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COME SPIRIT!!

1 Advent B-2003 THEME: Make Christmas Happen

I mentioned during my remarks on Thanksgiving that I knew Christmas was upon us when I picked up the newspaper on Thanksgiving Day. It must have weighed an extra two pounds due to all the Christmas Ads. My initial reaction was, "Well, here we go again." Cards, presents, parties, TV specials, Christmas is upon us.

But it has occurred to me that I and we shouldn't let everything around us determine what our Christmas is going to be like. We need to create our own celebration or our Christmas will be as shallow as the Elvis Christmas Special. Our young parents, those with children at home, are adept at this. They put up trees to help the children prepare for Santa and Nativity Scenes to help them prepare for Jesus. They then are faced with the difficult task of teaching their children that Jesus' coming is far more important than Santa's. The family Advent Wreath or the Giving Tree help the children to focus on the meaning for the celebrations. Essentially, parents must create Christmas for their children.

Well, that's what we all need to do. Instead of letting Madison Ave and the media tell us what our Christmas should be, we need to create a true, and proper Christmas for ourselves.

The four weeks of Advent are given to us to help us do just that: create a real Christmas. This year's Gospel for the First Sunday of Advent gives us the theme of the Season, "Watch and Stay Awake." The Nativity of the Lord, Christmas, is the beginning of the transformation of the world into God's

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Kingdom. The transformation will be complete when Jesus returns. Watch and Stay awake the Gospel tells us. "The world is now firmly in Jesus' hands. Be ready," the Gospel tells us, "for Jesus comes to call his own to himself."

Are we his own? As a Church, certainly. But how about as individuals? Am I the Lord's? That's a question we need to ask ourselves during Advent. We say, rather loosely, that we are members of a religion, the Catholic religion. That word religion means a binding. During Advent we ask ourselves, "Am I bound to the Lord to such an extent that he will recognize me as one of his own when he comes again?"

The watching and staying awake that Advent demands is far deeper than the watching and staying awake that children do on December 24th as they wait for Santa. The watching of Advent demands introspection as well as awareness of our surroundings. We look for the coming of the Lord within us as he calls us closer to him, as he gives us his Grace.

At the same time we watch for the signs of his presence around us. We take a step of humility and recognize God's presence working in those around us, particularly members of our family. It is easy to see the Lord's presence in a stranger. It is more difficult to see his presence in someone whose human limitation, whose every quirks are part of our lives. It is easy to see the Lord in the priest who speaks from the pulpit but whom we really don't know that well. It is harder to see the Lord in that person who hasn't quite conquered the use of the hamper. But husbands and wives, parents and children can make God's presence real in their families. The other members of the family have to have the humility to see God working through

them.

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We also should continue Thanksgiving into the Advent season. We should consider the gifts of our lives and have a greater awareness of God's hand in our own personal histories. Why did God lead us here? How did we get to this stage of our lives? Do we really have any regrets when we realize that God continues to write with a straight line using the crooked paths of our lives? God is continually present for each of us, guiding us. We need to be aware of this presence.

The staying awake that Advent demands is the readiness we must have to respond to God's presence. For example, if a child were to ask us, "Why was Jesus born in a stable?" we have to stop what we are doing and realize that God is calling us to provide a deeper knowledge of his love to our children. God provides us with many opportunities to grow in his love and presence during Advent. We have to stay awake so we don't miss any of these. Of course, if we are so busy with the fringes of Christmas, the things we do because that's what we do every Christmas, we'll be caught napping when the Lord reveals his presence to us.

Advent is the season of hope. The promise of the prophets will be fulfilled.

So we wait. We watch. We prepare.

"Here we go again," I thought as I picked up that huge Thanksgiving Day paper.

Yes, here we go again, with another opportunity to draw

near the presence of the Lord.⁴ That is the real celebration of Christmas.