

Advent 2016

A Season of Service



Reflecting on the four pillars of faith-based service:
Spirituality, Social Justice,
Simple Living, and Community

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Catholic Apostolate Center
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Dear Friends,

The Advent season is upon us once again. Did it sneak up on you this year? It sure did for me! As I write this I'm sitting at my desk, wrapped up in a cozy scarf, sipping a cup of tea, and watching the sun set just before the clock strikes 5 p.m. Christmas displays are up in the stores, every day my mailbox is full of advertisements for holiday sales, and I've caught a Christmas carol here and there while scrolling through the radio. Everything around me is telling me that Christmas is coming, and yet I still feel so unprepared.

I've talked to a few friends about this, and I get the sense that I'm not alone in feeling this way. We're all much too busy. All around the world it's been a very challenging year – with no shortage of war and violence, refugee crises, global health concerns, political strife, and natural disasters. And for those of us living in the United States, this season follows a drawn-out and divisive election that has left us all so tense, uncertain, and exhausted. It's hard to feel festive when we carry with us the heavy weight of these serious concerns. Perhaps, what we all need more than ever is a time of quiet, peaceful reflection. A time dedicated to restoring hope and making room for Christ in our hearts.

Thankfully, we are not on this journey alone. Catholic Volunteer Network and the Catholic Apostolate Center are pleased to bring you this Advent Reflection Guide to support your growth during this important season. We welcome you to journey through these weeks of Advent alongside several of our current and former volunteers who serve as contributors for this reflection guide. We are constantly inspired by their courage to step outside of their comfort zones and their commitment to serving those most in need. They have remarkable stories to share, filled with light and hope. Each week, a different writer reflects on the Sunday Gospel reading through the lens of their volunteer experience. Their insights on the four pillars of faith-based service; Community, Social Justice, Spirituality, and Simple Living, call us back to the true meaning of Advent.

Whether you are a prospective, current or former volunteer, a staff member of a volunteer program, or simply a friend and supporter of the Catholic Apostolate Center or Catholic Volunteer Network, I pray that you find hope and renewed strength in these reflections. Thank you for allowing us to journey with you during these next four weeks.

Peace,



Katie Mulembe
Catholic Volunteer Network

Looking for more? Catholic Apostolate Center hosts an extensive library of Advent resources on their website: www.catholicapostolatecenter.org/advent-resources.html

First Sunday of Advent

“So too, you also must be prepared,
for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.”

Matthew 24:37-44

Reflection by Madonna Enwe

Current Franciscan Mission Service Volunteer

I remember sitting in class during my last semester of college, thinking about the image I had seen the previous night: a dead Syrian boy whose body had been washed to shore. I was deeply hurt by that scene and wondered why people, especially refugees, had to suffer so much to find a peaceful home on earth. As someone who had arrived in the United States as an asylee, I was drawn to helping in any way I could to make the lives of refugees and asylees better.

I had decided to take a gap year between college and medical school, planning to do something health-related. However, I changed my mind when I discovered the opportunity to serve for a year at the Refugee Service Center for Catholic Charities through the Franciscan Mission Service program. I did not want to wait until I became a doctor before I could help people. This opportunity had presented itself to me, and I knew that God wants me to take advantage of it right now, especially when there is a current refugee crisis in the world. Without knowing when our Lord will come back, I cannot push back a call that He has placed in my heart. To better prepare my heart for His second coming, I am called - just as we all are - to minister to the suffering and needs of the people around me, listening to the Lord's voice when He calls me to serve, even when I don't feel qualified.

Focus on: Spiritual Growth

There are always times when I go for days, weeks, and even months without creating concrete time for the Lord. These moments always make me feel dry and withdrawn from Him, and I feel a sense of peace taken away from me. This passage tells us that we should not let our limitations lead us far away from God, but to strive more often to desire to find peace again and turn to Him. Being alert to serving the needs of others also challenges us spiritually to always be looking for and serving Jesus in those around us.

Service Suggestion

During this time of thanksgiving and waiting for the birth of Christ, let us daily strive to open our hearts and homes to those who are lonely, living alone or away from home, and suffering in one way or another. Find some way to engage your talents or resources to serve those around you: sing at a hospital or nursing home, donate gifts to refugee centers or crisis pregnancy centers near you, or become involved with young people in your parish to give them more opportunities to grow in their faith.

Prayer

*Lord, please create
in me a clean heart
and a quiet spirit
that is ready to
listen to your call
and answer it
quickly.*

*Help me not to be
blinded to the
sufferings of your
people around me;
rather, let me be an
example of your
goodness and
mercy to those I
serve.*

*Even when I hide or
run away from your
call, draw me back
close to you so that
I can dwell in your
presence and be an
instrument of your
peace and love in
the world.*

Second Sunday of Advent

I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I.

Matthew 3:1-12

Reflection by Mike McCormick

Former Augustinian Volunteer, Currently Resources Coordinator at Catholic Volunteer Network

Today we meet John the Baptist, the voice in the wild. For me, John represents the totality of an individual living in accordance with God's will. Through self-denial, John becomes a healer of sinners. Through self-abandonment, John becomes whole. How can anyone follow such a path?

I find direction in the two baptisms John describes. First, he says, "I am baptizing you with water, for repentance." Then he says Jesus, the one who comes after, "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." John washes, Jesus burns. Both will cleanse me and remove my excesses.

Water and fire were two shaping forces during my service year in Southern California, where there is still a severe drought. The unforgiving dry heat in the desert town where I worked exhausted everyone. The simple words, "Would you like a glass of water?" became a life-affirming phrase of hospitality. Rainfall, though rare, quenched our spirits.

Fire also formed us. In the dry hills, wildfires often threatened homes. In our community house, the small flame of our prayer candle was like my Pentecost, igniting a love for my three community members that mostly surpassed my self-love.

A lack of spirit, like a lack of water, leaves me dry and thirsting for God. A fire of purpose, kindled by the Augustinians, gives me the courage to proceed. I know I am chaff and dirt, yet God will find my grain and burn the rest – sin and sorrow and all that holds me captive.

Focus on: Social Justice

What strikes me is John's offer of baptism not only to the meek, but also to the righteous Sadducees and Pharisees. Yes, John harshly rebukes them and commands repentance, but the offer is still there if they shall be humble. As Catholics, we pray that God will protect the poor, which he does. We also pray that God will forgive all sinners – including even the mighty. I cannot help but think of our political climate, and how often we root for leaders to fail, when we should hope for their redemption and our own.

Service Suggestion

During my volunteer year, program staff would visit our communities as a way of checking in. They would also have one-on-one sessions with each volunteer, usually off-site, always over a coffee or tea. These unhurried talks were a form of service by the staff, giving their full presence to become a witness to each volunteer's experience, struggles included.

This season, who can you check in on? To whom can you be present to? Make time and be a Christian witness to ONE person's life, especially in this season when so much time is claimed by trivial affairs and festivities.

Prayer

God, help me to eat the locusts. Help me find the nighttime path. Help me bend this proud back, help me kneel by the river. Mend my cuts with honey and leaves, wipe the grime out of my eye, paste my tongue to the roof of my mouth and help me remember your silence. Your Voice fills the desert night, your Word kicks against the stomach, your fiery breath scorches me and renews me, you rip me from the dirt and for this I give thanks.

Third Sunday of Advent

“When John the Baptist heard in prison of the works of the Christ, he sent his disciples to Jesus with this question, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”

Matthew 11:2-11

Reflection by Meghan Dietzer

Former Rostro de Cristo Volunteer, Current Coordinator of Local Service Programs, Villanova University Campus Ministry

In this gospel, John questions whether Jesus is truly the one that he and countless others had been waiting for. In many ways, what John has heard about Jesus does not quite match up with the kind of person he had expected Christ to be. I look back to my year of service and remember thinking similar thoughts while living among the poverty and great suffering that so many of our neighbors faced.

I went to Ecuador in hope to always see the face of Christ in others and to do my utmost to be the face of Christ to all those I encountered. In many ways, I had started my year thinking that recognizing and encountering Christ meant finding joy and goodness, no matter how difficult the situation. However, as we journeyed through our year, my community and I experienced many situations when Jesus seemed unrecognizable and completely hidden. We came to know so much injustice, hurt, and suffering in the lives of our friends there that at points I, like John, also questioned who Jesus was.

After some time passed, much prayer, and many discussions with my community, I came to understand that Christ was in fact looking at me, straight in the eye, each day. For the first time, I recognized that He was Jesus Christ on the cross. That Face of Christ that suffers with us, that knows pain and sorrow, but also that face that rises from the dead and brings us unimaginable hope of the kingdom of heaven and eternal life with Him.

Focus on: Community

Living in community can be hard and so challenging at times (generally, most of the time!) Unfortunately, if we are struggling with our faith or other such things, we, unlike John, cannot simply send a member of our community out to go ask Jesus the big questions and return with answers. However, we must remember that by praying together and journeying with one another, Christ is in fact there guiding us along each step of the way. For, He told us, “Where two or three are gathered, there am I in their midst.” Living in community with an openness to be vulnerable, to lean into discomfort, and to pray together holds so much potential for encountering some of Christ’s purest love.

Service Suggestion

Think about John the Baptist in this Gospel. He was in prison and unable to go out and find Jesus himself. Without the gift of his friends, he may not have been able to know if Jesus truly was the Christ. This week, let us recognize those in our community who don’t seem to have anyone to bring them Christ’s love and peace. Do your best to be like those friends of John and bring that person the good news of Christ. Whether that means visiting the sick or imprisoned or sitting down with a co-worker who is having a hard day, there are countless people who need the gift of a friend that can share with them the love of God.

Prayer

Dear Jesus,

As I anticipate your humble birth in that small stable in Bethlehem,

Help me to further humble myself and to give with a selfless heart.

Grant me the openness to receive you into my heart in a new way this Christmas that truly transforms me.

Guide me as I continue on my journey in community with others, grounded in love.

Help me to recognize you in those that I serve, even when it is most difficult.

Let me truly hear your words of healing and hope, and enable me to spread your message to those who need to hear it most.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home.
For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her.”

Matthew 1:18-24

Reflection by Danielle Goddard

Former Rostro de Cristo Volunteer, Current Resident Minister at John Carroll University Campus Ministry

When I was young, I thought there was a script of how my story would unfold. It was combination of the life I had known growing up, along with the expectations others held for me, and the dreams I had for myself. I clung pretty tightly to that plan; that is, until I spent a year in Ecuador with Rostro de Cristo. My world was shaken and turned upside-down as I fell in love and shared life with people who were vulnerable and on the margins. I realized that although the plan I had for my life was very good, God’s call for me to respond to the needs of the world might be even more important.

It is because of these experiences that I resonate with Joseph in today’s gospel reading. He is a righteous yet caring man, determined to make the “right” decisions for his life based on other’s expectations and his plan for his future. Yet through a dream, he has his world turned upside-down by the realization that God is working through his life in ways he had not seen before. In his dream, the angel tells him “do not be afraid” to put God before the “righteous” decision.

This reading challenges us to not be afraid of the ways God is working around us and through us. Joseph gives us an example of trusting God’s will above our own plans or expectations. It urges us to listen to God speaking through those most vulnerable, or through the stirrings of our own heart. And it is a reminder that no matter how lost we feel, God is with us.

Focus on: Simplicity

I think of simplicity as putting God first. To me, this means putting Love before material things, before our own agenda, or before what others think we should do or say. It means listening to God’s voice stirring in our own hearts despite fear, just as Joseph responded to the angel in his dream. God calls us to love others, because all people are made in God’s image. This is what Jesus came to proclaim: “Emmanuel, God is with us.” So by putting God first, we strive to prioritize and choose to celebrate the Love alive in the people surrounding us, and in our own hearts. This is simplicity: letting go of the things, ideas, and distractions that create barriers between us and others, and ultimately between us and God.

Service Suggestion

Our lives are full of distractions, especially in the holiday season. Challenge yourself to embrace simplicity. Intentionally drop the barriers you create between yourself and others: focus on people instead of technology, material things, or expectations you put on yourself. Take time to engage with family and friends, or spend time building relationships with those on the margins in your community. Most of all, don’t be afraid to engage with your own heart in prayer to hear how God is stirring within you.

Prayer

Dear God,

We thank you for the ways you surprise us and challenge our expectations.

Help us to simplify our lives in order to draw closer to those around us, and to ultimately grow closer to you.

Give us courage to hear your call, spoken through those around us and from our own hearts.

Give us peace to know you are with us, through the gift of your son Jesus, Emmanuel.

Amen.

Christmas Day

What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race;
the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:1-18

The Gift of Light

The Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote in WWII Germany, said of Advent: “The Advent season is a season of waiting, but our whole life is an Advent season, that is, a season of waiting for the last Advent, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth.”

Over the past four weeks, we have lit candles on the Advent wreath. This ritual engages us with the darkness of the season, as well as the symbolic darkness of our world. In the circle of night we make a four-point square of light – a burning sign of our hope for the new life promised by God.

Today, our Christmas Gospel reveals God’s fulfillment of this promise:

What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:3-5)

We celebrate anew the birth of Jesus Christ – a gift we can hardly comprehend. In the refuge of the manger (which is located in every heart) we rejoice in the eternal Son of God, who is born for man, by the power of Holy Spirit and the willing service of Mary, his mother.

As a community founded in faith and service, we can rejoice doubly, for as God’s Angel told Joseph in the Fourth Week of Advent, “... they shall name him Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.” (Matthew 1:23) As Christ is the light of the world, he is also the light within all who receive him. We are each made little lights in His name. We are each to glow, and as St. Francis of Assisi reassures us, “All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle.”

We pray that you have peace and joy on this Christmas Day and beyond. We pray that you will carry your light forward into the world. The new earth has not yet come, but Christ has, illuminating the dark. Rejoice! In joyful spirit, we share now a few lines from author Madeleine L’Engle (herself a little candle of Christ):

First Coming (excerpt)

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

About Us:



Catholic Apostolate Center

Reviving Faith • Rekindling Charity • Forming Apostles

The Catholic Apostolate Center, a ministry of the Society of the Catholic Apostolate (Pallottines) - Immaculate Conception Province, was founded in 2011 to respond to the needs of the Church through: Developing, in collaboration with dioceses and other institutions and organizations, formation programs for the New Evangelization; Assisting Catholic leaders in deepening collaboration with one another; Providing formation and apostolic opportunities for members and collaborators of the Union of Catholic Apostolate. The Center takes its inspiration from the spirituality of St. Vincent Pallotti and achieves its goals through hosting conferences, seminars, webinars, and presentations as well as providing online and print resources.

For more information visit: www.catholicapostolatecenter.org



Catholic Volunteer Network is a national membership organization of Christian volunteer and mission programs that fosters and promotes full-time national and international service opportunities for people of all backgrounds, ages and skills. Catholic Volunteer Network supports and enhances the work of its membership by providing training and resources, networking opportunities, and national advocacy. Each year more than 20,000 volunteers serve in our Network, reaching nearly all states in the U.S. and more than 100 countries.

For more information visit: www.catholicvolunteernetwork.org

Catholic Apostolate Center and Catholic Volunteer Network partner to provide resources to support former volunteers in their on-going commitment to service, community, spiritual growth, simple living, and social justice. Please visit: www.catholicvolunteernetwork.org/alumni for more information.