



Advent Pastoral Letter

Prayer Comes First

To be read at all Masses on the First Sunday of Advent

3rd December 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I know some of you were present in Cardiff the day the Pope - now recognised as one of the great Saints of our time - declared: “*As long as the memory of this visit lasts, may it be recorded that I, John Paul II, came to Britain to call you to Christ, and invite you to pray!*”ⁱ. They were striking words to the young people of our land, and they echo today as Advent begins with the Gospel’s urgent call: “*Stay awake!*”ⁱⁱ. At the first Christmas, the slumbering world was oblivious to the greatest Gift, as poor shepherds alone found the Saviour born for usⁱⁱⁱ. Advent and Christmas call us once more to wake up to the “*grace and truth (which) came through Jesus Christ*”^{iv}. In a similar way, Pope Francis invites us to dedicate the year ahead to rediscovering in all our lives, the place of prayer in anticipation of the graces God wishes to give the Church and the world in the Jubilee Year 2025.

Prayer is always simple, and we shouldn’t make it complicated. It is our readiness to speak with God and be silent and attentive in His Presence. Prayer should really be as natural to us as breathing. It may be simple, yet prayer is also difficult. The Catechism reminds us, prayer involves a battle for us to remain silent and attentive, a moment of truth for our hearts, revealing where our real love is placed^v.

The best advice in beginning to pray is simply to begin praying! Many are the paths and the aids which will help us enter into prayer, such as the reading of the Scriptures, or the taking up of the Rosary, or being silent before the Blessed Sacrament. Yet, prayer is not a technique, still less is it an achievement by a feat of concentration; it is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts even when you and I meet with dryness and distraction. Saint Teresa of Avila teaches that our part in prayer is to be ready, to dispose ourselves to all the Lord wishes to give. Saint Teresa compared our task in prayer to preparing the ground, making ourselves ready as the farmer prepares the earth. The greatest temptation is to believe we have no time to pray, or that giving time to prayer conflicts with the duties and demands which fill our waking hours. The first step in rediscovering prayer may be to make time to pray.

I am writing these words to you during the twice-yearly meeting of the Bishops of England and Wales. Each of the long days of meetings filled with many questions and challenges, begins with the bishops gathering in silence, the silence of prolonged prayer before the Real Presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. At a recent meeting in Rome, Pope Francis gave this beautiful explanation as to why prayer must come first: *"In every diocese, in every parish, in every community, let us adore the Lord! Only in this way will we turn to Jesus and not to ourselves. For only through silent adoration will the Word of God live in our words; only in his presence will we be purified, transformed and renewed by the fire of his Spirit. Brothers and sisters, let us adore the Lord Jesus!"*^{vi}.

To face the questions and challenges of our own lives, do we give time to prayer by turning to the Lord Jesus in the silence of our hearts? Do we prepare to receive the supreme Gift of the Eucharist in the silence of adoration? Is our conversation and attention given to the Lord or to the confusing voices around us? The hope of Advent will be found amid life's challenges and the lengthening shadows of our world insofar as we are each ready to open our hearts in prayer *"to receive the outpouring of God's grace"*^{vii}. May Our Lady help us be so awake in giving time more generously to daily prayer and to adoration of the Lord Jesus in every tabernacle of the Diocese ^{viii}. In the words of the Christmas carol we will sing *"O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord"*^{ix}.

United with you in this prayer and adoration,

+ Mark

Bishop of Shrewsbury

ⁱ Pope John Paul II, Ninian Park, 2nd June 1982

ⁱⁱ Mk. 13:37

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Lk2: 11

^{iv} Jn. 1:17

^v Cf. CCC No. 2732

^{vi} Pope Francis Conclusion of General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 29th October 2023

^{vii} Cf. Letter of Pope Francis for the Holy Year 2025

^{viii} Cf. Mt. 2: 11

^{ix} Adeste Fideles