

Antibodies to the Virus of Indifference

Homily for November 2020

Advent Sunday

The story is told of St. John Henry Newman, (1801-1890) who was canonized in October 2019. When 78 years-old he was made a Cardinal by Pope Leo XIII. One day he received a message from an English priest who served the people of the tiny village of Brennan, a dirty little mill town north of Birmingham. Birmingham was where Newman lived. An epidemic of cholera had decimated the village and the priest was asking for the help of another priest to assist him in the giving of the sacrament, administering the Last Rites, and to do funerals, because so many people were dying.

Newman read the letter and he spent the next hour in prayer. Finally a secretary came in and said: “Cardinal Newman, we must give an immediate reply to Brennan. Your eminence, what shall we do”? Newman answered: “The people are suffering and dying. How can I send a priest to do this work? I must go myself”.

Advent is the season when we remember how God in the person of Jesus Christ said “I must go myself”. He came into our misery, like Newman did by entering into the suffering of Brennan. This Advent is unlike any other we have known because of the pandemic – which makes Newman’s example one of particular relevance.

Last week an essay by Pope Francis was published in the New York Times. He wrote about those people who during COVID have like Newman declared “I must go myself”.

Whether or not they were conscious of it, their choice testified to a belief: that it is better to live a shorter life serving others than a longer one resisting that call. That’s why, in many countries, people stood at their windows or on their doorsteps to applaud them in gratitude and awe. They are the saints next door, who have awakened something important in our hearts, making credible once more what we desire to instill by our preaching.

They are the antibodies to the virus of indifference. They remind us that our lives are a gift and we grow by giving of ourselves, not preserving ourselves but losing ourselves in service.¹

I am so appreciative for how many of our parishioners have been antibodies to the virus of indifference since COVID changed our world on March 17th. Of particular note I want to mention our SVDP Society. They will be taking great care to distribute the hampers to 75 families. On Tuesday, December 1st the families will receive gift cards so they can go shopping for presents and then on December 19th a second delivery will be made of turkey and other staples for Christmas. Rina and her team have been planning this since June. Here is an expression of “I must go myself”. All of you participating in our Hamper service are “antibodies to the virus of indifference, the saints next door.” Thank you!

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/26/opinion/pope-francis-covid.html>

\$30,000.00 will be spent on this Advent Ministry. If you have contributed to our Christmas Hamper Programme, thank you. If you have not, but would like to, please do by making an online donation.

What St John Henry Newman, Pope Francis and SVDP illustrate is the theme expressed in the Collect for today's Mass:

Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God, the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming.

Think with me now for a few minutes about how our readings encourage us to have the resolution to spend this Advent in a deepening of our righteous deeds so that in our own way we can all be antibodies to the virus of indifference, the saints next door.

In our reading from Isaiah there are many who are described as lacking resolve, there is a kind of indifference to the Lord and to one another. A feeling that God is hidden from them. But then there is this cry of the heart:

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
⁵You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.*

This is language filled with resolve described in the Collect. The Lord wants us to have a spiritual passion in the age of COVID. A passion our Holy Father is expressing - represented by Cardinal Newman and Rina and her team.

What about you? Does your heart burn with a desire to gladly do right, to live and work in such a way that through your life Jesus is saying: "I must go myself"?

But you might say: "Father, I don't have what it takes". I'm not a Cardinal Newman. But beloved, you are baptized – confirmed and one through whom the Lord wants to be present ever more so through you he can be present in a world that is hurting so deeply.

What we are invited to do is grow in our expectancy to be receptive to Jesus. People with this resolve are like those to whom St. Paul wrote in Corinthians. Paul believed the Church is the fellowship where people are to be expectant and receptive towards Jesus and says as much when in the opening of 1st Corinthians he states:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What do the gifts of grace and peace provide for us? Spiritual energy. Listen to the dynamism of Paul's words:

for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our way of thinking and speaking are enriched because of the grace of Jesus Christ. Notice as well, when a community collectively lives with spiritual zeal, the testimony of Jesus is strengthened among us. How important it is to have others who can encourage us to have the resolve to run forth to meet Jesus with righteous deeds. How we want to be able to encourage one another to not give into the discouragement – something that is so easy to do because of this health emergency. Advent invites us to be a people who are not falling into a spiritual slumber but take to heart Jesus call to be awake.

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”²

May we allow for this Advent to be a season where we pray for the Lord to increase within us an alertness so that we resolve to be antibodies to the virus of indifference as we pray with Isaiah:

***O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.***

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Mk 13:37). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.