

December 1, 2019 Awake From Your Slumber Homily: Few characters in literature or film are as captivating as those who are either drowsy or asleep. Some of them are undoubtedly familiar to us. We recall one of most memorable of the seven dwarves and a companion of Snow White, Sleepy. And who can forget “Sleeping Beauty” or the lovable cat of the popular comic strip, Garfield. But today, I should like to single out one figure from the world of American literature that is the featured character in a short story by the nineteenth century America author, Washington Irving. His name is Rip Van Winkle. What distinguishes him from the other characters in the story is a long slumber. He falls asleep in the Catskill Mountain, only to wake up twenty years later, having missed the American Revolution. On the day he loses consciousness, a picture of England’s king hangs proudly on one of the walls of his home. Upon awakening, his picture has been replaced by that of George Washington, America’s first president.

In Sacred Scripture, it is advisable not to fall into a deep sleep!

St. Paul makes effective use of metaphors and images in his letters to the various Christian communities. One, in particular, stands out: sleep. In his letter to the Church of Rome (2nd reading) Paul writes, “It is for you to wake from sleep”. (Rom. 13:11) Years later, in his letter to the Ephesians, he repeats his admonition: “Awake from your sleep, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you”. (Eph. 5:14)

Often in scripture, sleep is a symbol of spiritual laziness, otherwise known as sloth, one of the seven deadly sins. There is a lack of focus, an inexcusable absent-mindedness and a maddening inattentiveness to what truly matters. Let two examples suffice here. In the biblical accounts of our Lord’s Passion, three of Jesus’ disciples were found sleeping. Our Lord scolded them. “Could you not stay awake with me for one hour?” (Mt. 26:41) In the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew’s gospel, all “became drowsy and fell asleep”. (Mt. 25:5) But it was only the wise virgins with an adequate supply of oil that were admitted as guests to the wedding feast.

In his commentary on the Psalms, St. Augustine suggests that there is a kind of sleep proper to the body, and another proper to the soul. “The sleep of the soul”, he writes, “consists in forgetting about God whereas the soul who has stayed awake knows who its maker is”. He offers his readers the following advice: “Your life, your behavior, should be awake in Christ so that others... sleepy pagans... can see it and the sound of their watchfulness cause them to get up and throw off their sleepiness and begin to say with you in Christ ‘O God, my God I have watched with you’”.

Years ago, After Pope John Paul issued an encyclical (teaching letter) on the moral life of Christians and encroaching paganism, Jean-Marie Lustiger, Archbishop of Paris, told a skeptical French journalist, “The Pope is wide awake, the conscience of humanity is sleeping”.

Today we begin the season of Advent. It is a time of waiting and of expectation. It marks the beginning of the Church’s calendar year. During the season of Advent we must get our spiritual house in order. “The night is advance, the day draws near”. (Rom. 13:12) At times, we all fall asleep and lapse into a spiritual lethargy, a crippling torpor. In her prophetic role the Church begins the season of Advent by issuing an ultimatum: “Wake Up”.

In closing, let us give careful consideration of the words spoken by Jesus on the night before he died.

“Then he turned to his disciples and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand when the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners. Get up, let us go, my betrayer is at hand’”. (Mt.26: 45-6) Today, those words of Jesus are addressed to each one of us.

Amen!