

This weekend ushers in another Advent Season and the beginning of a new church year with its cycle of seasons and feasts. Unlike our civil calendar with its holidays and commemorations, the church year celebrated in the liturgy is not an annual cycle of “historical pageants” about the life of Jesus. Through the liturgy, especially the Mass, we are invited to enter more deeply into the life of Jesus we have received in baptism which is continually nourished through the proclamation of the Scriptures and communion of life with him and each other under the sacramental symbols of bread and wine, his Body and Blood, in the Holy Eucharist. During Advent we wait for more than a *day*, Christmas. What we await is a further and fuller revelation of a *Person*—Jesus Christ, now reigning in glory, to again be “born in us today.”

Our celebration takes on a special heightened awareness this year, as we observe the “Year of Faith” proclaimed by our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in observance of the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962. It will conclude next November 24<sup>th</sup> the Solemnity of Christ the King. In proclaiming the year of faith, the Holy Father’s expressed desire is that, first of all, each of us will come to a deeper personal relationship and commitment to Jesus. Secondly, out of this renewed relationship, the Holy Father’s hope is that that we become more confident and effective witnesses of him in a “New Evangelization”; bringing Christ and the Gospel to our world today.

Today’s Gospel passage with its “end of the world” images or our daily contact with the afflictions affecting our world globally, locally and environmentally as we witness them through various news media outlets, read in the light of faith are really signs of how far each of us personally, all of us collectively, and our world still have to go to implant Gospel values as we pray in each Mass especially for God’s “kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.” Today’s liturgy rather than focusing our thinking of the end of the world as a disastrous, punishing time, challenges us to think of it as an invitation to deeper Gospel living. To this end the Holy Father invites us to deeper prayer. This season may be a good time to pull out the prayer commitment forms we completed this

past August as part of our commitment to become a stewardship spirituality driven parish. Prayer, as we reflected then, is our primary response in gratitude and responsibility to the gifts God has entrusted to us—the way in which we come to a deeper personal relationship with Jesus and draw the strength to live the Christian way of life daily.

Particularly, as we open our Advent hearts to a renewed birth of Jesus within us at Christmas and through the Year of Faith for the sake of our, and the world's salvation, the Holy Father has stated that its starting point is that of the Gospel itself, conversion, through a personal sacramental encounter through regular celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation or Penance. To quote the Holy Father, “The new evangelization...begins in the confessional!”

In their meeting last month in Baltimore, our nation's Bishops echoed this call. “In the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, we meet the Lord, who wants to grant forgiveness and the grace to live a renewed life in him. In this sacrament he prepares us to receive him with a lively faith, earnest hope, and sacrificial love in the Eucharist. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, we repent, let go of any pattern of sin, grow in the life of virtue and witness to a joyful conversion.

We bishops and priests are eager to help you if you experience any difficulty, hesitation or uncertainty about approaching the Lord in this sacrament. If you have not received this healing sacrament in a long time, we are ready to welcome you. We, whom Christ has ordained to minister this forgiveness in his name, also approach this sacrament, both as penitents and ministers. We offer ourselves to you as forgiven sinners seeking to serve in the Lord's name.”

As your pastor, please make time this season to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Don't let Christmas be just another day that comes and goes on the calendar, but a genuine encounter with the Jesus who longs to “be born in you again today.”