saint Peter reminds us in today's text from his second letter that the Lord “is patient...not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” For the Lord *is* coming...and when He comes...will He find faith on Earth? Jesus Himself asks us that very question, and one can almost hear the sorrow in His voice as He asks this question, as if *hoping* that the answer to this question could be “yes,” and yet at the same time *fearing* that the answer might be “no.”

The constant Gospel message in the last days of Ordinary Time and the first days of Advent has been a message of being alert, being prepared, keeping watch. Because when Jesus comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead, *hopefully* we *will* have made *every* effort to be prepared – and the height of Advent preparation is repentance. Avoiding all near occasion of sin at all cost...being absolved of all sin that we may have incurred; and this is a whole lot more, a much bigger deal, than simply feeling bad or vaguely muttering those words “I am sorry” and then moving on as if nothing had happened. There are only seven Sacraments that Christ has instituted for His Church, and one of them is the Sacrament of Reconciliation – a whole Sacrament given to us for the *sole* purpose of telling Him how truly sorry we are for having sinned. And in that Sacrament...in the confessional, that chapel of mercy...we place at the feet of the Lord that which is our exclusive property (that is, our sins, our failings, and our human weakness). And giving all of that to *Him*, what does He offer *us* in exchange? “Comfort, give comfort to My people,” says the Lord. He gives to us His infinite, eternal love and mercy and forgiveness. And what greater comfort could there *possibly* be than this great goodness? The priest hearing confessions knows *very* well the extraordinary comfort that the Lord gives to those who come to confession – the tears of joy that burst forth as if a most terrible weight has *finally* been lifted from their shoulders! The Sacrament of Reconciliation gives comfort.

And we are a people and a world in desperate need of a comfort such as only *God* can give; and the dire urgency for this comfort, for *reconciliation*, is *now*. In that confessional, the Sacrament is celebrated, and sacramental confession effects God’s grace of healing and mercy in our lives, in our souls. Going to confession, then, is the key. And I mean *regular* confession, *frequent* confession, *not* confession whenever we *feel* like it, *not* once a year, once a decade, once in a lifetime, but *regular* and *frequent*; for therein lies a sure and certain path toward my oft-spoken plea for active and intentional discipleship. We need people *now* who are ready *now* to engage Jesus Christ in a *serious* way, to enter into their relationships with the divine at a newer, deeper level; we need disciples *now* who are ready *now* for some *serious* spirituality – because *that* is what it is going to take to encounter a comfort and peace such as only God can give, thus to share this comfort and peace with all the world. And as I

say, to do *that* means being reconciled...which in turn means pledging ourselves anew (or, perhaps even for the very first time) to regular, frequent confession.

I *know* that the vast majority of faithful Christians want a deeper, more personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I *know* that. And I know also that the surest way of getting that deeper, personal relationship is with regular, frequent confession.... Why, therefore, are more faithful Christians not taking advantage of this healing, transformative opportunity? Here at Saint Peter – there are many opportunities – a regular and frequent confession schedule – for the Sacrament of Reconciliation: every Saturday afternoon before the 4:30 PM Mass; Sunday mornings before the 8 AM Mass; and Friday evenings, I am there in the confessional each week, 6 PM to 7 PM – during which time we also have Eucharistic Adoration taking place in the chapel. If, perhaps, *nothing* of this regular and frequent confession schedule works for you, then we can always schedule an appointment; many parishioners, in fact, are already doing that.

Now, with Christmas coming so soon, why am I harping on *confession* of all things? Because I whole-heartedly believe in the salvific power of the grace of healing, mercy, and forgiveness given to us in this Sacrament. And I *will* waste time with the Lord in the confessional, even if for a whole hour nobody comes to confession, because if even just one penitent sinner in urgent need of God's grace finally *does* embark upon the holy pilgrimage to the chapel of mercy...then *they* will have been given that comfort and peace such as only God can give...and *I*, too, will be happy, for I will have done my duty, that God-given ministry and mission of the holy priesthood, for which I was called and ordained. Because the priest is in the business of saving souls...and the confessional is where this miracle of salvation takes place – the store-front, as it were, of this soul-saving enterprise.

Going to confession is just like praying. How do you do it? How do you begin? You begin simply by *doing* it! Our Scripture text from the Prophet Isaiah speaks of comfort; Saint Peter's letter and our Gospel text today both speak of reconciliation, that Sacrament in which we encounter that comfort and peace such as only *God* can give. Be reconciled, therefore! Be comforted! And go to confession! And may God bless you if – and *when* – you do.