

“The First Letter of John”
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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

What a joy it is to be with you on this feast of St. Andrew and the threshold of the Advent Season. I hope and pray that this talk will lead you to an Advent that is fruitful for your spiritual lives.

Let us begin this talk on the First Letter of John by imagining for a moment the scene of the Last Supper. After the disciples had eaten the Passover meal in the Upper Room with Jesus He made a solemn announcement that shocked them all: He told them that one of their number would betray Him that very night.

Why was this announcement so shocking to them? Why could they not immediately identify the betrayer?

The answer is that Jesus himself was full of charity towards his neighbor, even his betrayer. The disciples were unaware of the plot against Jesus because he never gossiped, complained, or criticized Judas. He never schemed or formed divisions within His group of Twelve. He lived the fraternal love and respect that He preached. Jesus was charity incarnate living in the midst of sinners, so they never suspected the magnitude of the sin that was about to take place.

A moment later the Apostle Peter directed one of the disciples closer to Jesus to find out the identity of the Betrayer. This disciple – John – laid his head on Jesus’ chest to ask the question. This was perhaps the most intimate experience of the Lord’s Presence and holiness that anyone had ever had. Except for the Blessed Virgin herself, John the Evangelist became at that moment the greatest authority on the charity of Christ and his very real love for his disciples. It is this John, who called himself the Beloved Disciple, whose testimony to the Lord Jesus we will study briefly tonight.

As we approach the Advent season, I encourage you to become like the Beloved Disciple and make time for solitude as if you were in the intimate company of the Lord in the Upper Room. Advent is the shortest of the liturgical seasons and, for busy people like you and me, it seems to pass in an instant. We must make the best of it. So in the silence of your prayer before Christmas, place yourself at that holy banquet, the first Eucharistic celebration ever offered. Imagine that you serve the Lord at the table; visualize yourself sitting at his feet. Look up into His eyes. Hear the sound of His voice. Then imagine that you – like St. John – can draw so close to Jesus that you can even hear the beat of his Sacred Heart.

That is how real the Lord Jesus was to John. That is how real He must become to you.

The Fourth Gospel in miniature

The First Letter of St. John is a perfect book of Scripture to read and meditate on during Advent. This letter is a miniature version of the Fourth Gospel, which bears the name of John and was written by the same author. It is truly a narrative masterpiece of our faith and deserves a great deal of attention for the nourishment of our souls. Its themes and images represent a synthesis of the spiritual life that finds its culmination in the person of Jesus.

The First Letter of John is one of the most readable and enjoyable books of the whole Bible. It consists of only five short chapters and is full of symbols and images that are central to our life of faith and worship. It is so simple in its language that a child could read it without difficulty,

but it is also profoundly spiritual and mature in its message so that even the greatest saints could spend hours meditating upon it.

Of course, it would be impossible to do justice to even this short letter in our brief talk tonight, but I would like to show you how the letter is a compendium of the spiritual journey. It communicates the three essential pathways or stages of spiritual growth. These are the ways of purification, enlightenment, and union. Let us now turn to our first theme:

Purification

John the Evangelist is well aware that we cannot enter the Kingdom of God unless we are purified first. But *of what* do we need to be purified? The answer is found throughout John's entire letter. The words "sin" or "sinners" are mentioned 28 times in the letter. In very straightforward language, he states that sin has its root in Satan's original rebellion and is the main obstacle to our spiritual growth:

Whoever sins belongs to the devil, because the devil has sinned from the beginning. Indeed, the Son of God was revealed to destroy the works of the devil. No one who is begotten by God commits sin because God's seed remains in him; he cannot sin because he is begotten by God. In this way, the children of God and the children of the devil are made plain (Jn 3:8-10).

In one short sentence, John reminds us that the Lord's mission was not political or worldly. It was to strike at the core of Satan's kingdom. At the same time, John is far from pessimistic or moralistic about the reality of sin. He reminds us that we have a hope of purification in the one sacrifice that saves us, the Precious Blood of Jesus:

But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of his Son Jesus cleanses us from all sin.... If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing (1:7.9).

The reference to the purifying Blood of Jesus is, of course, a Eucharistic image that mirrors the marvelous Eucharistic discourse in Chapter 6 of the Fourth Gospel. John's Gospel focuses on the Bread of Life while his First Letter emphasizes the Precious Blood of Jesus, forming a perfect blending of the one sacramental reality in the two writings. The Eucharist is an essential element in the process of purifying our souls.

Advent is a time of self-examination in preparation for the coming of the Christ Child. In your Advent reading and prayer, take time to reflect on the seriousness with which you view sin as an obstacle to your relationship with God and the efforts you have made to root out both mortal and venial sin from your life. John's Letter will be a valuable means of such self-examination.

Growth in Virtues

John's reference to light: Purification from sin is necessary to the spiritual life, but it is not sufficient to deepen our relationship with Holiness Himself. John's letter strongly suggests that we need *spiritual light* for our growth in holiness. Just as the natural world cannot live without the light of the sun, so we cannot live without the light of Jesus Christ. This light is to be understood as *truth* – that is, the eternal truth that created and sustains the world. This truth is not esoteric or reserved for a few intellectuals. It is accessible to all just as the sun is given to everyone as the primary light of our world. John says:

Here is the message we have heard from him and announce to you: that God is light; in him there is no darkness (1:5).

The image of light reminds us of the Creation of the Book of Genesis. God said, “*Let there be light*” (Gen 1:3) and separated the light from the darkness when he brought everything into existence out of nothing.

John’s testimony is that this light has entered the world in a very direct way in the person of Jesus Christ, and now the light is ours through faith. In practical terms, we must make a personal commitment to live in the light, which means that we are to reject certain forces of the world that draw us into darkness. In Chapter 2 he names those forces of sin: “*Carnal allurements, enticements for the eye, the life of empty show*” (2:16). Another translation gives the more familiar rendering: “*The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life*” (1 Jn 2:16, NIV).

But the value of light is not only for our benefit. God’s holiness has a communitarian dimension, so John testifies that

The man who continues in the light is the one who loves his brother...but the man who hates his brother is living in darkness. He walks in shadows, not knowing where he is going since the dark has blinded his eyes (2:10-11).

St. John has a great ability to concretize things that are abstract, to make visible things that are hidden. For the evangelist, growth in holiness – becoming perfect like God is perfect – is directly related to how we treat the people around us. We call that fraternal love or charity. Light and love are intimately linked in the teaching of John.

As we approach Christmas, *light* is an especially appropriate theme. It is a pathway to holiness, but it is not an easy one. I encourage you to pray that God will *enlighten your darkness*, to show you where worldly ways are still too much a part of you and where you need personal conversion. It is a curious fact of the spiritual life that we are blind to our sinfulness and shortcomings. We need grace not only to show us the truth of Christ but to show us the truth *about ourselves*. To make such a prayer requires great moral courage but we can be assured that He who forgave even His own betrayer will be merciful to us in exposing our darkness and leading us to a deeper conversion of heart.

As always, we proceed on the spiritual journey with great hope. God’s plan is not only to purify us and teach us but to *lead us into his very life* because we are his beloved children. This takes us to the third pathway or stage of holiness:

Union

Just as John calls us back to the Creation story through the image of light, so also he takes us back to the Garden of Eden through the theme of life. One of the most frequently used words in the First Letter of John is “life,” a theme that is connected to every other concept in his teaching. John uses this theme of life to express God’s desire to draw us into union with Him.

The “life” John is referring to is not natural life but supernatural life. The term “life” occurs 16 times in the letter while the phrase “eternal life” occurs seven times, and John uses the term creatively. He calls Jesus “*the Word of Life*” (1:1); he reminds us that we have “*passed from death to life*” (3:14) and that Jesus “*laid down his life*” for us (3:16). Above all, the whole letter seems to hinge on the understanding that “*God sent his only son into the world so that we might have life through him*” (4:9), a phrase that clearly echoes John’s Gospel. At the end of the letter, John indicates that the Holy Spirit is the source of this life:

This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by water alone, but by water and blood. The Spirit is the one that testifies, and the Spirit is truth (5:6).

These three images are a clear reference to the Sacraments of Initiation – baptism, Eucharist, and confirmation – each of which communicates supernatural life to us through the power of the

Holy Spirit. John then adds that *God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever possesses the Son has life; whoever does not possess the Son of God does not have life (5:11-12)*. Here John shows us how Christianity is unique in the history of religions. We believe that God offers us the gift of supernatural life as a full sharing in the life of the Blessed Trinity – Father, Son, and Spirit. The incarnation of God and the teaching of the Trinity are concepts that no other religion teaches.

Perhaps that is why the idea of “fellowship” is also an important concept in this letter. The term occurs four times in the first chapter as if to ratify the idea that we are called to communion with God and with one another. That is the core meaning of the Trinity: a sharing of life and a communion of persons that overcomes all the divisions and evils of our world. Our solidarity and communion with God is a force of love that leads us back out to the world to love our neighbor as God has loved us. John expresses this most beautifully when he reminds his hearers that only true charity will save us because love is the very identity of God:

Beloved, Let us love one another because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten of God and has knowledge of God. The man without love knows nothing of God, for God is love (4:7-8).

Conclusion

In your quiet moments of prayer this Advent season, please do take full advantage of the First Letter of John as your spiritual guide. As you can see, it is a synopsis of the Gospel message and a synthesis of the spiritual life. It is not a book that should be read from beginning to end so much as a theological banquet that should be savored slowly and digested in little bits. As we consume the message, we should hear the voice of Him who speaks through the words of the Beloved Disciple.

In fact, the letter brings us back to that Upper Room where the Lord gave his Apostles their first taste of the eternal banquet that he would consummate on the Cross the following day. It is the banquet of perfect fraternal love and communion to which we are invited and called to participate. It is the banquet where we are allowed to lean close to the beating Heart of Jesus, like John, and where we realize, perhaps for the first time, that he is the Father’s greatest gift to us – the very life of God in our midst.

May God bless you and your families abundantly in this holy season of Advent!