



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

## DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

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Monday, November 23, 2020

Dear Faithful of the Wheeling-Charleston Diocese,

We are about to enter the season of Advent, a time of joyful expectation for the coming of the Lord. Early in Advent we focus on the Lord's second coming in glory before turning to the season's later phase to remember how God fulfilled His promise to Israel to send a Savior, Jesus, born in humility in Bethlehem.

After a contentious election season, during a dangerous pandemic whose end is not yet in sight, having become more conscious of ongoing patterns of racism and nativism in our country and still grappling with scandals in our beloved Church, it may seem that the promise of Christ is remote from our experience. Yet the Lord is never absent from us! He comes to us through his Word, proclaimed in church or meditated upon at home; through those in need, in whose faces we recognize Christ's; and through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, in which the Lord personally enters each of us, and Penance, which purifies us to receive the Lord worthily. In these ways he keeps his word to us: *I am with you always, until the end of the age* [Matthew 28:20].

The COVID-19 pandemic will affect how we celebrate Advent and Christmas in our Diocese, but we *will* celebrate them! Masks and hand sanitizers and physical distancing cannot stop us from expressing our faith and joy in the Lord. They actually allow us to gather for worship in a safe manner, considerate of those with whom we worship.

Even during this pandemic, many people who do not ordinarily worship with us will join us at Christmas Masses. Let us welcome them, if not with embraces, because of the pandemic, then with "the elbow of friendship" and a hearty "Welcome!" Let us presume that they want to hear how God, through the birth of His Son, has shown His love and mercy to the world. Let them know you hope to see them again.

The truth is that we have a great message to announce to the people we live and work with. To a world submerged in the darkness of sin, error and death, God has sent a Savior. We cannot overcome these evils on our own. Only God can destroy sin, enlighten those in error and bring the dead to new life. That's the message we have: Jesus Christ is the Savior designated by God the Father to bring us light and life. Our message is rightly called Good News. It is news too good to keep to ourselves. We have to share it.

I hope you are willing to share the Good News about Jesus Christ with others. It is not beyond your ability. Let me share with you a simple Advent plan.

First, make a list, mental or on paper, of people you hope will hear the Gospel: family members, friends, coworkers, fellow students. Make the commitment to pray for them every day. In your morning prayer or at some other time, ask the Lord to open their minds and hearts to His Word.

Second, fast for these people once a week. Fasting can be from food -- most of us can afford to forego lunch or another meal without hurting our health -- but fasting can also be from some favorite activity such as a television show or playing video games. We do without a good thing as a sacrifice to show the Lord we mean it when we are praying for those on our list.

Third, offer to God any hardship or suffering you are experiencing: an illness, the loss of a loved one, a job opportunity that slipped away. Rather than let it embitter you, give it to God on behalf of those for whom you are praying. You can also offer good works you engage in: a teacher might dedicate her teaching on behalf of those for whom she prays, while a doctor does the same as he sees his patients; a teenager might dedicate to this intention her effort to reach out to a fellow student no one talks to, while a father might give to the Lord his getting up from bed to check on the baby he heard crying. When we do things with the right spirit, our prayers have greater effect. *The fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful before God* [James 5:16].

There is a final step: ask the Lord to give you opportunities to speak to those for whom you have been praying. Sometimes they give you an opening: a desire to talk about a problem, a great joy they share with you. You can then speak in a simple way from your own experience about why your faith in Jesus Christ and your belonging to his people matter to you. You don't need a theological degree or the eloquence of St. Paul to do it. You are an expert on your own life, including

how God has blessed you and held you up. Your willingness to speak of your faith may win an absent Catholic back or gain a soul we never had.

Some may feel that, buffeted as we have been by scandals, this is not the time to speak to anyone about our Catholic faith or reach out to those who have left us. I must disagree. St. Paul said: *Proclaim the word; be persistent, whether it is convenient or inconvenient* [II Timothy 4:2]. Athletes who don't run will never win the race. Christ's Gospel is not an appetizer. It's the main course. Indeed, it is the best food for the spiritually starved. If it sustains us, it will sustain others.

We are the Gospel people today must encounter. The Lord is counting on us to do our part. Make the commitment to pray, fast and offer your hardships and good works to God for those you hope God's grace will touch. And if anyone shows an openness to hear your testimony of faith, have the courage to share it.

Keep a good Advent! May it bring you happily to the joy of Christmas!

Faithfully in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark E. Brennan". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

+Mark E. Brennan  
Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston