

## Homily: First Sunday of Advent, Cycle B

Old St. Pat's, Chicago, 2011

*Edward Foley*

Ordinarily I have to say that I look forward to Advent.

I love the **ethos** of the season,

the **mysticism** of the music,

the **poetry** of the texts,

and its **cosmic confrontation**

with the death of the astronomical Sun in the north,

so that that only begotten Son can be reborn

in every person of good will.

In many ways, it is my favorite liturgical season,

with its **juxtaposition** of beginning and ending,

Christ's coming in history and coming in glory,

the darkening of the world,

while our churches radiant new light.

This year, however, there is a certain **sadness** for me in this season.

And while I have a clear aversion

to employing the pulpit as a **personal sounding board**

or as a substitute for **clerical therapy**,

this sadness, at least for me,

points to something unchanging

and **eternally true** about Advent,

and unchanging and eternally true about being church.

The sadness is about the **new translation** of the Mass

we inaugurate today.

I say this **not** as a matter of protest:

for as I have noted in the over 150 lectures 2 graduate courses

and multiple interviews and articles over the past year,

I will say these texts

because the liturgy does not belong to me,

but to the church,

and I was called to ministry to serve the church.

In some ways there is **always** some sadness for me

In the texts of the Roman Catholic liturgy,

Because we so often **pray about what is to be**

in some unknown future

in some yet to be seen world.

But such praying,  
so hope-filled and faithful,  
at the same time underscores  
that something is **woefully lacking here and now** –  
so absent, so missing, that it requires not only my **personal** prayer,  
but the **official** prayer of the church.

No part of our prayer repertoire made that as clear, at least to me,  
as the previous translation of Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation II,  
which praised God for the divine spirit  
that could invite enemies to speak to one another,  
those who were estranged join hands in friendship,  
and nations seek the way of peace together.

Such praying reminds us, however,  
that political enemies in this country  
really **do not speak** to each other,  
as demonstrated by the failure of the **supercommittee**;

the estranged seldom join hands in friendship,  
but too often **raise their hand in violence** and abuse,  
especially against women and children in our society;

and too seldom do nations actually **seek the path of peace**,  
but readily turn to rancor, violence, and deceit  
as the **accepted** form of national building.

But it is not only **ad extra** ... outside the church,  
the realities of the world, that make our prayer so poignant.  
So self-implicating  
and **sobering to the self-reflective**,  
it is also in the church.

And so in the Eucharistic prayer we use to pray  
*Keep us all in communion of mind and heart  
with Benedict our Pope and Francis our Bishop.  
Help us to work together  
for the coming of your kingdom*

A **laudable** thought,  
a **touching** prayer expression,  
but also a **wistful** one,

for in this moment in our ecclesial life  
when one out of every 10 Americans is an ex-Catholic,  
according to a **2011 poll**,  
a majority of Roman Catholics  
**do not agree** with official positions on **birth control**,  
the **death penalty**,  
married clergy,  
and even the **very authority of the Vatican**,

and yet for decades we have prayed,  
*Father, make your church throughout the world,  
a sign of unity and an instrument of your peace.*

Given the enormous **divisions** with the Catholic Church,  
the **turmoil** that has rocked the church these past decades,  
with unspeakable stories of betrayal and abuse,  
one can ask whether our **new or even our old prayer texts**  
**bless us or banish us,**  
**comfort us or convict us,**  
**Reconcile us or reproach us ...**

Now you might be wondering to yourself,  
**Why** even bring this up ... why speak a **hard gospel**?  
After all, there are other Advent **distractions** afoot.  
We did have a terrific **black Friday**,  
the **City Christmas tree** has been lit,  
the **NBA** seems to have settled their lockout,  
and there's all the speculation about how the advent  
of **Caleb Hanie** will transpire  
at the game in Oakland this afternoon.

There are other places we could go.  
But the gospel is nonetheless clear.  
Be watchful – **be alert – pay attention.**  
And since even the **secular press** is commenting on  
the changes in the Catholic Mass,  
Seems odd that **we** wouldn't pay it some attention too.

Or, in the words of an old friend, when I started teaching worship:  
I asked him if he had any advice.  
His wisdom: **When the bull comes in the china shop,**  
**acknowledge him.**

The bull in the china shop, this 1st Sunday of Advent,  
is a **newly translated** Mass  
that is going to be **welcomed** by some,  
**questioned** by others,  
and **challenging** to most.

There **are old formulas** that come **second nature** to us,  
“Lord I am not worthy to receive you,”  
that are changed ... and will take some time  
in a new familiarization process.

The common middle-American **cursus**  
and **sentence order** so familiar to us over the past 40 years  
has been changed to a word order  
and **rhetorical style** closer to the Latin,  
that might sound a little more **antiquated** to our ears,  
and certainly is a challenge to those of us  
who have to proclaim these prayers.

And there is some **new vocabulary**:

**consubstantial, chalice, dewfall and oblation ...**

I asked my four nephews, all around 30 years of age,  
who have been my test cast for the last few decades  
on the practices of the church.

I asked them if they knew what “oblation” meant ...

These are smart guys ... professionals ...

They were stymied until one said “oh yes,

it’s when you go to a bar and get a really great drink.”

I said, No ... that’s a “libation.”

It is going to be a challenge, without question.

But I don’t think the focus of the opening **Sunday of Advent**  
and Gospels about “**be alert**”

are just telling us to watch our **interpretation** of new texts  
and be cautious of the **new vocabulary**.

And I don’t think the **Prophet Isaiah**’s interceding  
that God make a return and stop hiding  
is some hidden **prophetic key to new texts**  
that simultaneously reveal and mask God ...

Because the **Advent call** is not simply or even essentially  
to have **more sacred, more literal, more Catholic worship**  
in our churches

And the startling evidence for that  
was proclaimed for us in clarion fashion last week,  
the **Feast of Christ of King**,  
which serves as a kind of elision to the beginning of the year,  
a gospel of the final days leading into this gospel  
of the final days.

And that **judgment gospel**  
was not about the **quality** of our translation,  
the **accuracy** of our English,  
the **competency** of our cursus,  
but our **care** for the hungry, imprisoned, homeless and unloved.

Jesus does not divide the **sheep from the goats**  
according to what Roman Missal they are reading from,  
not according to what **translation guidelines** they used,  
or even how well they **stumbled** through the new prayers.

He divided the sheep from the goats  
according to their abilities and commitment to  
the **corporal works of mercy**.  
Not how well did they **pray**, but how well did they  
**house and feed and clothe and care** for the needy.

**Karl Rahner**, a giant of 20th century Catholic theology,  
and expert at Vatican II,  
made a very **interesting and useful distinction**  
between the liturgy of the church and the **liturgy of the world**.

While Rahner understood how critical the liturgy of the Church is  
to the **holiness and well being of God's people**,

he also believed that the liturgy of the world:  
the **mysticism** of daily living,  
the encountering of God in the **great and small things of life**,  
was as important ... and actually **prior**.

Rahner basically understood  
that most of our **dying and rising**,  
most of our **crucifixions and resurrections**,  
and most of our decisions about how to live  
between our dying and rising  
does not take place in a **church**,  
But in the bedroom, the board room, the bathroom,  
and on the bus on the way to work.

Rahner taught that **if you don't understand the liturgy of the world**,  
you'll never understand the liturgy of the church.

I think that was crystal clear in the **life of Jesus**,  
at least as it is portrayed in the gospels.  
For the Jesus ministry was **not largely in the confines of**  
**synagogue or temple**,  
not taken up with **reading Torah** or **offering sacrifice**,  
but played out in homes and taverns,  
caves and hillsides that marked his life.

He was **born** in a **borrowed** space  
and **crucified** in a **public venue**.  
He lived, ministered and died in the world,  
which was appropriate,  
for if you believe the Gospel of John,  
God has a **love affair with the world**,  
not the church;  
God so loved the world that we were sent  
the only begotten.

The **liturgy of the world** is where our **salvation** is played out.  
Jesus knew that.  
I think Maggie Daly did too.

In her commitment to the **arts**,  
in her vision of Chicago as a **place of beauty**,  
but especially in her work for the **children**,

to an outside observer it seemed clear that  
her **faith** and that of her family were always important to her.  
But she **lived that faith** out in the **liturgy of the world**,  
inspiring, encouraging, supporting.

And so it is fitting that today  
the **public wake for her is not in a church,**  
but at the **cultural center** ... in the midst of the city  
and world she loved, and that loved her back.  
And tomorrow when she comes back to this place,  
to this church, for her **final farewell,**  
and the church prays, like for all our dead,  
that she be counted **among the blessed.**

Such seems truly **feasible** because of her public commitment  
to the liturgy of the world.

So for us, as the season turns.  
and a **page turns** on the English Liturgy,  
the **quality of this reform** will not be judged  
by the **beauty** of our speech,  
the **rhythm** of our cursus,  
the **distinctiveness** of our rhetoric,  
or the **sacrality** of our prayers,

But by the **justice and mercy** this liturgy of the church  
calls **forth from us** in the liturgy of the world.  
Or in the words of a new Eucharistic prayer  
we will be praying this day ...

**Open** our eyes to the needs of our brothers and sisters.  
**Inspire** us in words and actions  
to **comfort** those who labor and are burdened.  
Make us serve them **truly** after the **example** of Christ  
and at his command.  
And may your church stand as a **living witness**  
to truth and freedom, to peace and justice,  
that all people may be raised up to a new hope

And so we pray Through Christ our Lord.

*Edward Foley, Capuchin*