



CURRENT AND FORMER VOLUNTEERS
REFLECT ON THE ADVENT GOSPELS
& THE FOUR PILLARS OF FAITH-BASED SERVICE:



Social Justice ♦ Simplicity ♦ Community ♦ Spirituality

Brought to you by:





A WARM WELCOME TO OUR READERS

Dear Friends,

We are amazed at how fast Advent arrived this year! One moment, the trees were green and the temperatures balmy here in Washington, DC. Now we are wrapped in scarves and the branches are almost bare. Each day the sun sets while we are still at our desks, and our space heaters are set to **HIGH** right through 5:00 PM. Darkness has come, and like many we are seeking warmth, light, and hope.

We are also seeking these things for our country and other regions around the world. Daily reports of increasing poverty, outbreaks of violence, devastating natural disasters, ugly demonstrations of racism, and harsh political divides are leaving communities hurting and in need of healing. It's easy to give up hope and tune out the news altogether. But the season of Advent calls us to renew our commitment to service and justice. Two imminent Gospels offer us compelling messages as we await the true Son of God, the healer of the world. The first: *Be watchful, be alert*. The second: *Do not be afraid*. Now is truly the time to tune in – to listen to God and to each other.

It is our prayer that this Advent Reflection Guide might help rekindle hope for you in the weeks ahead. We at the **Catholic Apostolate Center** and the **Catholic Volunteer Network** are so very grateful for the thousands of volunteers who say “yes” to faith-based service each year, leaving the familiar behind to serve the poor within the U.S. and throughout the world. Each week in Advent, you will find here a reflection written by one of these men and women, current and former volunteers. They will reflect on the Advent Gospel readings, and touch on the four pillars of faith-based service: Simplicity, Spirituality, Social Justice, and Community.

Whether you are a prospective, current or former volunteer, a volunteer program staff member, or a friend and supporter of the **Catholic Apostolate Center** and the **Catholic Volunteer Network**, we pray that you will find encouragement in their reflections within!

SINCERELY,

Catholic Apostolate Center and Catholic Volunteer Network

Looking for more? Catholic Apostolate Center hosts an extensive library of Advent resources on their web-site: www.catholicapostolatecenter.org/advent-resources.html



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Reviving Faith • Rekindling Charity • Forming Apostles



REFLECTION BY SHAINA GLASGOW, CURRENT CAP CORPS VOLUNTEER

*Jesus said to his disciples: "Be watchful! Be alert!
You do not know when the time will come." (Mark 13:33-37)*

In my current service placement in the Emergency Room at St. Vincent's Charity Hospital, it is crucial to be alert and aware of your surroundings. There are indeed dull, lagging moments—but in less than two minutes you can have every room filled, EMS bringing in a full cardiac arrest, and a handful of patients streaming into the waiting room. If you aren't aware of what is going on around you, it becomes difficult to jump in and assist fellow staff in caring for patients.

When reading this Sunday's Gospel, I am reminded that this same awareness is crucial for growth in our personal relationship with Christ. It is important to be mindful of Christ's presence in the midst of everyday busyness. If we are not watchful to the point of being expectant of an encounter with God, then it is easy to miss opportunities to deepen our relationship with Christ.

Yet how can we listen to, or speak with, God amidst the craziness of our workday? Within each interaction we encounter with those around us lies an invitation from God. He may invite us to respond with love, compassion, gentle correction, understanding, or patience, for example. I believe the secret to becoming attentive to God's voice is silence. In the mystery of silence, we become aware of the ever-present God and train our hearts to more easily recognize Him internally even when our external world is not silent. Prayer is a great way to practice silence. We can simply acknowledge that God is with us, and allow ourselves to rest in that—no thoughts, just us and God.

Focus on: SOCIAL JUSTICE

How can we use this awareness to better serve the poor or those in our community both this year and in the future? Many of us closely encounter populations (refugees, addicts, the homeless, etc.) that daily face the consequences of social injustice. It is important for us who serve these populations to be aware of the sociopolitical situations currently affecting their lives. If we choose to do this, to become educated about the ways others are underserved or mistreated, then we can become more attentive and sensitive to their physical and emotional needs. We may even become an example to our coworkers, or others, of how to better interact with and serve those who are often misunderstood in our society.

Service Suggestion:

One important aspect of being watchful is to eliminate distractions. A practical way to do this, besides prayer, could be to silence cell phones when at work. This is tough, especially if nothing particularly stimulating is happening. Instead, try to be alert and present. Ask your coworkers (or those you are serving) if you can do anything to help. Look for little odd-jobs that sometimes get neglected (for example, cleaning up a messy area). Perhaps you can simply start a conversation with someone sitting or standing near you by asking "How is your day," and genuinely listening to their response. You'll get to know your coworkers and those you serve more intimately, and open a lot of doors for yourself (and others) to encounter Christ.

PRAYER

Prayer for Silence, by Thomas Merton

Lady, Queen of Heaven,
pray me into solitude and silence and unity,
that all my ways may be immaculate in God.

Let me be content with whatever darkness
surrounds me,
finding him always by me, in his mercy.

Let me keep silence in this world,
except in so far as God wills and in the way he wills it.

Let me at least disappear into the writing I do.
It should mean nothing special to me,
nor harm my recollection.
The work could be a prayer;
its results should not concern me.

Amen.





REFLECTION BY PATRICK HUBBARD, CURRENT SOJOURNERS INTERN

*As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way.
(Mark 1:1-8)*

What does it mean to “prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths”? The images it conjures, as well as the expectation it sets for those of us anticipating Christ’s coming, are those of restoration and justice. Isaiah follows his initial exhortation with a description of a grand even-ing of the world; the hills lowered, the valleys raised. As God approaches, everything equalizes before Him. Isaiah calls this good news, a sure sign of God’s presence. God descends to Earth, gathering His flock and removing the physical barriers between Himself and those He loves.

His presence is so powerful that all else fades away; the elements are dissolved by fire and even the heavens pass. All else diminishes, leaving only God and His flock. We see that John, the emissary tasked with preparing the way of the Lord, kept to the wilderness, letting others come to him, away from the city and the busyness of life, their homes and their cleanliness and their comforts. He cried out in the wilderness, signifying that God’s arrival carries weight independent of human society. His cry shows us that God’s arrival draws us away from where we are settled, into a place where all that matters is His Advent. In the wilderness, we see the true significance of God’s glory, revealed as dominion over and restoration of the world and its people.

Focus on: SIMPLICITY

The call to prepare the way of the Lord rings with the imagery of simplicity. God is described as flattening out the entire earth, laying low the mountains and raising up the valleys, until all that remains is His presence. John the Baptist lived in the desert, keeping to the simplicity of insects and rough garments. When God’s people yield to Him and make straight His paths, they see nothing but Him, and celebrate the wondrous simplicity of what it means to depend on the Lord. The simplest lifestyle is the removal of all superfluities, until all that is left is the presence of God our savior. Making straight His paths, in its truest form, is the distillation of life unto its most essential quality: the encounter with the divine. In all His complication, beauty, and incomprehensibility, God is really quite simple. He brings healing and redemption, and all else fades away.

Service Suggestion:

If we are to truly make straight a highway for the Lord, then it is paved with our acts of service and love. Justice shall walk before Him, the scripture says—we are that justice, the foretaste of the truth that shall spring out of the earth. Those who flocked to John received healing and baptism, inclusion into the community of God.

This Advent, we should seek out ways to welcome others into our communities, those who may not share our luxuries of warm homes, family reunions, or lavish feasts. We can open our homes to acquaintances, non-family members, or strangers, and listen to the needs and sorrows of our neighbors who may not see any reason to celebrate. We should make sure that no one spends the season in isolation, in such small ways we are able, by offering things from encouragement, to food, to a place to sleep, to a listening ear.

PRAYER

God, help us to rest in your presence, and celebrate rather than supplement your simplicity.

Instill in us the desire to prepare your way—to love, to heal, to be healed, and to celebrate the reduction of life until all that remains is you.

As we await your coming this Advent season, let us go out to you in the wilderness to see your glory together.

Transform us into followers who mimic you in your redemption of the world you so lovingly brought into being, and even now sustain.

And may all this be for your glory, so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God.
Amen.





REFLECTION BY KATIE DELANEY

FORMER LASALLIAN VOLUNTEER & FORMER GOOD SHEPHERD VOLUNTEER

A man named John was sent from God. He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. (John 1:6-8)

The first word that comes to mind upon reading this Gospel is humility. In response to questions from the priests and Levites, John explains that he baptizes not as Christ, Elijah, or the Prophet, but as “the voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘make straight the way of the Lord’.” John is so quick to point out this distinction, so quick to give credit where he feels credit is due. Reflecting back to my years of service as a Lasallian Volunteer and Good Shepherd Volunteer, I think I could have used a slice of this humble pie. How often did I consider myself “the light,” taking on the responsibility to serve, or save, the communities I entered? How often did I fail to see the parts of myself that needed saving, and that this saving work was never really mine to begin with?

Thanks to time, perspective, and most of all, the grace of God and those I have encountered, I continue to be humbled - moved beyond my self-righteousness, and into a space of more authentic listening, learning, and loving. These moments, in all their discomfort and vulnerability, become my testimony; through the gift of growth, I can “testify to the light.”

Focus on: COMMUNITY

In this Gospel, the questions posed by John’s community invite him to name who he is and what he is about. Community often provides this challenge and gift - holding a mirror up to our past, present, and future and reflecting how all these complexities meld and meet the world.

How do your communities help you own your truth? In community, how can we help each other “testify to the light” within?

Service Suggestion:

Spend some time reflecting upon someone in your community who has helped you grow more into who you aspire to be.

Write a note of appreciation, take them out to coffee, or find some unique way to affirm them and acknowledge the influence they have had.



PRAYER

OUR POWER TO BLESS ONE ANOTHER by John O’Donohue (Excerpt from *To Bless the Space Between Us*)

In the parched deserts of postmodernity a blessing can be like the discovery of a fresh well. It would be lovely if we could rediscover our power to bless one another.

I believe each of us can bless. When a blessing is invoked, it changes the atmosphere. Some of the plentitude flows into our hearts from the invisible neighborhood of loving kindness. In the light and reverence of blessing, a person or situation becomes illuminated in a completely new way. In a dead wall a new window opens, in dense darkness a path starts to glimmer, and into a broken heart healing falls like morning dew.

It is ironic that so often we continue to live like paupers though our inheritance of spirit is so vast. The quiet eternal that dwells in our souls is silent and subtle; in the activity of blessing it emerges to embrace and nurture us. Let us begin to learn how to bless one another.

Whenever you give a blessing, a blessing returns to enfold you.



REFLECTION BY TAYLOR GOSTOMSKI, FORMER AUGUSTINIAN VOLUNTEER

Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." (Luke 1:26-38)

"The journey is better than the inn," was written by Miguel de Cervantes in his famous work Don Quixote. Former UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden, used to use that phrase to describe how he liked the practices or "the journey," better than the actual games or the "inn" in his work. Many of us want to get to the destination or result right away – whether it's an actual trip or a goal we have set – that we forget the hidden treasure than can be the journey or process itself.

Take time to intentionally think about one of your favorite accomplishments. Was the only good part the moment you actually got your reward? Or was the process of getting there also satisfying? That's not to say there isn't hard work, sacrifices and suffering, but we can learn to take joy in that part too.

In today's Gospel reading, Mary has, what I would imagine, a very human reaction to being visited by an angel of God and being told something big is about to happen and that she's going to be a part of it. "Troubled", "pondered", being told to "not be afraid" and asking "How" are all pretty human responses. I wonder, if like many of us, Mary wanted to skip to the end of her story and know what was going to happen and whether or not she would be okay.

But ultimately, it seems Mary accepted the value of the process, the journey, when she trusts God's will. Bearing God's child, perhaps the "inn", is a wonderful thing, but maybe the journey is also wonderful—the trust, courage and inner-strength that was required of Mary to bring Jesus into the world.

Focus on: SPIRITUALITY

Spiritually, I struggle greatly with some of the classic big questions in life. Why is there suffering in the world? I also struggle with more practical questions like, what is my next career step going to be? I really want to know the answers to both of those, but maybe this passage about Mary can help remind us a) it's okay to have questions and b) it's also okay to not know the answers and wherever we are in life right now, we need not the answers or to know for it to be enjoyable.

PRAYER

God, teach us patience in the journey of life. For we often want to get to the destination so eagerly, we forget to appreciate what happens along the way.

Although the journey has its hardships, help us to see the value in those challenging times. Give us the strength to continue on the path set before us and to strive to seek moments of joy in situations where it may be sparse.

Service Suggestion:

If Christmas is our inn, then Advent is our journey. Let's not only wait this Advent, being stagnant, but prepare, being active. Let's prepare ourselves so that when the big day arrives, we will be able to more fully enjoy it. Maybe it's preparing ourselves to have a better attitude when things don't go our way in life, so that when the holidays come and, likely, something doesn't go our own way, we are able to take it in stride and maintain our joy during this special time of year and share it with others.





REFLECTION BY KATE FOWLER, BLOG EDITOR FOR THE CATHOLIC APOSTOLATE CENTER

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

These words, that never cease to amaze us, contain the whole of Christianity! God became mortal, fragile like us, he shared in our human condition, except for sin, but he took ours upon himself, as though they were his own... The birth of Jesus, then, shows us that God wanted to unite himself to every man and every woman, to every one of us, to communicate to us his life and his joy.”

-Pope Francis

On Christmas Day, “the Father’s only Son,” the Word, Jesus Christ, is made flesh and makes “his dwelling among us.” The world has never been and can never be the same. What is the cause of this miraculous event? God’s love for humanity, which seeks to restore us to friendship with Him and invites us to become His sons and daughters. After four weeks of preparation throughout the Advent season, God’s people have been made ready once more to welcome their King.

Over these past four weeks, we have reflected on the Four Pillars of Faith-Based Service, on the Gospel readings for each Sunday of Advent, and on what it means to be a person for others. We have prepared in darkness, so to speak, awaiting the coming of the light that is Jesus Christ. Today we celebrate he “who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation.”

This is the message of the Christmas season – one that we are called to bring to our families, workplaces, parishes, and communities—that God “has spoken to us through the Son” who “made his dwelling among us” remembering “his kindness and his faithfulness.” What a beautiful message for our aching and broken world – so filled with darkness and often lacking in hope! Pope Francis said in his 2015 Christmas homily, “The Saviour of the world comes to partake of our human nature; no longer are we alone and forsaken.” God himself announces peace and offers us good news. He meets us in our brokenness.

I would like to spend a few moments reflecting on the richness of the words from today’s readings. Perhaps they have become stale or seemingly commonplace over the years. God has directly intervened in our world to change the narrative of sin and death to one of hope and resurrection! Unlike the Israelite people, who waited for centuries for the

coming of the Messiah, we live in a world that has seen the salvation of God. We have the capacity to reap the fruits of God’s salvific work and can call Him “Abba, Father.”

It is Jesus Christ who reveals mankind to himself. We are called to model Him, who made His dwelling among us, by making our dwelling amidst the brokenness of our world and offering our brothers and sisters Christ’s salvation. We can do this through the Four Pillars mentioned throughout this guide: Spirituality, Simplicity, Social Justice, and Community. It is when we bring Christ to dwell in the world that we discover who we are.

This year, I invite you to reflect upon these beautiful readings in the light of Christ’s coming. Who are we in God’s eyes? How can we become a people who bring Christ to others? What can we do to show others that they are no longer alone and forsaken?

Our Advent journey does not end on Christmas Day. Let us move forward carrying the light of Christ and continuing to make his dwelling in the world with our works of service and charity. As you continue your spiritual journey, we invite you to visit the Catholic Apostolate Center’s many free resources on Advent, prayer, discernment, Catholic Social Teaching, and much more. Let us look to Mary, the first to truly allow Christ to dwell within her, and ask her to be our model for our life of discipleship. With her, let us “sing joyfully before the King, the Lord” who dwells among his people.



ABOUT US:



Catholic Apostolate Center

Reviving Faith • Rekindling Charity • Forming Apostles

The Catholic Apostolate Center, a ministry of the Society of the Catholic Apostolate (Pallottines) - Immaculate Conception Province, was founded in 2011 to respond to the needs of the Church through: Developing, in collaboration with dioceses and other institutions and organizations, formation programs for the New Evangelization; Assisting Catholic leaders in deepening collaboration with one another; Providing formation and apostolic opportunities for members and collaborators of the Union of Catholic Apostolate. The Center takes its inspiration from the spirituality of St. Vincent Pallotti and achieves its goals through hosting conferences, seminars, webinars, and presentations as well as providing online and print resources.

For more information visit: www.catholicapostolatecenter.org



Catholic Volunteer Network is a national membership organization of Christian volunteer and mission programs that fosters and promotes full-time national and international service opportunities for people of all backgrounds, ages and skills. Catholic Volunteer Network supports and enhances the work of its membership by providing training and resources, networking opportunities, and national advocacy.

For more information visit: www.catholicvolunteernetwork.org

