

LEADER



THE ART OF WAITING

A Retreat Guide for Advent

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FIRST MEDITATION

LEARNING FROM THE EXPERTS

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the four weeks of Advent, the Church's liturgy draws our attention in a special way to two figures in addition to Christ himself: St. John the Baptist and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Each one of them has something to teach us about the art of waiting.

WAITING WITH A MISSION

St. John the Baptist is known as the "precursor," the transition figure between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

He uses Old Testament language to describe his mission of announcing the advent of the promised Messiah, calling himself "the voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (John 1:23).

He was the first prophet to appear in Israel for hundreds of years, and his message was simple: repent and get ready, because the promised Savior is coming. He led an austere life that gave his message a certain moral weight and helped capture the imagination of his contemporaries.

As the Bible explains it:

 *At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.*

—Matthew 3:5–6

St. John the Baptist was anticipating the arrival of the Messiah by fulfilling his own mission in the history of salvation. That's the first lesson for us about the art of waiting. Just as St. John the Baptist anticipated the first coming of Jesus, we are anticipating the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

We know and believe, as we publicly profess every Sunday when we pray the Creed, that at the end of history (which could happen any day) Jesus "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his Kingdom will have no end."

And in the meantime, just like St. John the Baptist, we have a mission to fulfill, the mission of spreading to those around us, through our words and deeds, the message of the Gospel.

We are not called to simply sit around and wait for Jesus to come again and put an end once and for all to evil and sin.

We are called to actively spread his goodness and his light; that's part of how we anticipate his Second Coming; it's part of the Christian art of waiting.

SIMPLE INSPIRATION

There is a beautiful, true story about one woman who rediscovered this active Christian spirit not during the four weeks of Advent, but two days after Christmas.

She was the owner of a newsstand and novelty shop in a small town in the Midwestern United States. One year, shortly before Christmas, she fell sick and spent the whole holiday confined to bed.

She felt gloomy and even bitter about missing Midnight Mass and the other Christmas celebrations. But when she reopened her store two days after Christmas, an idea came to her: "Why not turn today into my lost Christmas?"

She carried out her plan by putting the spirit of Christmas into the whole day. She smiled more frequently and more warmly than usual. She tried to be extra accommodating and friendly with her clients. She even gave spontaneous discounts to customers who were low on cash.

After closing the store for the day, she took some small presents to several home-bound neighbors. And she also visited some poor families to give candy to the children.

By the time she came home, she was so full of joy and the spirit of Christmas that she had never felt happier in her life. She decided from then on to keep the spirit of Christmas alive every day of the year.



How different Advent would be, for ourselves and for those around us, if with the help of God's grace we were to spend these four weeks actively ushering in the spirit of Christmas just like that, and just as St. John the Baptist actively ushered in the arrival of the Messiah!^[1]

WAITING AND SERVING

The second figure given special attention during the liturgical season of Advent is the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Carrying Jesus in her womb, she was more aware than anyone else of the coming birth of the Savior. And how did she prepare for that day? What did she do to fill her time of waiting with meaning and joy?

The Gospels identify three things: service, faith-based friendship, and prayer.

Right after the Annunciation, Mary went to help her relative, St. Elizabeth, who was also expecting a child. Elizabeth was elderly, beyond the normal age of childbearing, and she had never been pregnant before. And so Mary, the Gospel tells us, "set out and traveled to the hill country in haste" in order to accompany Elizabeth during her pregnancy (Luke 1:39).

We are never alone in the world. We are never alone even when we are awaiting the good gifts of God. There are people around us who need our love and service. Advent is a time to renew our awareness of that, and to reach out to help meet those needs.

WAITING TOGETHER

But Mary didn't go to Elizabeth's house only to give help and service. She also went to share with a dear friend her own good news.

The Gospel describes the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth, as a heartfelt exchange of spiritual experiences and thoughts.

This too is part of the art of waiting. During Advent, we anticipate the celebration of Christ's first coming, and we also think deeply about his Second Coming.

Both of these revealed truths should stir up in our hearts and minds desires and thoughts about how to live our faith more deeply, and how to discover and better fulfill God's will in our lives.

Those thoughts and desires need to be expressed and shared so that they can bear fruit in our lives, and this is why it's so important for us to cultivate faith-based friendships.

Advent is a particularly propitious time for renewing, deepening, and investing in those friendships and relationships that can rejuvenate our journey of faith and nourish our love for God and his Kingdom.

Valuing them and living them deeply are also part of the art of waiting.

PONDERING IN THE HEART

Finally, the Bible explains to us not only what Mary did and whom she talked to; it also explains what was going on in her soul.

St. Luke describes Mary's reaction on the very night of Christ's birth, when the shepherds came to visit the newborn Savior:

 *And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.*

—Luke 2:19

Mary was a deep, prayerful woman, and we need to follow her example.

Cultivating space for meaningful, prayerful silence so as to reflect on God's message in our hearts—this too is an important dimension of the art of waiting.

It keeps us from being superficial, brittle Christians, distracted by the tinsel and the noise, but bereft of the sparkle that comes from true wisdom and unshakable joy.

CONCLUSION: WAITING ALL THE TIME

The Christian art of waiting is applicable in a special way to the season of Advent, when we look forward with anticipation both to celebrating the first coming of our Lord, and to welcoming his Second Coming.

[1] This example was adapted from *Stories for Sermons* by Msgr. Arthur Tonne.



But it isn't just for Advent. It's for every season of our spiritual lives, because God is always at work, always wanting to send his grace into our individual worlds, just as he sent his Son into the world at large on Christmas, and so we want to stay ready—that's what the art of waiting is all about.

Let's take some time now to reflect prayerfully on what St. John the Baptist and the Blessed Virgin Mary teach us about the art of waiting, and how to apply those lessons during this Advent, right here and right now.

The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/ GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Think back over my most beautiful or enriching experiences of Advent and Christmas in the past. What made them so valuable to me? Savor them and thank God for them.
2. St. John the Baptist was given a mission to help prepare the people of his time to welcome the coming of the Messiah. As a Christian, I too share in the mission of helping people welcome Christ into their hearts. What I am doing to fulfill that mission? What can I do during Advent to fulfill it a little bit better?
3. The Blessed Virgin Mary anticipated the birth of Jesus by serving and building her spiritual friendship with St. Elizabeth and by taking time to pray and ponder over God's words and actions. How can I follow her example in the here-and-now of my life during this Advent?

NOTES

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

Jesus said to his disciples: "Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come. It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his own work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch. Watch, therefore; you do not know when the Lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'"

—Mark 13:33–37
NABRE

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way. A voice of one crying out in the desert: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths." John the Baptist appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People of the whole Judean countryside and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. John was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He fed on locusts and wild honey. And this is what he proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

—Mark 1–8
NABRE

Be patient, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You too must be patient. Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not complain, brothers and sisters, about one another, that you may not be judged. Behold, the Judge is standing before the gates. Take as an example of hardship and patience, brothers and sisters, the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

—James 5:7–10
NABRE



SECOND MEDITATION

WHY CHRISTMAS HAPPENED

INTRODUCTION

The third Sunday of the Advent Season is known as “Gaudete Sunday.” The word “gaudete” is Latin for “rejoice,” and in the Latin version of that Sunday’s Mass, it’s the very first word.

The third Sunday of Advent has been “Gaudete Sunday” ever since the time of Pope St. Gregory the Great, way back in the sixth century.

It’s the reason for the rose-colored vestments and Advent candle that we use on that Sunday. The reason the Church invites us to rejoice in a special way on the third Sunday of Advent is obvious: Christmas is getting closer.

Part of the art of waiting, of preparing to receive the good gifts of God, involves intensifying our anticipation of them in harmony with the rhythms of the liturgy, which contributes to stirring up interior joy.

One way to do that is to remember and ponder over exactly why Jesus came to earth, to remember what we are waiting for.

If we can keep fresh our awareness of this deep meaning of Christmas, we will have a better chance of keeping fresh our experience of Christian joy.

True Christian joy is a precious reality; it is strong enough to shine out even in the middle of life’s hardest trials, just as Christmas trees stay green even in the midst of the coldest winters.

The Catechism tells us that Jesus became man on Christmas Day for four reasons, and every reason is a motive for joy. Let’s pause to reflect on each one of them.

REASON ONE: JESUS CAME TO SAVE US

First of all, the Catechism tells us, “The Word became flesh for us in order to save us by reconciling us with God” (CCC 457).

Ever since original sin, we needed to be saved. The human race as a whole, and every individual human being, was created in order to find lasting happiness by living in friendship with God.

But original sin was the human race’s sinful (and foolish) rebellion against God. As a result of that rebellion, we became so lost and tangled up in the dense jungle of selfishness and sin that there was no way we could find our own way back to the Father’s house.

So God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the jungle to rescue us. This is a reason for lasting joy because it is God’s promise that evil will not have the last word.

Just as Jesus came to Bethlehem two thousand years ago, so he will come again at the end of history, righting every wrong, wiping away every tear, and restoring every loss.

Salvation took a mighty step forward on the first Christmas, and it will continue growing and spreading until the last Christmas—no matter how dark the winter of history may get in the meantime.

REASON TWO: JESUS CAME TO SHOW US GOD’S LOVE

The Catechism tells us that the second reason “the Word became flesh” was “so that thus we might know God’s love” (CCC 458).

God didn’t have to save the human race after its rebellion. He could have crumpled it up like a rough draft and started his creation all over again.

Why didn’t he? Because his love wouldn’t let him.

“God is love,” the Bible tells us (1John 4:8), and true love never gives up, it keeps on reaching out to its beloved.

God’s love is like the sun: it just keeps on shining. When clouds of selfishness obscure it, it is still shining above them. When we try to hide from it in the dark caves of sin and fear, it keeps on shining, waiting for us to come out. When we find ourselves lost in the dark night of suffering, it is always there on the horizon, ready to shine out in the dawn of a new day.

This too is a reason for lasting joy, because the deepest desire of the human heart is to be thoroughly known and thoroughly loved.



Only God knows us through and through, all the good and all the bad.

And by coming to earth as our Savior, he shows that even while knowing us so well, he is still willing to sacrifice his own heavenly comfort to come and save us.

That's how unhesitating his love is. It proves that we never again have to suffer the agonizing despair that comes from wondering whether or not we are truly loveable.

We are, Jesus tells us at Christmas, and we never need to doubt it again. What a relief! What a cause for rejoicing!

REASON THREE: JESUS CAME TO TEACH US THE ART OF LIVING

The third reason “The Word became flesh”, so the Catechism tells us, was “to be our model of holiness” (CCC 459).

Holiness is a fancy word, but it means nothing other than the art of living. When someone is holy, like the saints, it means that they have learned the art of living—they know what life is about and how to live it to the full. Jesus came to teach us that, both by what he said and, most especially, by his own example.

In movies and storybooks people are always filled with joy whenever they find a treasure map. Jesus himself is a treasure map, the treasure map.

His example of humility, self-giving, self-sacrifice, honesty, integrity, and every other virtue constitutes the directions on the map.

And the divine wisdom that we obtain when, with the Holy Spirit's help, we start to make an effort to follow those directions is the treasure; it fills us with a spiritual richness and satisfaction that nothing else even comes close to.

And unlike treasures made of mere gold and silver, that wisdom is alive; it grows and deepens and intensifies, for all eternity.

This too is a reason for joy, because we all need an example to follow in life. Nothing would be more frustrating and saddening than to know that a treasure is within reach, but not to know how to get to it.

REASON FOUR: JESUS CAME TO ADOPT US INTO HIS FAMILY

The fourth and last reason the Catechism gives us that “The Word became flesh” was “to make us ‘partakers of the divine nature’” (CCC 460).

Jesus doesn't want just to lead us back to the earthly paradise that Adam and Eve lost. Jesus actually wants to lead us into his own home in heaven; he wants us to share his own life with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Salvation isn't just a ticket to eternal life; salvation is grace, it's like a divine blood transfusion in which God's own life is poured into our souls, making us adopted children of God and members of his family.

Imagine a poor peasant girl who also happened to be an orphan. She turns to crime in order to survive. Then one day the King is passing by and sees her. He sees how unhappy the child is, how wounded, sad, and angry. And so he invites her to come and stay in his palace with the royal family. And when she gets there, he provides her with a servant, new clothes, her own beautiful room, and treats her exactly like his own daughter. And then he legally adopts her, so that she becomes a princess, part of the royal family for the rest of her life.

That is a very pale comparison to what God has done for us through Christ and the sacraments. He hasn't just given us spiritual handouts so that we can survive; he has filled us with his own life, his grace, so that we can spend all eternity in the divine palace, as real members of the royal family.

This too is a reason for joy, because it means that we have much more to look forward to in heaven than we could ever imagine.

CONCLUSION: LETTING JOY BLOSSOM

That's what Christmas is really about: Jesus becoming one of us, to save us, to prove God's love for us, to teach us the art of living, and to share his very life with us. And those are the reasons for Christian joy—reasons that never change, which means that Christian joy doesn't ever have to go away.

In the conference, we will look at what God is waiting for during Advent, but for now, let's take some time to savor and enjoy the four reasons why Jesus took up



residence in the Virgin's womb and was born in that humble cave at Bethlehem—to practice a little bit the art of waiting.

Let's thank him for coming to save us, and let's ask him to help us stay close to him every day of this liturgical season, so that we can experience more and more deeply true Christian joy. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/ GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Which of the four reasons behind Jesus's incarnation resonates the most in my heart and mind? Why? Which resonates least? Why?
2. How would my life, and the life of the world around me, be different if Jesus had never come to earth?
3. In the Second Reading for the Mass of Gaudete Sunday (Year C), St. Paul writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). How is that possible, considering all of life's sufferings? Does Pope Francis give us the answer when he writes: "Joy ... always endures, even when only as a flicker of light born of the certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved ..." (Evangeliu Gaudium, 6)?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the LORD and a day of vindication by our God... I rejoice heartily in the LORD, in my God is the joy of my soul; for he has clothed me with a robe of salvation and wrapped me in a mantle of justice, like a bridegroom adorned with a diadem, like a bride bedecked with her jewels. As the earth brings forth its plants, and a garden makes its growth spring up, so will the Lord GOD make justice and praise spring up before all the nations.

—Isaiah 61:1–2A, 10–11
NABRE, Lectionary

Brothers and sisters: Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you.

—Philippians 4:4–9
NABRE

*And Mary said:
"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior.
For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness;
behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed.
The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him.
He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.
He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly.
The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped Israel his servant, remembering his mercy, according to his promise to our fathers, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

—Luke 1:46–56
NABRE

NOTES



CONFERENCE

THE FOUR PHASES OF CHRISTIAN GROWTH

INTRODUCTION

Advent is a time of waiting, of looking forward to a worldwide celebration of Christ's first coming as well as anticipating his promised Second Coming at the end of history.

The Church gives us this time in order to help us keep our lives in order, to help us re-focus on the really important things, like the four reasons why Jesus came to earth in the first place.

When we live this period following the examples of St. John the Baptist and the Blessed Virgin Mary, we can experience a true spiritual renewal, and real spiritual growth. We can also make the world a better, more Christian place. That's why God wants us to learn the art of waiting.

But why is God waiting? Why doesn't he bring history to its conclusion right now? Why does he let year after year pass by without the Second Coming?

In one sense, we can never fully know the answer to that question, because we can never fully fathom the infinite wisdom of God.

And yet, in another sense, God himself has revealed the reason to us. In his Second New Testament Letter, St. Peter explains that God's requiring us to patiently endure the sufferings of this life as we wait for the life to come has a purpose. Here is how he describes it:

Therefore, beloved, since you await these things, be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace. And consider the patience of our Lord as salvation...

—2 Peter 3:14–15

God's patience is directed towards our salvation, or as another translation puts it "If our Lord stays his hand, count it part of his mercy" (2 Peter 3:15, Knox).

We could multiply verses from the New Testament that tell us the same thing, from various angles: the art of waiting is connected to God's plan for us to grow to spiritual maturity, both during Advent and during every other season.

So, where do you find yourself on the path of spiritual growth? And what can you look forward to as you continue to grow?

This conference will try to help answer those questions, by reviewing the four phases of Christian life.

PHASE ONE: THE FIRST CONVERSION

The first phase of spiritual maturity can be called the first conversion. It consists of making our most fundamental life-decision: consciously, freely choosing to take our place in the Church as a disciple of Christ and an apostle of his kingdom. With this first conversion, we no longer just sit in the pew every Sunday, we find ourselves eagerly wanting and firmly deciding to take our place there.

This decision often flows from a grace-filled experience in which the abstract and theoretical ideas that we learn about God suddenly become an existential experience of God himself: Jesus becomes a real person to us; we encounter him; we discover that he loves us; we become fascinated with him and decide to follow him.

Spiritual activities that flow from this experience center on deeper personal prayer and heartfelt spiritual reading—we want to spend time with the Lord and to get to know him better.

This kind of transforming experience was described beautifully in the famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*, written by a former slave-trader who had become a minister. The first verse goes like this:

*Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
That sav'd a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

The decision to become Christ's disciple and apostle is the pre-requisite for the other phases; if we haven't made a conscious commitment to Christ and his Kingdom, we certainly won't be able to live out that commitment.



This is why an important part of our Christian mission in life is to help people who only know God theoretically to experience him existentially, so they too can make a fundamental life-decision to follow Christ.

PHASE TWO: INTEGRATION

The second phase in growing to spiritual maturity builds on the first. Some spiritual writers call it “integration.”

It consists in organizing all the diverse aspects of our life around our fundamental life-decision, as iron filings arrange themselves neatly around a magnet. It starts with our heart and our mind—the very core of our being—and works its way out.

When our heart is integrated, we habitually desire to please God, to extend his Kingdom, to stay faithful to him, to know him better every day.

When our mind is integrated, we habitually think according to Christ’s criteria; we look at the world and the events around us through the lens of the Gospel and the teaching of Christ’s Church.

As we integrate our heart and mind, we begin to feel the need to integrate everything else as well.

- We will feel the need to reform or abandon relationships that bring out the worst in us or lead us into sinful behavior.
- Certain bad habits have to go; our sense of responsibility intensifies, and we feel the need to develop all our talents and take full advantage of all our opportunities.
- We start to organize our time better, to elevate our conversations, to treat people with greater respect and dignity...

In short, every aspect of our life begins to feel and respond to the tug of that magnet, and we eagerly help each one find its rightful place.

In this phase, besides prayer and spiritual reading, we find ourselves working hard to reform our behaviors, seeking good advice and direction from wise mentors, and strengthening the force of our magnet through a more intense sacramental life.

This task of integrating the dispersed elements of our life will never end.

Perhaps at the beginning it will require a more intense and focused effort—like cleaning your room after six months of accumulated neglect—but even later it will require constant attention.

We never grow out of this phase, or any of the phases, for that matter—they build on each and feed each other.

St. Maximilian Kolbe used to tell his younger Franciscan brothers that when he got to heaven he would be able to help them twice as much, because here on earth he could only use one hand to help them—with the other hand, he had to support himself, he had to be constantly engaged in this second phase of Christian living.

PHASE THREE: GENEROSITY

The third phase is generosity. Once we have more or less integrated our life with our decision to be Christ’s disciples and apostles, we can begin to feel pretty comfortable, maybe even a bit over-confident.

At that point, when the time is right, God will present us with some situation or circumstance that knocks us out of our comfort zone, something that demands more generosity, more sacrifice, more self-giving.

He does this because he loves us. He wants the best for us, so he pushes us. He doesn’t want us to settle for being “good” Christians, or “practicing” Catholics; he wants us to be saints—real, dynamic, powerful, world-renewing saints.

And since being a saint requires more love than our natural selfishness likes to give, God puts us into circumstances where we have to stretch ourselves.

It usually hurts; it’s usually hard for us—and that’s why the Church never tires of pointing our gaze to the crucifix, which reminds us that Christ’s generosity was total and unconditional. He is our model of generous love.

The call to generosity can come in many different ways.

- It can be an invitation to follow a vocation to the priesthood or the consecrated life, which means giving up our own plans and hopes by putting all our eggs in God’s basket.
- It can be an invitation to choose a less traditional career path in order to dedicate oneself fulltime to the unglamorous work of building the Kingdom of Christ.



- It can be a physical trial—like sickness, or the death of a loved one.
- It can be difficulties in marriage or family life (for instance, when a newlywed couple realizes that they can't have children).

Because there is no limit to how much we can love God and our neighbor, we will usually be called to greater generosity more than once.

Once or twice, or maybe a few times, the call to generosity will be dramatic—like when St. Ignatius of Loyola gave up the privileges of nobility to follow his priestly vocation, or when widowed St. Elizabeth of Hungary refused the Holy Roman Emperor's marriage proposal so she could dedicate herself to prayer and works of Christian charity.

But dramatic moments like those don't come out of the blue. The Holy Spirit tries to prepare us for them with generosity practice sessions—like subtle invitations to spend an extra few minutes in the chapel, or to go the extra mile for another person even when we don't feel like it, or to make some adjustments in our social life.

If we respond faithfully to these subtle, quiet calls to hidden generosity, we will be well prepared to respond faithfully to the more dramatic ones, the ones that give us a chance to grow in holiness by leaps and bounds.

PHASE FOUR: PERSEVERANCE

The fourth and last phase of our spiritual journey is what tradition calls "final perseverance," staying faithful to Christ and his Kingdom to the end our lives, and therefore entering into the great adventure of eternity with him in heaven.

No one is guaranteed final perseverance. It, like existence itself, like the grace of baptism, and like so many other graces that we receive throughout our lives, is a gift of God, one that comes from his goodness and not from any merit of our own.

Jesus summarized this primacy of grace during every phase of our Christian lives in John Chapter 6:

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day.

—John 6:44

But even though we can't earn final perseverance (because it's worth so much more than anything we could do to pay for it), we can work towards it. By prayer and generosity throughout the course of our lives, we can put ourselves in the position to accept and welcome this grace. Jesus himself explained that we have an important role to play in our perseverance when he gave the following exhortation:

He who perseveres to the end will be saved.

—Matthew 24:13

St. Paul expressed his understanding of this truth to the Christians in Corinth:

I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.

—I Corinthians 9:27

But a little further on in that same Letter, St. Paul showed a keen understanding of the primary role of God's grace in our efforts to persevere:

No trial has come to you but what is human. God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with the trial he will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it.

—I Corinthians 10:13

It is for this all-important grace of final perseverance that we pray at the end of every Hail Mary: "pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death."

CONCLUSION: THE JOURNEY OF LIFE

Final perseverance is less a phase of spiritual maturity than its culmination. It's the door to the King's palace that awaits us at the end of the journey, a journey that starts at the gateway of our first conversion and meanders along the often rough and always unpredictable path of integration and generosity, of heartfelt fidelity to Christ and to his Church.

God gives us time to travel that path, because he knows that through the travelling, through learning and practicing the art of waiting, we will become better lovers, growing to spiritual maturity in the Lord, and that's what he is looking forward to.



FURTHER READING

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *A Handbook of Spiritual Perfection*
by Fr. Philip E. Dion
- *The Fulfillment of All Desire*
by Ralph Martin
- *Introduction to the Devout Life*
by St. Francis de Sales
- *Seeking First the Kingdom: 30 Meditations on How to Love God with All Your Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength*
by Fr. John Bartunek, LC
- *Answers: Catholic Advice for Your Spiritual Questions*
by Fr. John Bartunek, LC

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