

### Let's Get Real

When I was growing up, I often had the feeling that Advent was an artificial thing. It seemed like a forced time of year – sort of the Church's way to get us excited about the coming of Christmas. It felt sort of fake. After all, the birth of Christ happened a long time ago – what was the point of pretending it hadn't?

But: WOW! How my attitude has changed! Now I look forward to Advent each year – in fact, I deeply appreciate our Liturgical Cycle from Advent to Christmas, Lent to Easter, Easter to Pentecost, and: the Ordinary Time that connects it all. Because, if we look at this Liturgical Cycle from a spiritual perspective, we see that Advent – the entry of God into our lives – is a lifelong process.

As long as we breath, there is more of our lives to unlock, to unbar; there is always that deep sacred desire within to become more and more the person that God created us to be: created in " God's image and likeness" – each one of us a precious work of art – in process – becoming, little by little... .

By opening our hearts over and over again to the Advent of God into our lives, we dare to face the wounds that we bear, the scars hidden at the bottom of our being. We dare to wake-up, become aware of the "stuff" in our lives, in our families and communities, in our nation and world, that blocks us, hinders, diminishes and prevents – and even destroys – the chance for us to become what God intends us to become; so that we can be healed, forgiven, made new and begin again... over and over: *be-coming!*

Brothers and sisters, Advent is not a time to pretend; it's a time to get *real*; a time to make real God's entry; to make real God's Word; so that we may find ourselves giving birth anew to God in our hearts and God in our world!

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Sisters and brothers trust me: Advent can be much more than 'declaring war on Starbuck's' for having the nerve to omit snowflakes and reindeer from their coffee cups! *[Imagine!!]* Donald Trump suggested a boycott and promises: "If I become president, we're going to be saying: "Merry Christmas' again, that I can tell you!"

Speaking of declaring war: the words of Jesus in Luke's Gospel today may be read, not as a warning about the end of times: "*The earth's nations will be in disarray, people will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming...*" – but a challenge, ...a warning, ...a prediction of what could happen in our Global Village today if we don't wake-up and address the life threatening issues of our day. Pope Francis has spoken many times about a "Third World War being fought in pieces;" and responding to the terrorist attacks in Paris, he stated: "this is a piece.... There can be no justification for these things." He once again stated the core message: "The path of violence and hatred cannot resolve the problems of humanity, and using the name of God to justify this path is blasphemy!"

And, brothers and sisters: Jesus makes it so clear over and over again, to respond to violence with violence, to respond to injustice with injustice, is just as much a blasphemy and will never, never bring peace.

As we know, for decades we and some of our allies have been bombing the hell out of the Middle-east. Thirty-years later, hundreds of thousands of deaths later, trillions of dollars later, we are seeping into a deeper Hell... Someone once said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results...

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Sisters and brothers, perhaps this Advent – more than ever – is a time for us, as disciples of Jesus, to wake up and get real; and begin anew to read the signs the times through the lens of the Gospel rather than letting fear (and there is a lot of reason to fear) push us to deny Jesus. Let the hope of the Gospel empower us to work for justice; there will never be peace without justice, looking deeply into the political and economic systems that are at the root of global crisis. Rather than letting fear push us to deny Jesus, let us stand up for the oppressed whether they be our war-torn sisters and brothers in the middle east, or the endangered children in our inner city, or the victims of racism and sexism and all the ‘isms’ that dwell in our nation. Rather than letting fear push us to deny Jesus, let us welcome the stranger from Syria and wherever sisters and brothers are in danger and struggling for the basic necessities of life.

As disciples of Jesus, during these Advent days let us reflect on that desperate family fleeing in the Middle-East that we all know. We’ve all heard of this family: a carpenter named Joseph, his wife Mary and their baby son Jesus. According to the Gospel of Matthew, after Jesus’ birth, they fled to save Jesus from the murderous King Herod. Fortunately, Jesus Mary and Joseph found asylum in Egypt. Thank God, American politicians – and according to the latest polls, the majority of Americans – were not in charge when Jesus was a refugee!

Nicholas Kristof in an Op-Ed in the New York Times last Saturday, made a good point that, yes: security is a legitimate concern; and, yes: we can’t rule out the possibility that a terrorist will slip in with some refugees. But, according to the Migration Policy Institute, among all refugees admitted to the US since 9/11, there has been about one arrest for terrorism offenses for every 250,000 refugees.

That means there is a hundred times greater likelihood that a citizen of Florida will turn out to be a murderer over a ten year period, then that a refugee will attempt terrorism.

So if we’re willing to allow Floridians free entry into other states, allowing Syrian refugees shouldn’t be problem!

Bottom line: refugee admission is the most deeply vetted pathway to the US, a process often taking a couple of years – to which some members of our own Congolese Community can testify.

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Brothers and sisters, this Advent is a special opportunity for us as Catholics to get real and stop pretending. Pope Francis has declared a ‘Jubilee Year of Mercy,’ which will begin on December 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Significantly, this date is the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council where Pope John XXIII called the Church to open its windows and let the fresh air of the spirit engulf it. The Year of Mercy will end on the First Sunday of Advent next year.

What Pope Francis is attempting to do is to transform the Church into a community where *mercy, compassion, forgiveness, healing, love* are its trademarks. A community, an institution where all are welcome! If we're going to have any credibility in calling the world to renewal, we need to have our own house in order.

There's hardly a homily or address in which Pope Francis doesn't refer to mercy and compassion. A few weeks ago at morning Mass, he was reflecting on his concern for priests who aren't merciful. Francis said priests must be especially merciful, and if they aren't, then they should ask the Bishop for a desk job! And: "Never walk into a confessional, I beg you! A priest who isn't merciful does much damage in the confessional. He berates people.... If snapping at people is caused not by a lack compassion, but by being high strung, then go to a doctor, who will give you a pill for your nerves! Just be merciful!"

Brothers and sisters, we often sing at Mass: "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." Peace begins within each of us; it is a process of repeatedly shown mercy to ourselves, forgiving ourselves, befriending, accepting and loving ourselves. As we learn to appreciate ourselves and accept God's gift of peace, we begin to radiate love and peace to others. May our Advent journey this year be a time of getting real and letting God's mercy and healing enter our hearts. Let this Advent wreath remind us of our four-week journey to the birthday of Jesus --- the Prince of Peace! Now let us stand, as we are able, for the blessing of our Wreath:

Let us pray:

God of mercy,  
your Church joyfully awaits the  
coming of its savior,  
who lightens our hearts  
and dispels the darkness  
of ignorance.  
Pour forth your blessings + upon us and upon this wreath.  
May the light of these candles reflect the splendor  
of Christ  
who is Lord, for ever and ever.

Amen.