

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Happy New Year! I know some might be saying that I'm a bit early, but I always like to remind people that Advent is the beginning of the new liturgical year for the Church. It is a time of beginnings and a time to reflect on our lives. Remember that while the end of the Advent Season speaks directly to the coming of Christ in the flesh (2000 years ago), the beginning of the season speaks to His coming at the end of time... and so our readiness for Him in our lives.

The Gospel today reminds us not to “**become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life**” (Luke 21:34). When I was reflecting on this, I was reminded of a reflection I read in the *Magnificat* on November 24. Here Caryll Houselander (a British mystic, poet and spiritual teacher, who died in 1954) writes about our attempt to escape reality:

Religion, they say, is an escape, but it is the only escape that they do not try. For a man who has slammed the door on God must try to escape from the emptiness in the house of his soul. The solitude that is sweet is to be alone with God; to be shut up alone with oneself is more than human nature can bear. (qtd in November 2018 *Magnificat* p. 352)

As I thought about this, I thought of all the escapes we try to make from ourselves. On one level, so many try to escape through all sorts of distractions. We can see this in the culture that is so centered around TV, music, movies, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and all sorts of other ways to escape ourselves. It is so easy for so many people to get lost in books (on one end) or hours on YouTube. We cannot stand to alone with ourselves, and so we do anything we can to avoid it!

In the previous paragraph, though, Houselander says “so many people have lost their faith in mammon” (which means wealth, property, riches... *created things*). She is noticing that people find this stuff just doesn't do the job. We still have to end up with *ourselves* at the end of the day.

This, then, might explain the opioid crisis. When people have tried all manner of *things* to escape themselves, they find that the existential loneliness endures. If there is no escape through distraction, then there *must* be an escape from reality through drugs, alcohol, or some other way. The high wears down, though, and reality comes crashing back in. So there must be more and more of the drug to escape reality... and eventually it may be fatal.

We try so hard to escape that loneliness, the loneliness of our soul. No other person – no matter how close the relationship – can fill that emptiness. There will always come a time when we must face ourselves. According to Houselander, we can't handle that on our own, for the only “solitude that is sweet is to be alone with God.”

This Advent, I invite you to enter this solitude with God. If you were at the Masses over which I presided last weekend, you will remember how I spoke about the necessity of silence... yet the difficulty of silence. Enter into silence... *with God*. Let Him take you by the hand. Let Him lead you to that moment when you realize how loved you are... not for what you can do for Him (for He needs nothing), but for who you are.

In the midst of the Advent rush and chaos, make space for God. Invite your family to spend a few minutes each day in front of the crèche. Let God's Presence fill the emptiness, so that solitude becomes a moment of joy!

Happy New Year.