



A NEW LITURGICAL YEAR AND A NEW OPPORTUNITY TO DEEPEN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST.

Reflecting on the beginning of another new *Church Year*, Fr. Flor McCarthy writes:

This Sunday each year the Church invites us to embark on a great journey—the journey of the Liturgical Year.

When we start the Liturgical Year, we are setting out to follow in the footsteps of Christ. In the course of the year, the whole of his life and teachings will pass before us. We will re-visit all the mysteries of his time on earth: from his expectation (that is what Advent is about), to his birth, his life, death, resurrection, ascension into heaven, and his sending of the Holy Spirit.

In the course of the year we will relive his whole story. But we have heard the story many times. Hence, there is a danger that we may see it as old and stale. We must try and see it as new and present and alive. It's not like playing an old video. The celebration of each feast brings back the event in its original clarity and vitality, never allowing it to grow cold and lifeless or fade into oblivion.

Besides, we are not spectators but actors in all of this. The mysteries of Christ's life are represented in such a way that we are drawn into them, and become participants in them. That makes it more demanding, but more enriching and exciting too. God is not just a God of the past, but of the present and the future.

Each year we ought to hear the Christ story better, understand it more deeply, and make it more our own. In hearing his story we ought to hear our own stories too. Our stories merge with his and we are illuminated by it. His story enables us live our own story more fully and more joyfully.

Even though we've made the journey before, we must try to embark on it today as if for the very first time. This Sunday is a God-given chance to make a new beginning in our following of Christ.

The Story of the Evergreen Trees and its meaning for our lives.

In a second reflection on Advent and especially on Jesus' call to stay awake and be watchful, Fr. McCarthy writes:

*The story is told (by John Shea, *The Legend of the Bells*) that when God was making the trees, he gave a gift to each species. But first he set up a contest to determine which gift would be most useful to whom. He told them. 'I want you to stay awake and keep watch over the earth for seven nights.'*

The young trees were so excited to be trusted with such an important task that the first night they would have found it difficult not to stay awake. However, the second night was not so easy, and just before dawn a few fell asleep. On the third night the trees whispered among themselves in an effort to keep from dropping off. Even so, it proved too much for some of them. Still more fell asleep on the fourth night. By the time the seventh night arrived the only trees still awake were the cedar, the pine, the spruce, the fir, the holly, and the laurel.

'What wonderful endurance you have!' God exclaimed, 'You shall be given the gift of remaining green forever. You will be the guardians of the forest. Even in the seeming dead of winter, your brother and sister trees will find life protected in your branches.'

Ever since then all the trees and plants lose their leaves and sleep all winter, while the evergreens stay awake. This story illustrates the two major themes of Advent.

- *Wakefulness in the midst of sleepiness.*
- *And greenness in the midst of bareness.*

In the evergreen trees we find a note of gentle but resolute defiance. The surrounding world may be asleep or barren, but these continue to bear witness. They are sustained not so much by their own determination but by the power of God. They show us what our role as Christians is. It is to be awake among the sleeping, to be green in the midst of the barren. To bear witness to love in the midst of hate, to peace in the mist of conflict, and to light in the midst of darkness.

There are people in our society who need especially to stay awake. We think of those who do very responsible jobs, people such as pilots, drivers (how many accidents are caused by people falling asleep at the wheel), night nurses, parents with sick children, security people. .

But all of us are called to be wide-awake. Otherwise we will miss so much. Many sleepwalk through life. They have ears but they do not hear. Eyes but do not see. All of us need to be awake because life is precious. And Christians most of all. It is not mere 'wakefulness' that is being urged but watchfulness.

The Lord asks us his followers to stay awake. To be watchful, faithful disciples. To be ever-green followers of him. We are his witnesses in the world. It is not too much to claim that we are to watch over the world. We are to witness to life and hope in the midst of disruption, upheaval, and death.

When we witness to truth, justice, love and peace we are witnessing to Jesus. The way to witness to truth is to

live truthfully. The way to witness to justice is to act justly in all one's dealings with others. The way to witness to love is to act lovingly towards others. And the way to witness to peace is to live in peace with others.

In short, the most effective way to witness to Jesus is to live a Christian life. We need his strength to remain steadfast and faithful. His help becomes available to us especially through prayer.

Blessing for your Advent Wreath.

If you have an Advent Wreath in your home this year, you can bless it with the following prayer which we used in church today.

Lord God, your Church joyfully awaits the coming of its Savior, who enlightens our hearts and dispels the darkness of ignorance and sin. Pour forth your blessings upon us as we light the candles of this wreath; may their light reflect the splendor of Christ, who is Lord, for ever and ever. Amen.

An Advent Prayer

The following prayer - the *Opening Prayer* from today's Mass - captures beautifully the spiritual meaning of the Advent Season. This could be a part of our daily Advent Prayer. It could also be used whenever you light your Advent Wreath.

**Father in heaven,
our hearts desire the warmth of your love
and our minds are searching for the light of
your Word.
Increase our longing for Christ our Savior
and give us the strength to grow in love,
that the dawn of his coming
may find us rejoicing in his presence
and welcoming the light of his truth.
We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen.**

Consider Purchasing Fair Trade Gifts for Christmas

One way to get into the Christmas Spirit of giving and to be a "practicing Catholic" is to purchase online gifts from the developing nations. The following are some excerpts from an article that appeared in the November '06 issue of the magazine *U.S. Catholic*.

Transfair USA is the U.S. label for fair trade food items and is a part of Fairtrade Labeling Organizations International. Its definition of fair trade is "a trading partnership based on dialogue, transparency, and respect that seeks greater equality in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the right of, marginalized producers and workers."

Catholic Relief Services has had a long commitment to fair trade. Every fall the organization produces *Word of Human Hands*, a catalog of fair trade gifts and food.

Its first fair trade effort was coffee because nearly 25 million people, who are mostly poor and exploited, grow it. Coffee costs about 80 cents a pound to grow, and most companies purchase it at 40 to 50 cents a pound. A fair trade label on coffee means that its growers were paid a minimum of \$1.26 per pound. CRS's commitment to getting fair trade coffee into 10 percent of American parishes has had a huge impact worldwide.

Some local stores have some fair trade items in stock, but I do most of my fair trade shopping on the Internet. There are chocolates from Ghana, stationery from homeless women in Chicago, baskets from Uganda, candles, clothing, jewelry, musical instruments, wooden puzzles, and hand sewn puppets. One of my favorite places in Ten Thousand Villages (tenthousandvillages.com), which has more than 160 retail locations around the country. Another favorite website is globalgirlfriend.com, which showcase a variety of items made by women worldwide.

Each item I buy comes with a tag that explains who made it and where that person lives. I like to keep that in the gift and let the recipient find it. I bought my niece, who was a music major, a drum from Indonesia. She loved the beauty and uniqueness of the gift, and when she discovered the tag, she said it was even more personal-like she was continuing to care for this person's precious work. My children love to keep the tags so they can remember the people's names and where they live.

One of the realities of buying fair trade is that the gifts tend to be more expensive. That is hard for me as I try to stick to the Christmas budget. But the trade-off is worth it. I feel like the gift is given three ways: to the recipient, to the one who made it, and to me because it just feels right.

These Advent preparations have influenced my life outside of the Christmas season. As I buy wedding gifts, birthday gifts, and even every day, items, I try to buy fair trade. The more I use my purchasing power to empower others in the world, the more I feel I make room in my heart for the Christ of peace and justice.

Local Fair Trade with items from Bali and Vietnam is located at 905 E. New Haven Ave, Suite 205. Telephone 729-6022. Name: *Serendity Fair Trade*.

Coffee from Guatemala

In recent months you heard us announce at the end of Mass, *coffee from Guatemala on sale outside church*. This coffee is from the organization *Café Conciencia*, founded by Tim Kantz, who spoke in our parish last July and whose parents are parishioners. The coffee is a *Fair Trade* item. When we purchase it we are supporting the poor in Guatemala and practicing our faith in a very concrete way.

Ideally, the *poor should be included in our Christmas budget.* *Fair Trade* on line is one way to do this. A second way is to give a monetary gift to *Gift of Water*— a ministry operated by Ascension parishioners to help the poor in Haiti and Jamaica to have clean water. If so moved send your gift to: Gift Of Water, Inc., P.O. Box 361091, Melbourne, FL 32936-1091

Have a blessed Advent,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Aaron". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.