

Welcome to Advent! It's a time of preparation, to be sure, but also it has an edge to it, doesn't it? The readings promise that on the one hand we can look forward to a time in which there will be no war and nations will joyfully flock to the Lord. On the other hand, we're told to stay vigilant otherwise we'll miss the whole thing and end up becoming seafood like most of the folks in Noah's day. Advent always begins like this, with a mixed message of assured victory along with insistence on being prepared.

Happily, our Catholic tradition provides us with plenty of ways to tune in to the habit of being prepared. The sacraments and frequent reception of the Eucharist are the main ways, of course. But let me also share a couple of others, with which you mightn't be as familiar. If you choose to make a habit of them you'll find yourself well prepared at all times.

The first comes to us from Br. Lawrence of the Resurrection, who lived back in the seventeenth century. His small collection of letters and conversations with people who came to him because of his reputation for holiness are recorded in a book entitled *The Practice of the Presence of God*. The title itself tells us what being prepared really means; it's habitually being as aware as we can possibly be of living in the presence of God.

For those to whom term "the Presence of God" might seem a bit abstract, let me share with you how the Trappist Fr. Thomas Keating describes God's Presence. I hope when you hear it, you'll wonder why anyone, including yourself, would ever want to live anywhere else. "This Presence," Fr. Keating writes, "is so immense, yet so humble, awe-inspiring yet so gentle, limitless, yet so intimate, tender and personal. I know that I am known. Everything in my life is transparent in this Presence. It knows everything about me – all my weaknesses, brokenness, sinfulness – and still loves me infinitely. This Presence is healing, strengthening, refreshing – just by its Presence. It is non-judgmental, self-giving, seeking no reward, boundless in compassion. It is like coming home to a place I should never have left, to an awareness that was somehow always there, but which I did not recognize."

Habitually living in this Presence might sound like something only monks and mystics can do, but the reality is precisely the opposite. Br. Lawrence was about as ordinary a person as you can imagine. He worked in the kitchen of a priory in Paris, did a bit of shopping for them, and cooked. Word has it he was pretty clumsy and broke a lot of things.

He wasn't very different from any of the rest of us, except perhaps, that he habitually did everything he did, to the extent he was able, aware of being in the Presence of God. He had resolved to make the love of God the end of all his actions, even the little ones, since he believed as all saints do, that God cares less about the magnitude of the things we do than about the love with which they're performed. Adopting this habit, Br. Lawrence had found the key to being prepared at all times.

Coming at preparedness from a less familiar angle, let me read you a thing or two from a Church document called *The Enchiridion* (handbook) *of Indulgences*. It contains lovely prayers and describes many things we can do to obtain remission of the temporal punishment due our sins.

To refresh your memory, in the sacrament of reconciliation we obtain absolution from the guilt of our sins, but temporal punishment remains. It's like the way it is if you happen to cause an auto accident. The person we hit might forgive us for the crash (that's like being absolved of the sin), but we still have to pay fully or partially for the damage to the car (that's like dealing with the temporal punishment).

Being prepared means we make sure we take care of both sides of the equation. That can happen in Purgatory, or we can take care of it here by means of indulgences that the Church has made available to us since roughly the third century. In case you happen to have a negative opinion of indulgences, let me assure you that the old practices of selling indulgences or thinking we can shave years, months or days off our time in Purgatory have

long been officially suppressed by the Church. Nowadays, the Church encourages us to look at the behaviors associated with indulgences as everyday habits we can tune in to, that can bring us closer to God. Let me share just a couple with you.

A partial indulgence, the *Enchiridion* tells us, is available to those “who, in the performance of their duties and in bearing the trials of life, raise their mind with humble confidence to God, adding even if only mentally -- some pious invocation.” In other words, we can be prepared simply by living; but living as Br. Lawrence did, resolved to be prayerful and habitually aware of living in the presence of God.

Likewise, a partial indulgence is available for the faithful “who, in a spirit of faith and mercy, give of themselves or of their goods to serve [those] in need or...in a spirit of penance, voluntarily deprive themselves of [something that pleases them].” Tuning in to the needs of others and disciplining our own desires helps move the ball down the court.

Finally, to the faithful “in danger of death, who cannot be assisted by a priest to bring them the sacraments and impart the Apostolic Blessing with its plenary indulgence...Holy Mother Church nevertheless grants a plenary indulgence to be acquired at the point of death, provided [the faithful] are properly disposed and have been in the habit of reciting some prayers during their lifetime.” That certainly sounds like a habit anyone can tune in to.

Advent invites us to be prepared by developing the habit of remaining as fully aware as we can be of living in the loving presence of God. It takes the edge off the message of Advent, and opens us up to embrace the deep significance of Christmas, which is nothing less than this very Presence of God we’ve been talking about becoming personally incarnate in Jesus. Indeed, there’s something about the preparation of Advent and the arrival of the promise at Christmas that are somehow mysteriously one and the same. Want to experience that? Stay tuned.