

ADVENT LONGING

Sermon on Second Sunday of Advent

8 December 1963

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The time of Advent should help us to become people of longing, and should make us men and women of faithfulness. People of longing - longing for redemption, for the Redeemer, longing for vital union with God even to the extent of being gripped by God. Men and women of faithfulness - faithful to our very personal mission as Christians and as human beings. That is what we heard on the first Sunday of Advent.

The following three Sundays take up the same theme Sunday after Sunday, although in a strange way. They do not discuss longing and faithfulness in theory or in principle, but place two great Advent preachers before our eyes, as it were. These Advent preachers themselves classically embody the longing and the faithfulness meant here. One Advent preacher is the Mother of God, the second Advent preacher is St. John the Baptist.

Today - we are celebrating the feast of the Immaculate Conception - the Mother of God as the great Immaculata wishes to have her say. What has she to say to us? What has she to say through her words, what has she to say to us through her example? Yes, we know that today's feast expressly draws our attention to the joyful fact that she by far excels all other merely created things or beings with her personality and her mission. Yes, she towers above us all, she even towers above the apostles. Nothing that is merely created surpasses her. That is why St. Bernard tells us: She is the creature that endlessly surpasses all that God has

created.¹ This is how we see the form of the Immaculata before us today.

And what applies to her in general should also be applied to our Advent longing. So we have to say that her longing - her longing for God, her longing for union with God, for being gripped by

God - surpassed the great Advent longing of that time, as well as of our present time, as heaven is high above the earth.

What was this longing, this Advent longing, like at that time, and what is it like today? Well, this is what we foster Sunday after Sunday during the season of Advent, and if we follow the liturgy we sing it into and out of our hearts and up to the Eternal, the Divine, day by day. What is the effect of the Advent hymns on our souls? They strike notes that are extremely dear and congenial to us.

"O come, O come, Emmanuel, set free your people Israel"
"... and let the clouds rain down the Just ..."

What does all this imply? That is the cry of longing. Advent in the liturgy, it is the cry of longing rising up from our hearts and it was the world's cry of longing at the time of our Lady. And if these hymns, at least in an analagous

1. "... videbis quiddid maius est minus Virgine, solumque opificem opus istud supergredi - ... you will see, even what is really great falls short of (the greatness) the Virgin, and only the fabricator surpasses this work." Sermon 41,1 among the works of Peter Damian (PI 144,738 A), formerly attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux, but probably coming from his onetime secretary, the monk Nicholas of Clairvaux.

sense, have been sung for thousands and thousands of years, if the cry of longing for God, for God's incarnation, for the incarnation of the Redeemer, has moved the whole of human society, what a resonance this longing, this Advent longing, must have awakened in the heart of our Lady, the great Immaculata!

There are two questions that we want to ponder on somewhat in this connection. The first question is: How can we describe the Advent longing as such, the Advent longing of the whole of mankind? And secondly, how did the Mother of God realize this longing, this Advent longing, in herself?

With regard to the first question we need to imprint three great principles on ourselves.

The first law or principle: Advent longing is longing for God. What does that imply? In order to answer that question we would have to ask above all what the human soul understands by longing. That is actually the natural, original urge of the soul towards a good that one either does

not possess at all, or that one does not yet possess completely. Longing! Of course, this must normally be a good that is worthy of and valuable to human nature.

Look for a moment into everyday life. There are different goods - goods that we do not yet possess or that we do not possess sufficiently. Since we are people of today, we will naturally think in this context of sensual, earthly goods. There are also spiritual goods - truth, right, justice - and there are divine goods. Longing! Yes, Advent longing, what sort of longing is that? It is the longing for the living God, for the God of life, longing for the God of our hearts, longing for the God of our altars. More precisely, it is the longing to be inwardly and vitally united with the living God as the greatest Good, yes, the longing to be gripped by God and the longing to love God deeply even in the midst of an age that idolizes earthly and sensual goods in a most terrible way. The first principle.

Second principle - this is particularly important to us people of today - this longing for God, the Eternal, the Infinite, is inalienably connected and united with human nature, although, as long as we are pilgrims here on earth, it will never be completely satisfied. An important truth.

In the first place we are here concerned with the longing for God, the Eternal, that is innate to human nature, even in those instances where nature is without grace. We think here, for example, of the heathens - our modern heathens and the heathens of ancient times. Yes we say, we state, that even in them there is an inextinguishable urge and drive towards God. Of course, we add that it will never be completely satisfied as long as we are pilgrims here on earth. This drive can only be satisfied up in heaven throughout eternity.

Hence we distinguish between the divine, the longing for God in human nature without grace, and the drive, the longing for God, in human nature with grace. At the present moment, because we are living in a world that flees from God, our main concern is with the first thought.

Let us begin by asking ourselves: Why is it that this longing for the living God is ineradicably and indelibly connected with our human nature? What is the ultimate and deepest reason? Theologians tell us. They point out emphatically that human nature is not like an uninscribed tablet as some people like to describe it at times. No, human nature has been created by the infinite God. And this infinite God has set his seal on human nature. What is this seal? That is this ineradicable urge, this ineradicable drive towards God. Therefore mankind's sickness, the sickness also of modern man, is this unfulfilled urge towards God. Man is in a state of sickness for God.² Is this true? How that sounds, but is it true?

Therefore, man not only experiences a certain feeling of sickness when he thinks of God and possesses him too little, but within him there is an eternal homesickness. Homesickness! Yes, we may call any number of earthly goods our own and think that they will satisfy us - but that doesn't last long. Our soul remains empty, our heart dried up, unless it ultimately bypasses all earthly goods or takes them with itself into the possession of God, into its self-surrender to the eternal, the infinite God.

From this we may well understand it when St. Augustine, for example, tells us in those classic and well-known words: "You made us for yourself." To be sure, he also made us for earthly goods, but in the end "you made us for yourself". And now comes that great statement, "and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you!"³

2. "The human soul is no mere tabula rasa. As a conditioned, finite entity it is of its very nature attracted towards an Absolute which is unconditional and final, and in the depths of its consciousness it is aware of this attraction as an unrest, as a nostalgia for eternity and completeness, as a state of sickness for God." (Karl Adam, *The Son of God*, tr. P. Hereford, Image - Doubleday 1960, 1962, p. 31).

3. *Confessions* 1,1 (trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin, Penguin Classics, 1977)

And then Augustine starts in his classic way to show with brilliant rhetoric how he had looked for God in his life. Each one of us may discover himself or herself in it. He points out: I approached all created things and practically asked them all, "Are you my God? Are you the highest good?" Earthly things - property and possessions, pleasure, all that the world could offer me, I enjoyed them all. But the question, "Are you my God?" Answer, "No, I am not. Climb higher." I rose up to the stars, to the heavens, to the sun. I asked them all, I asked again and again, "Are you my God? Can you satisfy the insatiable hunger for happiness within me?" Answer, "I did not create myself. Climb higher, higher, higher upwards!"⁴

Do we now understand what is meant when we say that even in human nature without grace there is an indestructible urge towards the living God? And all the disappointments connected with earthly things call out to us again and again: Rise higher! *Sursum corda!*⁵ God is the ultimate, God is eternal Love, the eternal, infinite Good!

A French philosopher once summarized his observations of life in this regard in the classic words: If man is not created for God - as we hear shouted from the rooftops everywhere, or almost everywhere - if man has not been ultimately created for God, why is that that he is only happy if he has found God to some extent, when he has given himself to God, when he has been gripped by God? If, however, he has been created for God and ultimately only for God, why do the world and men fight against God? Why do they flee from God? Why do they run away from God? Why do they attach themselves to creatures, to earthly things, and not use all these things to rise up to the Eternal, the

4. Confessions X,6.
Infinite?6

5. Lift up your hearts!

If we examine it more closely and if we have now convinced ourselves that this hunger for God is also present in us, that it has always been there, we will then hear another saying of the Sacred Scriptures resonating in our souls. God himself says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love, so I am constant in my affection for you" (Jer. 31,3). This also applies to me. I imagine, therefore, "with an everlasting love"! God thought of me from eternity with infinite love. "I thought of you with an eternal love" - hence the urge towards him, the Eternal, the Infinite, which he put into my nature when he created it. "With an everlasting love! And I want to love you throughout eternity. I thought of you with an everlasting love, and in my mercy I drew you to myself; I drew you to myself, first of all, by the bond of longing for me which I will never allow to be destroyed."

Pius XI tells us also in his own way - if the longing for the eternal cannot be extinguished in thoroughly depraved people, how strong must not this longing be in the human soul that has never heard about the living God.⁷ Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love and I have mercifully drawn you to myself! And my answer? Since we live so far from God, since we cannot see him, therefore

6. Blaise Pascal (1623-1662, Pensees)

7. Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter "Quadragesimo anno" (15.5.1931) Nr 139: "For if in the depths of even the most abandoned hearts there lurk, like sparks beneath the ashes, spiritual forces of unexpected strength - a clear testimony of a naturally Christian soul - how much more

must these abide in the hearts of the many who, largely, through ignorance or external circumstances, have been led into error." (CTS 1934)

- as the Psalmist prays: "As a doe longs for running streams, so longs my soul for you, my God" (Ps. 42,1), the eternal, infinite God.

This is how we should interpret the mysterious and restless stirrings in our hearts. Everything in us is calling for God.

Now there are various ways in which this longing, this longing for God, finds expression in us. Once again it is the French philosopher, Pascal, who tells us. He pointed out that there are three different types of people in this regard. He said that there are people who love God, who serve him, because they have found him. These are the people we may call reasonable and happy. Do I belong to this class of people? To some extent without doubt. Second class: There are people who have not yet found God, but they are looking for him. He characterizes them as very reasonable. Why are they reasonable? They are trying to satisfy the cry of their hearts for the ultimate and highest Good. But they are not happy, at least they are only happy to some extent, because they have not yet found him, they have not even found him to some extent. And again, there are other people - yes, what are they like? They haven't found him, they don't want to find him, nor do they search for him. Characteristic - they are extremely unreasonable and unhappy. Unreasonable - yes, reason demands that we should consider the basic drives of our nature. And we shall only be happy, ultimately happy, through this urge, through this longing for God, through God's intervention, through the possession of God, the Eternal, the Infinite.⁸

8. Pascal, Pense"es

A German writer⁹ once summarized in his own way the longing of mankind, yes the longing of the whole of mankind, in the beautiful words:

I circle around you -
mankind says this, starting with Adam and Eve ever since they were driven out of Paradise, until today.

I circle around you, you ancient tower.
How should I picture this to myself? Stretches of water, wave after wave, and in there a tower, God is this tower.

I circle around you, you ancient tower,

I circle around you for hundreds of years.

That is the eternal drive in the human heart towards the 'Eternal, the Infinite.

I do not know –

it continues,

am I a falcon, am I a storm

or am I an eternal canticle?

Do we understand what that means? Man's urge towards God. Yes, I see the tower. Falcons fly around the tower. But what do they do? They beat their heads against the tower. They are falcons. Am I a falcon? Do I come into collision with God?

Do I collide with him because I do not understand his guidance? Or am I a storm? Do I want to overthrow the tower, to blow it over? A symbol of countless people today who want to have nothing more to do with God. What am I? Or am I a brilliant canticle of praise to the eternal, the

9. Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) in the poem: "Ich lebe mein Leben in wachsenden Ringen" - I live my life in ever-growing rings.

The second verse states (literal prose translation)

"I circle around God, around the ancient

tower,

and I circle for hundreds of years;

And I know not whether I am a falcon, a storm or a great hymn."

infinite God? That is what my life should become - a hymn of praise to God's infinite kindness, love and mercy. A canticle that never tires in actual life to be, to live and to die as a person who is gripped by God and who loves God deeply.

We have said that this drive towards God is indestructible. What does that mean?

One of our most modern thinkers, who bears Cain's mark of hatred of God on his forehead, who misused his life, as he himself admitted, to murder God, to kill God, to eradicate God - away with the Eternal, away with the Infinite! - he himself, who later ended up as a madman, coined that other saying: Modern man circles at midnight hour around the grave of the murdered, his murdered God.¹⁰ That is to say, even those who kill God, who murder him and want to tear him out of the hearts of modern mankind, cannot get rid of God, they circle around the grave of the murdered God.

That is the second great truth. Now for the third great truth. Actually I should still add about the second that this hunger for God is naturally embodied uniquely in human nature that has

received grace, even if only because grace takes up what is alive in noble human nature, it elevates and perfects it. Therefore, if the urge towards God is indelibly inscribed into nature-bound nature, how much more must this be true of nature that has received grace! All the more when we now add that through grace, through the grace of baptism, we are incorporated into Christ, the living God-Man, and hence also into his longing for the Eternal, the Infinite. It is obvious, therefore, that in the Christian, even more than in the person without

10. cf. F.W. Nietzsche, Thus spoke Zarathustra, Part 4,5, The Sorcerer, p. 264-270 (Penguin classics, tr R.J. Hollingdale, 1977)

grace, the eternal homesickness for God must be alive and active and bring forth great works.

Finally, the third truth. We are concerned here with the qualities of this longing, the quality of longing in a Christian. He should be able to call four qualities his own. Firstly, his longing should be supernatural, that is to say, its motivation should be supernatural. Which God do we seek? The Triune God, the God of revelation. The motivation must be supernatural. This living, eternal God should rule. It should be supernatural in principle. What is the source from which this longing flows? From human nature connected with grace. Hence, this longing must be supernatural.

Secondly, surpassing. It must surpass all other longings. Which longings? We all know how many longings are slumbering within us, how many longings are pressing within us and demanding fulfillment. But surpassing!

Because if this longing for God is not surpassing, it is pressed into the background by all the other longings for earthly goods, for sensual goods, for pleasures.

Thirdly, therefore, constantly growing. If our longing does not grow, it goes to sleep, it falls asleep.

And finally, practical. It may not be emotionalism. Saint Teresa once pointed out: a person who only wants to climb a molehill, for example, what sort of person is that? What forces does this aim awaken in a person? On the contrary, I want to climb the highest mountain in the world. How many forces such a high aim awakens! Thus we should set high aims before ourselves; it should be our longing that God should reign completely over us, he should reign completely over my family. High aims! I want to do great things for the living God. But that may not be and

remain imaginary; in the end it should and must find expression in our practical, everyday lives, and should mould and form life.

With that we have answered the first question to some extent: How can we describe this Advent longing?

And now the more important question. What is it? How did our Lady realize this longing? I can only say a brief word on this point. I am emphasizing it so that we may recover at least some contact with the Mother of God. Theologians tell us that she took into her heart and realized the longing of her entire age for the Redeemer, the longing for God, for connection with God, for being gripped by God, the entire longing of her age, the entire longing of the millennia before her. And that was ultimately the reason why the eternal God allowed the Second Person of the divinity to become man.¹¹ I shall express this more exactly: On behalf of all mankind the Mother of God bore the longing for God in her heart and realized the longing for God in her heart. There is a great law in God's kingdom which states: The measure of longing is the measure of fulfillment. Our Lord expressed it in the words, "Happy those who hunger and thirst for what is right, for God, they shall be satisfied" (Mt. 5,6). If what the theologians tell us is true, we must truly admit: How endlessly great must not the longing in our Lady's heart have been.

A saintly visionary, I am no longer sure but I think it must have been Saint Mechthild¹², once asked our Lady to show her the point of view from which she should love her particularly. She was told: from the point of view of her inexpressible

11. cf. M.J. Scheeben: Dogmatic Theology, Book 5

12. St. Mechthild of Magdeburg (1212-1283)

longing for God, the Redeemer. And this longing moved the eternal God to take flesh, to descend to earth and bleed to death for us on the cross.

That is only a very simple answer. A second and third, oh, I must keep those for later! At any rate it is sufficient to the extent that we can say: The Mother of God stands before us as the great preacher of Advent longing.

Mother of God, so let us pray, we have given ourselves to you and you have given yourself to us. We have made a covenant of love with you, and you with us. Therefore we ask you fervently and lovingly: See to it that our longing for God does not diminish and is not disturbed by slavery to all earthly things! Break the fetters that bind us to this earth alone. Help us, so that the great canticle of love for God may resound through our lives!

I think that in this spirit we may kneel down and pray and renew our little consecration to the Mother of God together:

"My Queen, my Mother,
I give myself entirely to you and to show my devotion to you, I consecrate to you this day, my eyes, my ears my mouth, my heart, myself without reserve. As I am your own, my good Mother, guard and defend me as your property and your possession. Amen."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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