

Pastoral Letter for Advent 2021

On the First Sunday of Advent our Church, and many others, begin a new Church year. The Church begins its year with a time of hope, and Advent—so frequently ‘lost’ in the preparation for Christmas—is the season of hope par excellence. It is the season of hope, because our God who gave himself to us by creating us, and who came to us in the coming of his Son, will come again.

Our God “comes to enrich our personal and collective histories, our dashed hopes and our sterile yearnings.” (Pope Francis, Homily for the First Sunday of Advent, Bangui Cathedral (CAR), November 2015). Our God comes to save us. “Unless the Lord comes to us, we are completely helpless,” as St Maximus the Confessor, so dramatically put it.

In Advent, we proclaim and celebrate our hope and our trust that our God is faithful: that the Lord will come again and again to rescue us, to heal us, to console us, to be with all that he has called into life.

God calls us forward to a new world, to embrace a new future. That is God’s deeper gift to us. His call is not to return to a wonderful place where “everything was wonderful”—be that Bethlehem or the ‘wonderful world’ of our shared past. Our prayer this Advent and always is, therefore, shaped by that hope. In this time, for many, it is also framed by the experience of loss and continuing grief. Our anticipation of the joy of Christmas is all the greater for the depth of the crisis through which we have been travelling. Christian hope is not naive. It does not give rise to nostalgia, denial or conformity. Rather it is realistic in its faithfulness and bold in its imagination. Pope Francis tells us that hope ‘is able to see a tomorrow; hope is the door that opens onto the future.’ Hope changes everything.

As we prepare to celebrate the overwhelming gift of love that was the Incarnation, we are invited to take stock of how well prepared we are, not only to celebrate the Nativity of the Lord at Christmas, but to live the kind of life we are meant to live, loving one another and the whole human race as much as we are loved.

The Gospel for the First Sunday of Advent reminds us that the Christian life is rooted in prayer; we are urged to pray at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen, so that we can stand with confidence before the Son of Man.

We have been living through a very testing time. Sickness and death resulting from the Covid-19 virus have taken a heavy toll. The necessary restrictions on everyday life have at times been very hard to bear. The continuing pressure on healthcare staff and other vital workers has increased our admiration for their commitment and care. Our gratitude for the remarkable success of those developing vaccines and treatments has been tempered by a growing realisation that there is no easy or simple solution for this crisis.

So it is for us, the community of faith that is the Church in this Archdiocese. We are living through dark days. We confront immense challenges, not least that the dominant culture is hostile to faith, while there is much in our story that discourages and even repels many people. Yet as Christians we are called to bring Good News to the whole world, to accompany those at all stages of life’s journey towards an encounter with Jesus Christ. We are hopeful, despite the immensity of these challenges, some of which have become even more stark as a result of the coronavirus crisis.

It was to build hope that, some months ago, I established a Task Force to develop a pastoral strategy to support parish communities of faith to undertake a radical renewal, looking to the future with creativity, while enabling the Archdiocese of Dublin to act now so as to give effective witness and service in the years ahead. The Task Force received views and suggestions from over 3,000 people, the vast majority of them laypeople involved in different ways and to different degrees in the life of the Church. I have received the recommendations of the Task Force and I am reflecting upon them and praying about them. The strategy that has been recommended involves principles to guide our renewal, a process of engagement that would involve the whole diocesan family, and a framework to guide discussion and discernment. It is my intention to invite the whole diocesan family, and every parish, to begin the process of discussion and discernment early in the New Year, and to provide guidelines and suggestions to support this journey, which will be, in itself, an expression of the synodal path on which the Church has embarked.

Any pastoral strategy that is true to our Christian calling will acknowledge, as the Task Force has, our need to hear the call to conversion of hearts and minds, and to deepen the spirit of prayer and attentiveness to the word of God.

I am therefore inviting the Church in the Archdiocese of Dublin to use this season of Advent as a time of prayer and reflection to prepare ourselves spiritually for the challenge of renewal. Responding to the Task Force Report, we need to create a prayerful atmosphere this Advent as we begin to look to the future of parishes, groupings of parishes, and the Diocese itself. Our prayer must be, above all, to be open to the Spirit to guide us in our mission as bearers of light and carriers of good news to the people of our time. We honour our history and our traditions. We draw strength from what has been built up. But we are not afraid to craft new wineskins to carry the new wine of the Good News to those who thirst for it today.

In Advent we begin the Liturgical Year preparing for the coming of the Lord. Our diocesan theme this year is 'Be Still', waiting for the Lord, preparing ourselves for the year ahead with Him.

There is a 'Be Still' resource available on the Diocesan Website, and our Mission and Ministry Team are offering a daily prayer posting on Facebook every day during Advent with a variety of contributors.

We need to 'be still' during Advent, and mark time a little with the Lord, as we set out on a year of prayer, reflection and planning.

I am asking each parish community to pray for conversion of heart so that we may be effective missionaries. I ask that the Synod prayer be prayed every day during Advent, especially during our celebrations of the Eucharist, so that we are reminded of the call we have received and the hope-filled response which we will craft together under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

In the season of Advent, we unite ourselves with our Blessed Mother Mary, whose own preparation models for us the spirit of hope and faith that brings the light of Christ to life.

Let us pray:

Ever faithful God,
You sent your son into the darkness of human history
to fulfil your will, and guide your people home to you.

Fill our hearts with the hope of your coming
that we may draw close to all our sisters and brothers
especially those who bear the cross of Jesus in the heart of our world.
May the Light of his victory over darkness and death,
guide our feet on the way of justice and peace.
We ask this in the name of Him who came and will come again,
Jesus, our Lord, for ever and ever. Amen

+Dermot Farrell,
Archbishop of Dublin