

Dearly Beloved,

Today we mark the last Sunday of the liturgical year, with Advent beginning a week from today. As is always the case, in the Gospel, Our Lord tells the Apostles and us of the signs that will accompany the end of the world. What Jesus says is a complex combination of events that have already occurred, events that occur more than once, and some events yet to come. In each age, some aspects of today's Gospel are fulfilled, for it is meant to spur us to greater fervor and vigilance. If Christ is coming, and He surely is, then we should prepare ourselves and not suppose that we will have another day to right ourselves or to love God more generously.

If anything in the account jumps out to our imagination, it is mention of the abomination of desolation. This is one of those events in the Lord's prediction that have happened more than once, and is destined to happen again before the end of time. The manifestation of which Jesus speaks regards the events surrounding the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

But we can think of other times in which this abomination also showed itself, both based upon the meaning of the phrase, and especially if we couple it to the testimony of Paul. The phrase 'abomination of desolation' occurs first in the book of Daniel. There it is translated both as the abomination that makes desolate and the abomination unto desolation, with both phrases clearly conveying a sense of movement: this is something that makes the area in which it is found desolate, inhospitable, forsaken, bleak, barren. The abomination, whatever it may be, whether a thing or an idea, makes desolate wherever it is exalted.

Added to this is that Paul says in 2 Thessalonians that there will an Antichrist in the end who combines in himself all the worst elements: *"Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God."* Since the abomination of desolation and the antichrist are related, there have been many times in history when some person or group of persons set themselves against God with utter rebellion and lawlessness. One need only think of the French or Bolshevik Revolutions, and how a supposedly political movement quickly became an attempt to destroy every object of worship and proclaimed itself to be God. All the signs of today's world point to yet another abomination that makes desolate, this one being the exaltation of selfishness, sensuality and cowardice, under the name of human love.

In 1976, while still a cardinal, St. John Paul II journeyed to our country to attend the international Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia. Before he left in September, he spoke about the state of the world, saying, “We are now standing in the face of the greatest historical confrontation humanity has gone through. I do not think that wide circles of the American society or of the Christian community realize this fully. We are now facing the final confrontation between the Church and the anti-Church, of the Gospel versus the anti-Gospel.” That is, the abomination of desolation is perhaps making its final appearance.

If we quickly consider the controversies and heresies in the Church, they began with Christology and Trinitarian theology, then shifted to the theology of the sacraments and of the Church, then to the value of Revelation and faith, and now finally to the family and to the very nature of the human being. It seems that there is nothing left for the devil to attack, nothing more that he can do, and so instead of attacking the divine and the divine means to salvation, he is now attacking man himself, with no attempt to mask his plan. The devil, who is always the agent behind every age’s abomination of desolation, for it is a continuation of his rebellion against God, hates mankind and knows that true love will orient us toward God and heal and save us, with the help of grace.

Thus he has done two things to undermine marriage and human love: first, he has glorified artificial birth control and abortion. He does not want more humans entering this world; he knows that they will necessarily lead to a decrease in selfishness and an increase of sanctity and charity, that the ranks of heaven will be more full, and so he convinces mankind to avoid more children. Second, he has exalted and sanctified homosexuality and other forms of promiscuity; he knows that if people freely engage in such behaviors, even to the point of marriage, he can keep them from experiencing true, selfless, healing love, for such behavior of its very nature has a selfish quality to it and it can never open to the sacrificial love required by the conception of children.

Marriage is supposed to be an image of Christ and his Church and thus life-giving and salvific, giving life to the souls of the spouses through their mutual love and sacrifice, and giving life in generating new human beings to be members of the kingdom of God. Even an unhappy marriage is a sign of Christ and the Church for if the spouses remain faithful, their fidelity on earth will blossom into real, mutual love in the world to come. Perseverance in a difficult marriage is a testimony to our faith that we are made not for this world, but for the next, and that unhappiness suffered here for love of God will be transformed into peace and joy in the next life.

If these things are true, that we are in the midst of the final confrontation between good and evil, and that the truth about marriage and sexuality is at the center of the conflict, what can we do? This homily is meant to encourage, to give meaning to our current struggle, to reinforce our intuitions; it is not intended to discourage and sadden. So what can we do?

In his second letter to Timothy, St. Paul wrote his immortal words, *“I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. As to the rest, there is laid up for me a crown of justice, which the Lord the just judge will render to me in that day: and not only to me, but to them also that love his coming.”* We are, then, not to live in these dark days as if there is no hope, no purpose, to live as if fear ought to be stronger than love. We are to love the coming of Christ and to lift up our heads to welcome Him when He returns to earth. So we can and should ask ourselves: do I love His coming?

There are three reasons to love His coming, in ascending order. The first is to escape the evils of this world. This is the most imperfect reason, for we desire the coming of Christ out of fear or out of weariness. We groan at the possibility of facing the apparent unraveling of society and our hearts melt within our breasts. This kind of yearning for Our Lord’s return can exist while higher loves are also operative, but if it is the only love of His coming we experience, we should pray for an increase in charity and fortitude. Our forebears in the faith have suffered worse than we have; there are Catholics throughout the world at this very moment who are suffering more than we do. What will come upon us in the end we do not know, but we must say with Job, *“Deliver me O Lord, and set me beside thee, and let any man’s hand fight against me.”* Our Lord has died for us; even should what remains be cause for fear, it should not be debilitating fear, for we are victorious through the Blood of our Savior and He will not abandon us.

A second reason for loving Christ's coming is to be freed of the moral struggle. This is still an imperfect reason, but loftier than the first reason because by His coming in the flesh the Lord called us to holiness, to cooperation with His grace, to the using of His spiritual gifts to the full. So by desiring the return of Jesus to bring an end to our personal moral battles is not wrong; we weary of overcoming our sins and vices, and also grow weary of other people's sins and vices. We long to be freed from sin, both our own and that of others; we long to rest in God. Surely this pleases Christ, but it still remains self-centered.

And thus the greatest reason to love the coming of Christ is for His sake; to rejoice at the presence of the One whom we have served and sought since we gave our lives to Him. St. Augustine puts it this way, *"There are men who with patience submit to die; but there are some perfect who with patience endure to live. What do I mean? When a person still desires this life, that person, when the day of death comes, patiently endures death: he struggles against himself that he may follow the will of God, and in his mind desires that which God chooses...But when a man desires, as St. Paul says, to be dissolved and to be with Christ, that person, not patiently dies, but patiently lives, delightedly dies. See the apostle patiently living, how with patience he here, not loves life, but endures it."*

This is that to which we are called. We desire Christ not for what He brings, whether it be the destruction of evil men or definitive freedom from sin, but we desire Christ for His own sake. We have been asking, seeking and knocking most of our lives and now He is here: He responds, He is found, He opens to us, not in a veiled manner as now, but manifestly so. The One who has died for us has returned—He has come, and He has come to take us with Him.

So in this final week of the liturgical year, as the season of Advent is about to unfold, let us learn to love the Lord's coming. Let us ask Him to purify our hearts, to cast out the fear He finds there, and in its place, to cause courage and charity to grow and come to maturity. Continue to have children, continue to support marriages, continue to take elderly parents into your homes, continue to live chastely, to be generous with your spirit and your other resources, to extend charity whenever you can, to try to pull people back from the brink of suicide and selfishness, to fast and pray and love as much as you can, to never give up.

And when the Lord comes, we will be able to say with the Psalmist, *"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me, uttering slanders against me, my adversaries and foes, they shall stumble and fall. For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent, he will set me high upon a rock. And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies round about me; and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the Lord!"*