



DIocese OF BELLEVILLE
Office of the Bishop

Be Watchful! Be Alert!

A Meditation Presented to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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By

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Dear Brothers in Jesus Christ:

“Be watchful! Be alert! Watch, therefore, you do not know when the lord of the house is coming...May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all; ‘Be watchful!’” Eleven days from today, on November 27, the First Sunday of Advent, when the Church in the United States begins to pray the new translation of the *Roman Missal*, we will all hear once again these challenging words of Jesus from St. Mark 13, 33-37. The Church traditionally associates these words with the *parousia*, Christ’s Second Coming at the end of time and with the eschatological reality of the end of our individual lives, the Particular Judgment, the Last Judgment, and the final transformation of the cosmos as we know it. The Lord’s powerful words often occasion preaching on the threefold coming of the Messiah; in the past (“was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man”); in the present (by grace pitching His tent in the cold stable of our world and our hearts); and in the unknown future (“He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead”).

There is a wider sense in which Our Savior’s command to be watchful and alert may stir our hearts this Advent. We are to be watchful for His hidden face amid the innocents swept from their mother’s wombs by the thousands each year by abortion; in the midst of the deadly wars and conflicts in which our nation is involved; in the lives of those suffering from nature’s fury and from the global and national economic crisis leaving so many unemployed and leading to

various forms of mass protests; in the suffering of those who continue to endure racial, ethnic, and religious oppression; in the shattered lives of undocumented immigrants; and in the innocent victims of violence in our communities. We are to be alert for His reconciling presence as we continue to respond to the victims of the terrible sin and crime of the sexual abuse of minors by our brothers and address the seemingly unrelenting legal and financial challenges these abuses have caused with their negative impact on the morale of our priests, our people, and ourselves. We are to be watchful for Christ's wisdom in the face of the continuing assaults on the religious liberty of our community of faith at the federal, state, and local levels by means of laws that are contrary to the Gospel, allowing no exceptions for reasons of conscience, which seem to have as their goal the silencing of the voice of the Catholic Church in the public square, thereby reducing fundamental moral principles to mere questions of "private morality" and "conservative social values."

This afternoon, I propose three points for our meditation as we prepare for our Holy Hour anticipating Advent:

- I. Be Watchful and be Alert for the Disclosures of the Divine Presence in Everyday Experience.
- II. Be Watchful and be Alert for those Who Seek the Divine Presence and Seemingly Experience only Divine Absence.
- III. Be Watchful and be Alert for the Opportunity to Encounter the Divine Presence as we Pray the Poetic New Mass Texts.

I.

Be Watchful and be Alert for the Disclosures of the Divine Presence in Everyday Experience.

The supreme language is the "Word" of the Father made flesh in Mary's womb. The *Logos* is the eternal divine utterance, for without the Word "was made nothing that has been made." All of creation calls us to be watchful and to be alert for the manifestation of the Divine Word. Perhaps Jesuit Father Gerard Manley Hopkins expressed it best when he wrote that Mary:

Gave God's infinity Dwindled to infancy
Welcome in womb and breast,
Birth, milk, and all the rest
But mothers each new grace
That does now reach our race—

-Hopkins' *The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to the Air we Breathe*

—We are called to be watchful and be on the lookout for God whenever we experience singular beauty in the magnificence of nature - the birth of a baby, a riot of flowers on a hillside, rivers of stars on a dark night, the many shades of autumn that delight us on a walk in the forest, and the biting chill of winter's approach. The form and symmetry of music, art, theater, and poetry also stir up our awareness of a world "charged with the grandeur of God." The Creator's Presence is closer to us than the air we breathe.

— We are called to be watchful and be on the lookout for God whenever we attend to the agility, strength, and decline we experience in the inexhaustible complexity of our bodies and our minds. When we exercise, play sports, study a new language, play a musical instrument, test our wits in a game of chess, get lost in a great novel, or grapple with a work of serious theology, we have the immediate experience of the great capacity and the real limitations of physical prowess, memory, imagination, and intelligence. Our experience of youth, maturity, illness recovery, and resilience as well as the constraints that come as we grow older, eventually announce our mortality and evoke our reverence before the horizon of the unknown-unknown, and the absolute reality of the Divine Presence. "Our hearts are restless until they rest in God."

— We are called to be watchful and be on the lookout for God even in our struggles for personal discipline and moral goodness in our daily lives. We seek to use our time well, overcome inertia, prepare sufficiently for our various responsibilities, and get sufficient exercise and rest. Yet our reach is often beyond our grasp. We experience the tension between detachment and self-indulgence. When we strive for abstemiousness in the enjoyment of food and drink, true discipline in the consumption of alcohol, overcoming addiction to cancer-causing tobacco products, avoiding dependence upon drugs (legal or illegal), and the proper understanding and integration of our need for acceptance, affirmation, love, intimacy and our sexuality, this can all be the struggle of a lifetime. The struggles are not made easy by faith, but they are certainly made easier when we realize that we are not struggling alone. Our successes as well as our failures underscore our utter dependence on the All Holy One who dwells in unapproachable Light.

— We are called to be watchful and be on the lookout for God in the networks of our complex interdependent relationship with our seven billion sisters and brothers on this tiny planet floating amid the flaming stars of space. We rightly hold fast in the defense of human life in the womb, in the wards of the terminally ill, and in the cells of death row. Each day calls us to resist stereotyping or even rejecting individuals because of their religion, nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, income, theological perspective, intellectual skills, or personal appearance. We know that these attitudes contradict our commitment to put on Christ. Our ongoing efforts to defend the most vulnerable and overcome lingering biases and prejudices in our lives impel us to turn to Jesus of Nazareth. The incarnate Word of the Father makes manifest the dignity and worth of every human person and empowers us with His Redemptive Grace.

— We are called to be watchful and be on the lookout for God when we let go of anger and the desire for revenge and embrace forgiveness. Every day we pray to “Our Father” to “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Yet, we know how distressingly difficult it is to forgive someone who has hurt us deeply and expressed no remorse. Only God working in us can turn our hearts from revenge to loving forgiveness, turn an enemy into a friend. Conversely, when we are forgiven by those whom we have offended, we experience whole new possibilities in a relationship we thought was dead, a kind of rebirth that can only be the work of Divine Grace.

— We are called to be watchful and be on the lookout for God in the experience of authentic intimacy. In the exhilarating self-transcending experience of authentic love and intimate friendship, we are drawn inexorably into holiness. The give and take of growing in a human relationship, the gradual development of deep-seated trust and the insatiable desire to know and be known by the beloved is a deeply moving experience of our need for the absolute love that comes from God alone. The radical loneliness and aloneness of those whose lives are bereft of genuine love can also be a painful cry for the companionship of God. This pain can sometimes be particularly acute for us who do not know the love of wives and children, if we are estranged from our family members, or have few true friends. We all long for the radiant smiles of those who truly care for us. We ultimately long for the “hints half guessed” offering intimations of Divine Friendship.

— We are called to be watchful and be on the lookout for God in the midst of excruciating suffering. When sudden, tragic and seemingly senseless death overtakes the dearest of the dear in our lives, we are brought low by unspeakable grief, overwhelmed and utterly helpless in the face of the “unbearable lightness of being.” Human comfort, though deeply appreciated, may be inadequate. Such sorrow is made endurable in a living community of faith celebrating the confident belief that for those who enter fully into the life, teachings, suffering, death and resurrection of Christ, life is not ended in death, but merely changed. The great promise of eternal life anchors our hope of seeing God no longer through a glass darkly, but face to face.

As we will be reminded by the prophet, Isaiah on November 27th –“No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you doing such deeds for those who wait for Him...Yet, O Lord, you are our father; we are the clay and you are the potter: we are all the work of your hands.”

II.

Be Watchful and be Alert for those Who Seek the Divine Presence and Seemingly Experience only Divine Absence.

Even with abiding faith, it is not always easy for us to be confident of God's nearness, in spite of our watchfulness. It is not always easy for our people either, at a time when many people feel estranged from God. Christ calls us to be alert and to be watchful for the Divine Presence in America's increasingly secular culture. The Christmas Holy Days have become simply "the holidays;" and "Season's Greetings" has replaced "Merry Christmas." Christmas Day itself may pass and the name of Jesus Christ is not uttered even in the homes of devout Catholics who, alas, may speak often of Santa Claus and not St. Nicholas. And, in the world at large, God is spoken of more because of His perceived absence than because of His incarnate nearness. "I touch no hand. I hear no voice, though oft through darkness infinite I list." (Paul Lawrence Dunbar, *The Mystery*)

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI has reflected frequently during his pontificate on the malaise in our day caused by the eclipse of God. In his September 12, 2008, address to Representatives from the World of Culture at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris, the Pope, recalling the fundamental goal of the French monks who once gathered there said, "Their goal was: *quaerere Deum* [to seek God]. Amid the confusion of the times, in which nothing seemed permanent, [the monks] wanted to do the essential- to make an effort to find what was perennially valid and lasting, life itself. They were searching for God. They wanted to go from the inessential to the essential, to the only truly important and reliable thing there is. They were seeking the definitive behind the provisional. *Quaerere Deum*: because they were Christians, this was not an expedition into a trackless wilderness, a search leading them to total darkness. God Himself had provided signposts, indeed He had marked out a path which was theirs to find and follow. This path was His word, which had been disclosed to men in the books of the sacred Scriptures....The longing for God, the *désir de Dieu*, includes *amour des lettres*, love of the word, (the) exploration of all its dimensions. Because in the biblical word God comes toward us and we toward Him, we must learn to penetrate the secret of language, to understand it in its construction and in its manner of expression." (Cf. **COMMUNIO: International Review, Summer 2011, pp. 299-300**)

When he marked the 25th anniversary of Blessed John Paul II's historic gathering in Assisi, the Pontiff again spoke of the quest for God. He first spoke by his actions, inviting, for the first time, four philosophers, who were humanists with no specific religious affiliation, to join the 300 religious leaders. In his October 27th address, he said people who are suspicious of religion cannot be blamed for questioning God's existence when they see believers use religion to justify violence. "All their struggling and questioning is, in part, an appeal to believers to purify their faith so that God, the true God, becomes accessible." He also said that the absence of God leads to the decline of man and of humanity. He then poignantly asked, "But where is God? Do we know Him, and can we show Him anew to humanity...?" (**L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO, #44, November 2, 2011, pp. 8-9**)

Commenting on agnostics who do not have religious faith, but who are on the lookout for God and searching for truth, Benedict continued, “Such people do not simply assert: ‘There is no God.’ They suffer from His absence and yet are inwardly making their way towards Him, inasmuch as they seek truth and goodness. They are ‘pilgrims of truth, pilgrims of peace.’ They ask questions of both sides...(T)hey challenge the followers of religions not to consider God as their own property, as if he belonged to them, in such a way that they feel vindicated in using force against others. These people are seeking the truth; they are seeking the true God, whose image is frequently concealed in the religions because of the ways in which they are often practiced. Their inability to find God is partly the responsibility of believers with a limited or even falsified image of God. So all their struggling and questioning is, in part, an appeal to believers to purify their faith, so that God, the true God, becomes accessible.” (*L’OSSERVATORE ROMANO*, *ibid.*)

Professor Charles Taylor, a Catholic and a contemporary Canadian scholar of religion and culture, understands well the reasons why the Holy Father frequently calls us to watch and be alert to the eclipse of God caused by the pervasive secularity in western culture. He has examined the reason why a growing number of people, including Catholics, feel they cannot succeed in their efforts to seek God (*quaerere Deum*). They may be watching. They may be alert. But they cannot see. Perhaps they do not realize that God is not God the way we would be God, if we were God! In his major study of this phenomenon, *A Secular Age* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2007), Professor Taylor explores three interrelated elements that have radically secularized much of contemporary western culture. The first concerns “public spaces,” that seemingly have been emptied of God and any reference to ultimate reality. He writes, “[A]s we function within the various spheres of activity—economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational.—the norms and principles we follow, the deliberations we engage in, generally don’t refer us to God or to any religious beliefs; the considerations we act on are internal to the ‘rationality’ of each sphere—maximum gain within the economy, the greatest benefit for the greatest number in the political arena, and so on. This is in striking contrast to earlier periods, when Christian faith laid down authoritative prescriptions, often through the mouths of the clergy, which could not easily be ignored in any of these domains...” (*A Secular Age*, p. 2.)

Professor Taylor concludes that the second dimension of secularity is manifest in the notable decline of affiliation with mainline institutionalized religious traditions. This secularity “consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church. In this sense, the countries of western Europe have mainly become secular—even those who retain the vestigial public reference to God in public space.” (*ibid*, p. 2.)

According to Dr. Taylor, the third and most significant dimension of secularity may be unique to our age. In our age, the conditions of belief have been dramatically altered. He writes,

“The shift to secularity in this sense consists... of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.” (A Secular Age, p. 3) He argues the United States as a whole is secularized in this sense.

A central thesis of A Secular Age is that there has been a radical change in religious consciousness from the thirteenth century when the Cistercian monks established the Collège des Bernardins as a house of formation for their monks in Paris to the present day. In that former age, a sense of spiritual realities was so pervasive that it could be called an “enchanted age” in which religious realities were all but palpable in the mysteries of the cosmos. Unbelief was a very unlikely course for anyone living in that milieu. For many, the post-modern world is quite the opposite. Indeed, political economist and social theories, Max Weber has argued that ours is precisely the “disenchanted age.”

Professor Taylor’s ambitious study examines the movement from “a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others. I may find it inconceivable that I would abandon my faith, but there are others... who have no faith (at least not in God or in the transcendent). Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives. And this will also likely mean that at least in certain milieux, it may be hard to sustain one’s faith. There will be people who feel bound to give it up, even though they mourn its loss. This has been a recognizable experience in our societies, at least since the mid-nineteenth century. There will be many others to whom faith never even seems an eligible possibility. There are certainly millions today of whom this is true.” (A Secular Age, p. 3.) I do not believe that Charles Taylor is writing only about intellectuals in secular universities. We are aware that some of them are students at our Catholic universities. Others are, at least, nominal Catholics who are occasionally in our churches. Still others may be teenagers among our *confirmandi*, whose deeply felt questions about faith may challenge their catechists. All are ripe for the new evangelization.

III.

Be Watchful and be Alert for the Opportunity to Encounter the Divine Presence as we Pray the Poetic New Mass Texts.

It is precisely into this “secular age” that we are bringing the new translation of the *Roman Missal* in the United States. It is an age in which many people, perhaps especially those who live and work in larger cities, are bombarded daily by media that are completely silent about God. They have made their own the existentialist mantra, “God is dead!” They say they are watching, staying alert but they see nothing but the faces of other alert watchers. The Pope is very aware of this. It is not by chance that, speaking to the Bishops of Australia on October 20th, he commented on the new English *Roman Missal* saying “the new translation of the Mass is meant

to help Catholics pray better.” He said it "is intended to enrich and deepen the sacrifice of praise offered to God by His people." But how? How does it help us pray better? How does it help us to watch better with eyes that can be opened like those of the man who was blind from birth?

Recall the Pope’s words at the Collège des Bernardins. The monks were seeking God. Their longing for God, their *désir de Dieu*, was expressed in their *amour des lettres*, love of the word, the Word of Scripture first and foremost, but also the word in literature and poetry. As each of us has prepared for our first public proclamation of the new prayers on the First Sunday of Advent, we have been compelled to give more attention to the words. The longer sentences and the more complex syntax force us to slow down. We cannot easily rush through the new prayers. We must necessarily pay attention to commas, semicolons, periods, paragraphs, pauses - yes, pauses! There is a need to enunciate carefully new words that may be less familiar to the assembled People of God. This, in turn, has the potential of making our preparation for November 27th a kind of *lectio divina*. Like Mary, we turn the “word” over in our hearts pondering what it might mean.

Paradoxically, the new translation may help us to pray better and enrich and deepen our praise precisely because some of its critics were correct when they said it contains unfamiliar words, odd constructions, and does not reflect everyday contemporary English usage. This, of course, is exactly the way poetry works. Poetry employs unusual expressions so that, startled by wonder we can be caught up in the disclosure concealment of a reality hidden, yet revealed. Poetic language has long been used in the Catholic tradition to express our encounter with the living gift of Divine Love!

What may seem at first as odd sounding expressions may orient us into the deep mystery of what we are doing at the altar. As Hans Urs von Balthasar expressed it, “It is evident that the mystery itself cannot be ‘explained,’ neither the ‘transubstantiation’ of bread and wine into Flesh and Blood nor the...happening which can analogously be called the ‘transubstantiation’ of Christ’s Flesh and Blood into the organism of the Church (and of Christians as her members). What is important is not that we know *how* God does it, but that we know that and why He does it.” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord; A Theological Aesthetics*, Vol. I, *Seeing the Form*, p. 575, [Gerard Austin, O.P.] , San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983.)

Mystery cannot be explained. But carefully chosen words can be the occasion for an “inbreak” into the realm of mystery. Let us listen attentively to these words of Preface I of Advent:

For He assumed at His first coming
the lowliness of human flesh,
and so fulfilled the design you formed long ago,
and opened for us the way to eternal salvation,

that, when He comes again in glory and majesty
and all is at last made manifest,
we who watch for that day
may inherit the great promise
in which now we dare to hope.

Now consider these lines from T.S. Eliot's, *Four Quartets: Dry Salvage*:

But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint—
...For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
...or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses;
...The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

Or, more succinctly, ponder John Donne's *Holy Sonnet XV*:

Wilt thou love God, as He thee? Then digest,
My soul, this wholesome mediation...
'Twas much that man was made like God before,
But, that God should be made like man, much more.

Now let us consider a portion of Eucharistic Prayer III:

you give life to all things and make them holy,
and you never cease to gather a people to yourself,
so that from the rising of the sun to its setting
a pure sacrifice may be offered to your name.

Compare this stanza from Hopkins' *The Wreck of the Deutschland*:

I kiss my hand
To the stars, lovely-asunder
Starlight, wafting him out of it; and
Glow, glory in thunder;
Kiss my hand to the dappled-with-damson west:

Since, tho' he is under the world's splendour and wonder,
His mystery must be instressed, stressed;
For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand.

We who are priests and, *a fortiori*, we who are bishops have a special devotion to and responsibility for the Roman Catholic Liturgy. Because of this, we are called to think of the implementation of the new missal as an opportunity to be embraced and not as a burden to be borne. It provides us the occasion to reflect and think about what we are called to do as Celebrants of the Eucharist. One of the things we are called to do is put words right and not dismiss their poetic power.

As an opportunity to embrace, the new translation calls us to renew our “liturgical spirituality” beginning with meditation before the Blessed Sacrament as we shall do shortly. When we preside at the altar table of the Lord in the name of Christ, we are not only leading public prayer, we are also praying publicly in a manner that we hope calls the whole assembly to public prayer. Each of us has developed a certain style or persona in our liturgical celebrations due to our ongoing efforts “to put on the character Christ.” At the altar we are “*alter Christus*,” another Christ. Our prayerful study and, yes, our “practice” of the new texts may be an occasion to deepen or even change and improve our liturgical presence in the sanctuary. Our ordination and our day-to-day servant-leadership and ministry as bishops of the Church are a source of the grace we need for renewing our liturgical spirituality. Our liturgy-centered spirituality nurtures a love and respect for the Church’s public worship. It reminds us that the Mass and the prayers of the Mass are not “ours.” Nor do they belong to “our” Diocese or “our” priests, or to various liturgical “experts.” They belong to the Church. This is the reason for our docility to the Church which gives order to and oversees our life of worship. This liturgical spirituality makes it possible to deepen our appropriation of the truth that the Mass truly is the source and summit of our spiritual lives by which every faithful priest –

Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

-Hopkins' *As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame*

Dear Brothers: Throughout Advent, Christmastide, and the Church's year of grace let us use the new prayers of the *Roman Missal* as a *lectio divina*, source of meditation on the three-fold coming of Christ: in Bethlehem, in our hearts, and at the end of time. “Be watchful! Be alert! Watch, therefore, you do not know when the lord of the house is coming...May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all; ‘Be watchful!’” Be watchful! Be watchful!