

Sunday 1 of Advent.06

1. Although we begin a new liturgical year this first Sunday of Advent, the readings for today continue the themes of the past few Sundays. They speak of the end times and of the catastrophes which will accompany them. But note that today's Gospel tells us that the end times, despite the natural catastrophes which will accompany them, are not something to fear but rather something to look forward to, for they are the coming of the Lord in glory. "Stand up straight and lift up your heads," Luke's Gospel tells us. Just as you know that spring is coming when you see buds on the trees, so these catastrophic signs should tell you that the Lord is coming. In other words, the Lord's coming will be like the coming of spring for us who are waiting for him.

2. But since we are beginning something new this first Sunday of Advent, and since the readings are already familiar to us from the past few Sundays, let me spend a few minutes with you renewing our understanding of what we do each Sunday when we come together to celebrate the Eucharist. Such a renewal is necessary, it seems to me, because we are apt to forget the meaning of what is very familiar to us—and certainly the Mass is that—and because

we can see new things when we look at something which we already know.

3. The Mass is the central act or action of the church. Therefore we can justly presuppose that its meaning is infinitely rich.

Consequently, we cannot possibly exhaust its meaning when considering it for five or ten minutes. Since that is the case, let me limit myself to saying just one thing about it. Perhaps this point is already familiar to you. If so, please be patient. After all, as I just said, looking at something we already know can sometimes give us new insights into it.

4. The Mass is the action of the community. Your church here is smaller than St. Charles Borromeo Church where I serve. Our largest congregation is about 120 people on Saturdays at 4pm. The Sunday Masses are smaller, maybe ninety people. But the church can seat 800 comfortably, maybe even 1000. And so, given the size of the church and the number of people in it, what results is that you have one or two people here, and one or two there, and so on. They are spread out all over the church. In fact, at times it looks as though they are all trying to get as far away from each other as they possibly can. And add to that the thing we always laugh about

ourselves—that Catholics sit as far away from the altar as they possibly can.

5. Now tell me: if you come to church alone, and if the person nearest to you is about ten pews away, does that give you a sense of community? The answer is clear, is it not? But does that also tell you something about the way we are thinking, that is, we the people who sit as far away from others as possible? To me it does. It tells me that we don't think of the Mass as the action of a community. We are coming to Mass as a family or as a couple or as an individual, but we don't think of the Mass itself as the action of a community. We don't think of the Mass as an action which either presupposes community or might help to create a community.

6. To try to encourage a sense of the Mass as the action of a community, we have begun to do two things at St. Charles. First, we ask people to introduce themselves to each other before Mass begins, or, if they already know each other, to say hello. Second, we ask people now and then—not always because it seems to be a most delicate matter—to sit upfront and in the middle so that there can be a sense of a group, a community, celebrating the Mass together. So we are trying, but not with much success with respect

to this second point, sitting together. The first request has found more acceptance. People are willing to introduce and greet others around them.

7. We should not be surprised by this lack in us of a sense of the Mass as a community action. After all, this emphasis was an innovation of Vatican II. For centuries before Vatican II the Mass appeared to be the action of the priest alone at the altar and of individuals in the congregation. The people were not encouraged to take an active role in the Mass. Indeed, they did not understand the language in which it was celebrated, and the priest had his back to them, and the sanctuary was separated from them. That is how the Mass was celebrated for more than a thousand years. Furthermore, priests were told that they should celebrate the Mass daily, even if that meant celebrating it alone, without a congregation. Thus a priest could easily begin to think that the Mass was his private possession. And yet despite all these factors leading to the understanding of the Mass as the private action of the priest and the individual Catholic, there were certain actions and customs that pointed to a more ancient time when the Mass was celebrated in a communal way. For instance, the church insisted that priests have a server to answer them when they prayed the prayers at the beginning of the Mass. They were also taught that even if they

celebrated alone, they celebrated for and with the Catholic community throughout the world. That certainly helped to make sense of prayers of the Mass which remained in the first person plural, we, not the first person singular, I. And so, at Vatican II, the church went back to the beginning and revealed the ancient communal nature of the Mass by turning the priest around to face the people, by having him use the language of the people, and by asking the people to take their part in the celebration once again by responding at certain times to the priest and by praying some of the prayers such as the Gloria, the Creed and the Our Father as a community.

9. I suspect that in the earliest days of our faith when the Church was small and was surrounded by a larger society which was hostile to it, it had more of a sense of itself as a community not only when celebrating Mass but even in ordinary life. Later on, when the church became the church of the larger society, there had to be a lessening of this sense of community. Here in the early days of our country Catholics were a minority, and being a Catholic meant belonging to a community, even though within that community there were ethnic differences. Look at our city with its different ethnic churches. We still know these differences. I know I am in the right church with a name like mine. St. Charles was the

first church built by the Irish. The French came a wee bit later and built Precious Blood and used their own language. And so in that situation Catholics had a double identity: they were Irish Catholics or French Catholics or Italian Catholics or Polish Catholics or Ukrainian Catholics. Moreover, they lived in these communities to a great extent. So they were not community simply at church but in everyday life. That, and not the Mass itself, gave them their communal identity. And it was a huge one. And when they gathered at church, they were numerous and many celebrations of Mass were needed to serve them.

9. The situation has changed. The larger community in which we now live our normal lives is not simply Catholic. Members of our own families no longer consider themselves Catholics or don't practice their faith. True, if we closed 8 of the 11 Catholic churches in our city, we would still have huge numbers coming to church. But with 11 churches still existing we are now celebrating with smaller congregations. I think that fact alone could give us a greater sense of being different, of belonging to a community of faith. It may also help us to regain or sharpen our sense of the Mass as the action of a community. For the Mass is the center of our community. It is there that we eat the bread of the Lord and drink his blood and become ourselves the living body and blood of

the Lord for the world here and now. Yes, we are one bread, one body. Why not allow that belief to express itself in the way we act at Mass? Let us sit together. Let us pray out loud together.

Let us greet each other and try to get to know each other so that we can share our lives and be a real community both at Mass and in the help we offer to each other in our everyday lives.