



## **BE NOT AFRAID**

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*by Visitation Sister  
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Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

My dear friends, once again it is my pleasure to welcome you to this Hour of Presence. Here we continue to reflect on the treasures hidden within the loving Heart of Christ. We also find ourselves beginning the second week of this Advent season. Our Holy Father, Benedict XVI reminds us that as Christians Advent is concerned with awakening the most profound and basic emotional memory within us, namely, the memory of the God who became a child. This, he tells us, is a healing memory; it brings hope.

Hope? Why do we need to think about HOPE? We need not look very far to answer that question. Picking up the daily newspaper is one constant reminder. Thinking about the events of this past year: tsunamis, devastating floods, earthquakes, pandemics, political unrest, reported apparitions. These events are not new, although each era seems to think their experience of these is the worst ever. A common thread is the reflective question that is voiced by some: "What is God saying to us in all this?"

People visiting us, often say to us, "You have no idea how difficult it is to live in the world." Would you agree? Are you not constantly battling the pressures of greed and the consequences of sin? Yes, it is hard to be good out there. Your presence here, today, and each month, tell us that you are desirous of knowing how to live your Christian life well. We, your Sisters in Christ, try to share our beliefs with you and reflect on the teaching of Jesus. He has promised to be our guide. Together we grow stronger in our beliefs through this mutual sharing. We are not perfect, but we strive to be so. We all have seen that even within the Church we have had to endure much from the resulting scandals and criticisms both within and outside the Church. The age old question voiced by Pontius Pilate is still echoing throughout the ages: "What is Truth?" Our beloved John Paul II would have us understand that the question is not "What is truth?" but "Who is Truth?"

The gift of our Faith as Catholics provides us with a wealth of truth founded upon our God and revealed to us in Jesus. The commandments are the "natural law" we know from natural reason. They transcend us. These commandments help us to identify and know what is good and what is evil. Although they may be looked upon as "negative" words spoken on some distant mountain, they are complimented by the positive ideals presented to us in the Sermon on the Mount. Through Jesus we know TRUTH and face the challenges that our everyday life presents to us.

The Father has given us Jesus as the One True Light that enlightens everyone. Our beloved John Paul the Great, as he is so often called, reminds us that we are:



“Called to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ people are made holy by `obedience to the truth’ (1 Peter 1:22). This obedience is not always easy. People are constantly tempted by Satan to exchange `the truth about God for a lie’ (Rom. 1:15), giving themselves over to relativism and skepticism. But no darkness of error or sin can extinguish the light of God the Creator. In the depth of the human heart there will always remain the yearning for truth. We see this proven by our tireless search for knowledge, and even more by our search for the meaning of life. This search does not free us from the obligation to ask the ultimate religious questions. “What must I do?” “How do I distinguish good from evil?”

The answer is possible thanks to the splendor of truth, John Paul II tells us, the truth that shines forth deep within the human spirit. “God’s face shines in all its beauty on the countenance of Jesus Christ, the reflection of God’s glory” (Heb. 1:3), `the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6). Jesus then is the decisive answer to our questions.”

Putting this another way: What has God really done for us? We are invited to reflect on this very love of God for us during this season of Advent. How often do we not read “For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son” into this world for us (John 3:15). Joseph Nassal, in his latest publication entitled: Stations of the Crib reflects with us in this way as he considers “Thoughts that count” Fr. Nassal begins his musings like this:

Have you ever opened a gift on Christmas Day and whispered to yourself, “Well, it’s the thought that counts”? We usually reserve this phrase for a gift that doesn’t quite fit our person or personality. I wonder if this thought crossed Mary’s mind as she saw the strange gifts of the Magi: “It’s the thought that counts.”

He goes on to say: When I hear that phrase, I wonder: How much is a thought worth these days? And if the thought counts more than the gift, why not just give the thought? ... I’ve heard of `thoughts weighing heavy on peoples’ minds, but these thoughts do not make good gifts. They are like that gift of myrrh used in Jesus’ time to prepare bodies for burial. Now that’s a heavy gift to give a baby!

In our Christmas cards we often write, “You are in my thoughts and prayers.” Why do we make a distinction between “thoughts” and “prayers”? Can’t a thought be a prayer? We say prayers and have thoughts. But when the thought is spoken it no longer counts as a thought for now it is out in the open. Our thought becomes an incarnation. People hear it, maybe even see it, judge it, embrace it or dismiss it. It is only a thought. But now it counts! That is what Advent is all about! For the Word of God was spoken from the depth of God’s heart on a silent, starry night. This Word began as a Divine Thought, a Word that holds all the hope, all the love, all the compassion of the Divine Heart.

We have read the account of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden so many times. This is why our Holy Father Benedict tells us that Advent is concerned with “awakening the most profound and basic emotional memory within us, namely, the memory of the God who became a child.” This, he tells us, is a healing memory; it brings hope. Adam and Eve clung to hope after they sinned, knowing that God had promised to



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put “enmity between Satan and God’s healer – “The Savior, Jesus “. It was as if God said Adam and Eve, “...yes, you did make the wrong choice, the choice for evil through your disobedience. But, do not be afraid, I have another plan to remedy all this.”

These three words will recur like a refrain throughout Sacred Scripture from this point onward. As the mystery of God’s unbelievable love, unfolds before our eyes: The mystery of the loving Heart of our God. Why all this FEAR? Where did it come from anyway? What is there to be afraid of? Fear entered into our life when sin cast its dark shadow upon humanity. We read in the Book of Genesis that after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit they “heard the sound of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from God among the trees of the garden. But God called to the man: “Where are you?” [Adam replied) “I heard the sound of you in the garden, [but) I was afraid ... (Gen.3:8-10 ff.) It is here that the refrain needed to begin. “Do not be afraid,” God is saying as He takes the initiative. It is He calling out: “Where are you?” Perhaps God feels the same type of panic we feel when we know that something has gone wrong, and we call out to a loved one who should be present: “Where are you?” “What’s happened?” God comes to Adam and Eve where they are; in their sinfulness and fear. God, as it were, in His intense love for His creatures, feeling in His Divine Heart, the sudden pain of His creatures pulling away from Him. A distance has begun to separate man from God. We call this distance: SIN. However, God would not abandon His creatures. His heart is so great; His mercy is beyond our understanding. His desire for us to be with Him is so intense.

When we first begin reading the Holy Scriptures we might better understand the point of all this. God’s ‘second thought’ offers us another chance. Remember, the first words attributed to God in the book of Genesis reflect His first thoughts that were recorded. “God said: ‘Let there be light.’” His thoughts once expressed became an incarnation in a series of events from light to oceans, stars, mountains, hills, plants and animals of every kind and ultimately to humankind. It was the latter that gave rise to God’s ‘second thoughts’; ‘Adam and Eve, representing humankind, rejected God’s first thoughts by making another choice. In our way of speaking, we could say that from the time between the Garden of Eden until the birth of Jesus, God had many occasions for “second thoughts.” He even said before the flood, that He regretted having created mankind! Nevertheless, He is a faithful God. He will never abandon us in spite of our lack of faithfulness to Him.

As we read Sacred Scripture we hear the rhythmic refrain, like the pulsations of His Divine Heart, repeating over and over again, “Do not be afraid.” He knows what He will do. Gradually He will form a people whom He chooses to be His own. There was Abraham to whom God said, “Do not be afraid, I will make of you a great nation.” To Moses, God said, “Do not be afraid, I will put my words into your mouth and you will lead my people.” God raised up David and said to him “Do not be afraid, I will make your kingdom last forever.” As Advent continues, that refrain will resound in our ears during the Liturgy of the Word throughout the season. Listen for it, for it is also directed towards you.

God would have us see that His greatest ‘second thought’ was when He decided that instead of sending prophets and poets, messengers and mystics to try to change the hearts and minds of His people, He would



do something new. He decided to come Himself! But, on 'second thought', He sent His angel to bring this divine idea to a peasant girl named Mary. The angel greeted Mary and said: "Do not be afraid, you have found favor with God." This 'second thought' would bring the world to its knees by lifting up this maiden and by making the high priest, Zachariah, speechless at his and Elizabeth's role in this idea. It would make Mary's fiancé restless until that same angel appears to him in a dream and utters the same phrase to Joseph, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." It would inspire Wise Man on a star-led journey.

"And so, one night, this divine inspiration, this 'second thought', became a Word. [God] spoke this Word on a dark, clear night, when the stars were bright, the town was crowded, and the shepherds were awake. On this night, this 'second thought' became very much like the first, that was manifested in the creation of the universe. [God] said, 'Let there be a Light of the World'. And that thought, once spoken in the silence of a holy night, changed forever the course of history." (Joseph Nassal)

Thus far we have seen that God comes to His creatures where they are. He still comes to us where we are. He comes in our good days and our not so good days; in our joys and our sorrows; when we are lonely, sad, discouraged, angry, and uncertain about what to do next. I'm sure we each have our own lists of when we really would like to believe that God does come to us where we are. We might be thinking: "It's easy for you to say all this" or "it's easy for God to tell us not to be afraid but I'm the one going through this; I'm the one with the problem." We all feel like saying that sometimes. So let's go back to consider the gifts the Magi brought to Jesus: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Remember that not only does the thought count, but the Word counts even more.

Fr. Nassal reminds us that God's thought has been turned into a Word, and that Word became flesh and blood. This word, we might say, is easy for God to say because God is infinite, incomprehensible, and divine. But don't we see, can't we hear, that it is because God saw how we were having such difficulty understanding and translating God's 'first thought' that on 'second thought' God made the divine Word human and spoke in the language all humankind can understand: the language of love. This is the love that is seen when a mother holds her firstborn child close to her heart. This is the scene the Magi saw after their long journey. This is the magnificent manifestation of God's love to the world. In this awe-filled moment, these men of majesty saw the glory of God revealed.

It might be helpful to notice some interesting facts about the three wise men from the East. Along the way they were willing to stop and ask directions. They trusted their vision. Having seen the star rising, having studied the charts, and having considered the tradition, they still stopped to ask, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews?" Here are the wealthy and wise who are willing to stop and ask for help. And then there were the shepherds who did the unthinkable, they left their flocks in order to go over to see what the angels had told them. They also trusted their vision. After their visit, the Magi had a dream that told them not to return to Herod. Returning to the king was really the politically correct thing to do, but instead, the Magi trusted their



instincts. They trusted their knowledge about the star, and trusted their dreams about the way they should return home.

Dreams may take us in a different direction than we had originally planned. Dreams may make us find our way home by using alternative routes. Even as we move beyond the manger to the mission it mandates, we need to remember how important it is to trust not only what we know but also what we feel; to trust our knowledge, our thoughts, our prayers, our dreams. On second thought, it does matter; it does count to commit ourselves to making all our thoughts and all our words count by bringing them to life in the language of love.

Christ has no other hands but yours, no eyes, no ears, no feet but yours. Our openness to Christ, who reveals who each human being truly is, can only be achieved in our relationship with the Father, this God who so loved us that He sent His Son into the world. Through Christ's actions and words, through His birth in Bethlehem and His life in Nazareth and finally through His death and resurrection this love of God has been made manifest. (JPII Dives in Misericordia). In identifying Himself with the poor, the outcast, the lowly, and Himself accepting suffering and injustice and poverty, Jesus has made Himself the touchstone and model for each of us. Yes, Advent is a time to reflect on the coming of Christ and to awaken the most profound and basic emotional memory within us, namely, the memory of the God who became a Child. Yet it is essential to keep before us the reason He came as a child, that is to save us from our sins and to tell us: "Do not be afraid." I am with you always in everything that happens to you, because I love you.

Let us pray our thanks to God for having "second thoughts ". Let us thank God for not doubting us but rather for allowing dreams to come true.

Lord, you did not keep these 'second thoughts' to yourself. Instead you put your thoughts into words, especially a single Word, a Word made flesh. This Word, Jesus, holds all the compassion and love, the mercy and hope, the joy and peace you have in your Sacred Heart. Lord, stretch my heart and mind and soul, so that all people might find a listening ear and a helping hand in me so that even those like Herod who are enemies of hope might see a manifestation of your Word. Make me an incarnation of your 'second thoughts'. Make my life an answered prayer for someone in need. Make me an instrument of your incarnation where all thoughts count and all prayers are answered. Amen.

*References used with permission of the publishers include: 1. Donders, Joseph G. The Encyclicals in Everyday Language. Orbis Books. 2. Nassal, Joseph. The Stations of the Crib. Ave Maria Press. 3. Ratzinger, Joseph. Seek That Which Is Above. Ignatius Press.*