

In many cultures, Advent has developed a split personality as a time of light and of shadow. The commercial countdown to Christmas begins while the Church calls us to a period of deep reflection and spiritual preparation for the celebration of the mystery of God becoming flesh. On the one hand, Advent is a season of dazzling secular light. Cities and towns are lit up in fantastic ways. It is also a time of spiritual quieting as we are called to look within. We are pulled both ways as the cultures say, "Get busy!" and the Church says, "Quiet down!" to prepare for Christmas.

Christmas evokes powerful memories, feelings and hopes in all of us. It speaks to deep yearnings within every person for home, family, friendship, unity and peace. Every year, we look to Christmas to fulfill those desires. Today, we try to pack all we expect of Christmas into one day rather than the traditional twelve days of the Christmas season as was the case in earlier times. A restoration of the healthy majesty of the Christmas season can be a gift to our time.

Nevertheless, we all want a memorable Christmas. But what are we really willing to give up to bring the promise of Christ's birth to our soul? St. Paul gives us a key in today's second reading as he writes about the need to "cast off the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light."

Are we willing to cast off the deeds of darkness? Are we willing to match the preparations we make on the outside over the next four weeks with a similar preparation on the inside? This Advent is the time to look at the quality of our Catholic life: our regular participation at Mass, our personal prayer life, our dealings with others, our honesty, our truth-telling, our respect for the reputation and property of others, our commitment to our family, our commitment to the great issues the Church has embraced today — the poor, the sacredness of human life, the strengthening of family life. It is very tempting, and very easy, to get so wrapped up in the artificial lights of this season that we can forget the true light, the light of Christ.

This first Sunday of Advent is a good time to revive the resolutions we made after Christmas last year and to make some new ones. It's a good time to prepare a deep confession to renew ourselves in grace. It's a good time to select some charity to assist from the many that come our way at this time of year. It's a good time to revive old friendships, restore broken connections and trying to heal some families. It's a good time to make sure we spend time with our families.

"Cast off the deeds of darkness, put on the armor of light." People can be oblivious to the power of Christmas as a time to open ourselves more widely to Christ. We can be like those people to whom the Lord refers in the Gospel reading as going about their life, indifferent to the coming of the Lord. They all look alike but there is a huge difference within. The transforming power of the Christmas mystery is found not in the changes that happen on the outside but the changes that happen within.

Advent provides a great opportunity once more to cast off deeds of darkness and put on the armor of the Light of Christ. The darkness from which Jesus came to rescue us, the darkness that Advent addresses, is not the darkness outside. We know the seasons will change and light will return. He came to rescue us from the darkness within.

Don't let the potential of these days of Advent get lost in all the other preparations for Christmas. Advent is another chance to cast off the deeds of darkness and experience once more a Light that lasts.