



Apostles for Today

Prayer and Reflection - December 2013

Living Advent and Christmas in the spirit of the New Evangelization

Advent is a time of preparation. It has various interrelated dimensions. It is a season of joyous expectation in the light of the feast of Christmas. It also invites us to give meaning and direction to our lives, both by looking back to the first coming of Christ at Bethlehem and by looking forward to his final coming at the end of time. It is a time of preparation in which we are invited to renew our Christian faith, to attend more fully to the meaning and implications for our life of believing in the person of Christ, to become more grateful for this extraordinary gift of infinite love and to try to learn to live it more coherently and generously each day. Advent directs our gaze towards the living and unfailing sign of God's love and faithfulness: Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God-with-us, sent into the world by the Father as the everlasting symbol and living source of His infinite love.

In this reflection, we will briefly examine St. Vincent's understanding of the Incarnation and draw from it some simple implications for the New Evangelization.

Saint Vincent Pallotti's understanding of the Incarnation

Pallotti's understanding of the Incarnation is closely linked with his understanding of creation and redemption. He repeatedly states that it was God's infinite love and mercy that moved Him in all things. "It was because God was moved by his infinite mercy towards us that he undertook the Divine Work of creating all his creatures and conserving them in being" (cf. OCCC XIII, 27-28). It also moved Him to create human beings in his own image and likeness. And when those whom He created in love used their freedom to sin, to turn from the path of love to the path of selfishness, He did not abandon them but, moved by the same infinite love and mercy, offered them another chance: "God as if moved with love of man, who is so ungrateful and miserable (...) promises a Saviour. This Saviour is God's divine Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who became man for us in the womb of

Blessed Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit... Oh, what an infinite, immense gift" (OOCC XIII, 121-123).

Pallotti speaks of two complimentary aspects of the Incarnation. From one perspective, it is an act of sending on the part of God the Father. God sends Jesus to reveal his love and mercy, in order to teach human beings how His image can be perfected in them: "God moved by his infinite love and mercy became man to teach us in his blessed humanity how we should live in order to perfect our souls as living images of God" (OOCC XIII, 127). He is the "perfect exemplar of the heavenly Father" (OOCC XIII, 697). "He is the divine model of the whole human race" (OOCC II, 541). Thus, the Incarnation manifests God's sending of Jesus, impelled by love, while at the same time revealing His love and mercy.

From another perspective, the Incarnation is an act of *kenosis*, of self-emptying, on the part of the Son, made visible in Jesus' testimony of obedience to the Father. Pallotti speaks of how Jesus empties himself by becoming man and by being born in the poverty and discomfort of the manger (cf. OOCC II, pp. 18-19). This *kenosis* of Jesus is further demonstrated throughout his life, both hidden and public, by his way of living, and finds its deepest expression in his death on the cross: "through the mystery of the Incarnation, our Lord Jesus Christ entered into this world in the spirit of sacrifice, lived and died on the cross in that same spirit" (OOCC VII, 9-10).

The Imitation of Christ

St. Vincent made the hidden and public life of Christ the fundamental rule of the Pallottine family (cf OOCC III, 35-36). In his own life, he reflected deeply on the inner attitudes of Christ at the different points in his life and tried to make them his own. He tried to discern what attitudes Christ would have had in the situations which he, St. Vincent, was facing and to embody these attitudes in his own response to the challenges of life. We too are called to do the same. And this is a fundamental prerequisite for the New Evangelisation: we cannot evangelise effectively if we are not ourselves continuously evangelised, and what does it mean to be evangelised if not to put on Christ, to be transformed more and more each day in Him, to become progressively and ever more profoundly Christ-like in all of our attitudes and in every aspect of our being and relating and doing.

In this period of Advent and Christmas, are there some aspects of Christ's Incarnation from which we might try to draw inspiration with a view to the New Evangelisation?

Renewed in the Wonder of Love

Advent and Christmas are times when we are invited to open our hearts again to wonder. The Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh began his poem 'Advent' with the striking line, "We have tested and tasted too much, lover - through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder". Advent and Christmas invite us to a simplicity which is once more able to find wonder in the ordinary and extraordinary things in life. And there is nothing more extraordinary than the Incarnation itself. Adapting a phrase sometimes wrongly attributed to St. Augustine, we too could say: I have read sayings that are wise and very beautiful in great thinkers of other faiths and of no faith, but I have never read in any of them that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (Jn 3:16). We are invited at this time of year to hear this truth again as if for the first time, to rekindle a sense of wonder and awe at the mystery of God becoming one of us, of infinite love coming to us in the form of a tiny, helpless baby. Are we able to embrace this truth deeply and let it renew in our hearts a profound and tender love for God? If we do not nourish such a sense of wonder at the Incarnation, how can we hope to move the hearts of others to be filled with wonder at all that God has done in order to share the fullness of His life with us, offering us a new beginning each day.

The Incarnation also speaks to us of the extraordinary value of every human life, of the infinite dignity of each person made in God's image and likeness, and of God's particularly tender love for the poor and the vulnerable, with whom He has identified even to the point of sharing their condition in his own human existence. In Christ, infinite love has gone out from itself, to share the life of those in need and bring them comfort and relief. This is what St. Vincent did, inspired by the example of Christ, and this is what we too are called to do as members and collaborators of the Union of Catholic Apostolate. This is what Pope Francis is inviting the whole Church to do, to move out from her sometimes narrow confines and concerns, to go to the 'existential peripheries', in order to share the lives of those who are suffering in so many different ways, to become a more faithful image of Christ and of his compassion in a way that people can experience firsthand very concretely.

We are all called to live the Gospel more radically, to imitate Christ more closely in his deep relationship, his constant living contact with the Father, the wellspring of all of his life and activity. We are called to follow

him on his path of *kenosis*: of obedience, of simplicity, of poverty, of humility, of generosity of spirit, of compassion, of justice, of mercy.

We are called not as isolated individuals, but as members of God's family, united in that very love which is God himself. At the beginning of Advent, Pope Francis described how we are beginning “a new journey of the people of God with Jesus Christ, our shepherd, who guides us in history towards the completion of the Kingdom of God” (Angelus, Dec 1st 2013). We are accompanied very specially on this journey by Mary, our Mother. Let us ask her powerful help, that our hearts may be touched deeply this Advent and Christmas, that we may become more joyful and authentic witnesses of Christ in our daily lives - in our families, our communities, our workplaces, wherever we are and in all that we say and do and are:

Mary, Virgin and Mother, you who, moved by the Holy Spirit, welcomed the word of life in the depths of your humble faith: as you gave yourself completely to the Eternal One, help us to say our own “yes” to the urgent call, as pressing as ever, to proclaim the good news of Jesus. Filled with Christ’s presence, you brought joy to John the Baptist, making him exult in the womb of his mother. Brimming over with joy, you sang of the great things done by God. Standing at the foot of the cross with unyielding faith, you received the joyful comfort of the resurrection, and joined the disciples in awaiting the Spirit so that the evangelizing Church might be born. Obtain for us now a new ardour born of the resurrection, that we may bring to all the Gospel of life which triumphs over death. Give us a holy courage to seek new paths, that the gift of unfading beauty may reach every man and woman. Virgin of listening and contemplation, Mother of love, Bride of the eternal wedding feast, pray for the Church, whose pure icon you are, that she may never be closed in on herself or lose her passion for establishing God’s kingdom. Star of the new evangelization, help us to bear radiant witness to communion, service, ardent and generous faith, justice and love of the poor, that the joy of the Gospel may reach to the ends of the earth, illuminating even the fringes of our world. Mother of the living Gospel, wellspring of happiness for God’s little ones, pray for us. Amen (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 288).

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