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Meditatio

As with last week, the Gospel for the second Sunday of Advent confronts us with themes of Christ's coming and of judgement, playing with images of fire and purification, of confession and repentance. It helps us tease out what it is we are meant to do with that news—that hope—of Christ's coming.

Hope, after all, is not 'naïve optimism,' as Pope Francis reminded us in *Spes non confundit* (§24). It is not a vague belief that everything will work out regardless of our own contribution. On the contrary, it is through our contribution, through our preparing a way for the Lord, as St John the Baptist did, that Christ comes. We are called to clear the paths in our heart so that Christ can live completely within us, even now. As we do this, the hope of Christ becomes more real, more tangible, for others.

One of the practical ways we do this is through prayer. The life of prayer is, as the Catechism says, ‘the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him’ (§2565). In his encyclical on hope, *Spe salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that it is through the school of prayer that we grow in hope, for in prayer, in learning to be in the presence of God, we expand our hearts so that God can prepare us for eternal life.

Saint Augustine, in a homily on the First Letter of John, describes very beautifully the intimate relationship between prayer and hope. He defines prayer as an exercise of desire. Man was created for greatness—for God himself; he was created to be filled by God. But his heart is too small for the greatness to which it is destined. It must be stretched. “By delaying [his gift], God strengthens our desire; through desire he enlarges our soul and by expanding it he increases its capacity [for receiving him]”. Augustine refers to Saint Paul, who speaks of himself as straining forward to the things that are to come (cf. Phil 3:13). He then uses a very beautiful image to describe this process of enlargement and preparation of the human heart. “Suppose that God wishes to fill you with honey [a symbol of God’s tenderness and goodness]; but if you are full of vinegar, where will you put the honey?” The vessel, that is your heart, must first be enlarged and then cleansed, freed from the vinegar and its taste. This requires hard work and is painful, but in this way alone do we become suited to that for which we are destined. Even if Augustine speaks directly only of our capacity for God, it is nevertheless clear that through this effort by which we are freed from vinegar and the taste of vinegar, not only are we made free for God, but we also become open to others. It is only by becoming children of God, that we can be with our common Father. To pray is not to step outside history and withdraw to our own private corner of happiness. When we pray properly we undergo a process of inner purification which opens us up to God and thus to our fellow human beings as well. In prayer we must learn what we can truly ask of God—what is worthy of God. We must learn that we cannot pray against others. We must learn that we cannot ask for the superficial and comfortable things that we desire at this moment—that meagre, misplaced hope that leads us away from God. We must learn to purify our desires and our hopes. We must free ourselves from the hidden lies with which we deceive ourselves ...

For prayer to develop this power of purification, it must on the one hand be something very personal, an encounter between my intimate self and God, the living God. On the other hand it must be constantly guided and enlightened by the great prayers of the Church and of the saints, by liturgical prayer, in which the Lord teaches us again and again how to pray properly.

Spe salvi §33 - 34

Oratio

Spend some time now in conversation with the Lord.
Respond to his Word.

Where has your prayer and meditation led you? What questions or desires do you want to bring before God? Bring them now. Feel free to use the journaling space on the first page to help you pray

Contemplatio

Pope Benedict XVI said that this step of contemplation (contemplatio) is the time of taking up ‘as a gift from God, his own way of seeing and judging reality ... forming within us “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16)’ (Verbum domini §87). Spend some time resting quietly in God’s presence, asking for the gift of his heart and mind.

Actio

If you are in a group setting, discuss your thoughts and meditations from your time in prayer. Towards the end of your time together, focus especially on how your prayer might lead to action, to greater witness. If this is an individual exercise, journal your thoughts and resolutions here.

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