

**A PASTORAL LETTER
FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER
FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT (2018)**



**Appointed to be read aloud at all Public Masses in the
Diocese of Lancaster on the weekend of 1st and 2nd December 2018**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We have entered the Holy Season of Advent. May something of this Holy Season enter into us. Let us long for a re-awakened sense of the Sacred. Let us desire it for ourselves and for so many whose lives are empty or broken. I have no doubt you know who they are.

Beginning our journey towards the crib at Bethlehem, the Church reminds us of God's call for each one here to safeguard a sense of the sacred. Each one is called to know the Holy One. Each one is called to be holy. But this is not something we are comfortable with. Why is that so?

Let us begin our answer by asking another question: What is Advent? The simple answer is it is our way to Christmas. But if we do not know what Christmas is we will fail to know what Advent is for. If that is the case we must be careful. We could spend a great deal of time, effort and money only to be left with something that fails to satisfy. So much could be wasted. That is not what we want.

So much this year will be similar to previous years, but not everything. This is an Advent we have not had before. The world has changed. Babies have been born, loved ones have died and children have left school for college or to look for work. Some have retired. So much has changed and we have changed. What has not changed is the message of Advent. That message tells us first of God's love for us and our need for that saving love. It begins to tell us that we can begin to know the Lord. It tells us that He has heard our cry, our distress and come to us.

We can begin to know the mind and heart and even the face of God. No longer do we have to guess. Once we have that confidence we become guardians of that humble knowledge, that truth, that certainty. We guard it best by sharing it with others by becoming evidence of the love of God particularly for those in most need.

When I was parish priest in West Cumbria I remember visiting the home of an old parishioner who had died. She had lived all her life in a street on Salterbeck, in a Council house that had been home to her parents. I went to the house to meet her

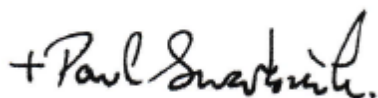
brother and arrange the funeral. Sitting in the cold living room I noticed one corner that she had kept as a shrine, full of her holy things. A crucifix, a statue of our Blessed Lady, a picture of the Sacred Heart, a rosary, blessed candles, a bottle of holy water, a prayer book, prayer-cards with images of saints, a picture of Pope Saint John Paul II, photographs of her parents on their wedding day, a picture from someone's first Holy Communion and more. This was all evidence of a Faith that had accompanied her through life to the very doors of heaven. The home would soon be broken up, leaving just a house to be returned to the Council, waiting for the next tenants.

Not many days after her requiem a box was delivered to the door of the Priory full of those same pious objects, unwanted by the family, no use to them in this modern age. It left me thinking: How do we value things now? What has happened to our world to make us discard as useless what others turned to for strength and comfort in their last days? For all the undoubted benefits of the times in which we live, what can our society not see?

By Faith we are heirs to the treasures of heaven. This must be the gift of Christmas. Advent is too brief a time for all our preparations to be completed. It acts as a prompt. This whole life is our Advent, during which we prepare ourselves for the moment when we enter fully – please God – into the life of God. This world is never enough to satisfy us. This Advent, may something more of Christ enter you. May you re-discover that sense of the Sacred. May you be drawn a little further along the way, a little deeper into the Mystery. May you become evidence to the world of God's faithful love, especially for those who need such evidence. May you have courage to let God make you holy.

On a practical note, by way of conclusion to this long letter, I would like to suggest four things. I would like first, each Catholic home to have a crib at the heart of their Christmas decorations. Secondly, I would like each of us to try and do something this Christmas to alleviate suffering and hardship in any form. Thirdly, I ask you to make Mass the main event of Christmas, even if it is 'inconvenient'. Finally, I ask you to pray for unborn children. They are children of God, present in the world, just as Jesus was present in the womb of Mary for those nine months prior to his birth.

With my prayers and blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+Paul Swarbrick." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

+Paul Swarbrick
Bishop of Lancaster