

## “EVER PRESSING FORWARD” ADVENT’S COUNTER-CULTURAL CHARACTER

Yes, it happened, and all too predictably. As I visited **Cossetta’s** for a leisurely cappuccino and pastry the day after Thanksgiving, the Christmas music blared over the speaker. It wasn’t even Italian! Apparently Black Friday even descended into the coffee shop! We Catholics commonly refer to our faith as being **counter-cultural**, but I’d have to say that Advent might just “take the cake” (or Christmas cookies!) for the most counter-cultural season of all. Advent waiting is a special kind of waiting. It is an eager waiting, a hopeful waiting. It is the antithesis of the “impatient toe-tapping with arms folded” waiting. Nor is it a tranquil, quasi-retreat in a monastery type of waiting. It is *sui generis*—in a class by itself kind of waiting, but most definitely is **not** a full-scale celebration before Christmas season. Too often, when it becomes just that, we cheat ourselves of the richness of the Advent season.

I am not sure if some Christians relish being counter-cultural or not. I myself desire to be current with culture. I neither eat nor dress as if it were the 19<sup>th</sup> century, much less try to speak as such. In what is considered perhaps his most famous speech, on November 10, 1889, **Archbishop John Ireland** spoke at the 100th anniversary celebration of the establishment of the Catholic hierarchy (Diocese of Baltimore) in the United States. The Catholic Church finally had emerged from its missionary territory status and a century of growth ensued. Ireland was in his comfort zone, always looking ahead at the horizon. The key “money lines” from that sermon are as follows: “I love my age...I love its aspirations and its resolves. I revel in its feats of valor, its industries, and its discoveries...I seek no backward voyage across the sea of time; I will ever press forward. I believe that God intends the present to be better than the past, and the future to be better than the present.”

Looking forward surely beats constantly peeking in the rear-view mirror. In the sermon quoted above, Ireland also stated— “Brothers, hold not the language of fear and distrust...Why should we fear or hesitate? Catholics in America are loyal to the Church...They have **waxed strong amid storms**...their labors and their victories in the first century of their history, a century of poverty, struggling, and spiritual destitution, show what they are capable of in a century of adult stature, conscious power, and completeness of hierarchical organization.” He did not shy from alluding to the historic anti-Catholic bias of the **1850’s “Know Nothing”** movement (“No Irish need apply”), but added— “They are fast putting off the old traditional prejudices against the Church. If they still retain some prejudices, **the fault is ours.**” Ouch! It is as if he were saying: “Quit complaining about others. Be proud of your Catholic beliefs and customs. Do not retreat, but transform the culture by your presence!”

Archbishop Ireland’s vision was for an **active and engaged laity**, every bit as American as they were Catholic, seeing no contradiction or competition between the two. He believed in his core that “America is at its heart a Christian country.” But he also noted of modernity: “Let us be fair to the age, discerning in it that which is good, as well as that which is bad. The good is the essence; the bad is the accident, the misdirection.” I can only wonder if he would recognize the country today, nearly a century after his death? But the truth of his words remains. If we as Catholics today project to our neighbors and colleagues a basic mistrust of our society, constantly pointing out its defects, even if our observations are valid, I fear the fallout. As Catholics, we are called to be **people of hope**, and hope always looks to the future with faith.

Advent is described in the liturgical documents as “a time of preparation for the Solemnities of Christmas, in which the First Coming of the Son of God to humanity is remembered, and likewise a time when, by remembrance of this, minds and hearts are led to look forward to Christ’s Second Coming at the end of time.” As such, it is a “**period of devout and expectant delight**” [Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year, # 39]. The Opening Prayer for the First Sunday of Advent especially conveys this sense of looking forward much better than did the old translation, which frankly was impoverished. Whereas the old translation stated, “All-powerful God, increase our strength of will for doing good that Christ may find an eager welcome at his coming...,” we now pray: “Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God, the resolve to **run forth to meet** your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming...” One senses a greater sense of urgency in the newer translation. We, “your faithful,” go forward to meet Jesus, and we do with “righteous deeds,” no less. So much more than “doing good,” our righteousness makes us pleasing in the sight of God.

Rather than peeking out the door, wondering when the Lord will come, we eagerly go out to meet him and show forth that desire by our deeds. All too often, the “eagerness” of this season, is manifested in the frenetic pace with which we spend these precious days before Christmas. We are called to be counter-cultural, and our Advent waiting is but one small liturgical manifestation of how we seek to live differently in our consumer-driven culture. Nevertheless, we must **be willing to engage** our world, lest our withdrawal from it signal defeat. A retreat into a bygone era was neither the vision of our first Archbishop, nor is it our call as Christians living and engaging the modern world. Lest the sacrifices of those who preceded us be in vain, we ought to be mindful of history and gain wisdom from its pages. I am saddened at the lack of interest in the past, even as I seek to live very much in the present. May this ever-so-brief Advent be a blessed time for you and your family.

- This coming Friday is the **Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception**, a great feast and holy day of obligation that falls during Advent. In 1846, the U.S. Catholic bishops chose the Virgin Mary, conceived without sin, as the patroness of the country. We will offer four Masses: **Thursday, December 7 at 5:15 p.m.** (anticipatory); **Friday, December 8 at 7:00 a.m.** (for workers), **12:00 Noon and 5:15 p.m.**
- Our annual Pre-Christmas Church cleaning is scheduled for **Saturday, December, 16 from 9:00-10:30 a.m.** I am especially asking for your help this year, as we would like to tackle the sacristy in addition to the church. The Handmaids are preparing to take over the organization of the twice-yearly cleanings and let’s show the sisters our resolve to pitch in. There are several types of cleaning tasks to match all “skill sets” and ages. I am so appreciative of your generous response.
- While I have been duly impressed with the hard-working Crashed Ice crew these past several years, considering our overall parish mission, we have reached a mutual agreement **that this year’s race will be the last** here. They are grateful for our willingness to be good neighbors and I value our witness to the throngs of visitors who otherwise may not have set foot in our Cathedral. This year’s race will take place **January 19-20, 2018**. The athlete tent will be relocated from our lot, providing more parking spaces for the weekend Masses.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector