



Pastoral Letter for the First Sunday of Advent.

To be read at all Sunday Masses on 2 and 3 December 2006

My dear Friends,

The season of Advent always offers us a new way of looking towards the future. No longer is the future simply a projection of our own desires and expectations that often come to nothing. Advent is God's future coming to us. It is a time to prepare for the coming of Christ into our lives.

One of the six priorities of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan is Spirituality. It says that: "Spirituality is both the interior life of prayer and living according to the example given to us by Christ". Advent is an opportunity for us to deepen our prayer. The Advent edition of *Walk with Me* that is made available for you once again is entitled *I Am Here*. It is a journey of prayer, which through its daily reflections will help you come closer to the mystery of Christ's presence among us.

Prayer is not just a means to an end but is itself a mystery, a way of deepening our life in the Spirit. Faith is strengthened and grows especially through prayer, so long as we really meet Christ in Prayer. Do we? Do we pray out of a sense of obligation? Is our prayer a truly shared meeting with the Lord? Do we pray very little? Is it then any wonder that our faith is weak? Prayer as the basis for our relationship with God is essential for our faith.

It is from this basis of prayer that we can see Advent as a time when we see God coming into the world to be with us. We are able to look at everything afresh with

new vision. Habit forces us very quickly to see things, not as they really are, but as we would like them to be. But Christ taught us to see things, people, and events in a new way: in a very different way. He preached a kingdom where things are turned upside down, in which the last come first, the sinful woman is preferred to the Pharisee and the repentant thief goes straight to heaven.

Christ reveals the true face of everything. We must go beyond masks, appearances and facades. We must go beyond what we can see with human eyes. Things are more than they seem to be. Often they are paths towards God, and sometimes, even, signs of the presence of God. Prayer enables us to see the grace of God at work in the world. So it is amazing how our ideas change when we pray over them. To pray over our ideas means to think over them in the light of God, under his gaze. Our own outlook would certainly change and become closer to God's point of view if only we learned to pray over things in this way. To help you pray, please pick up a copy of *Walk with Me* as you leave church today.

But spirituality is not just about prayer. Prayer finds an outward expression in the way we live our lives. Over the next eighteen months you will be hearing more about the *Live Simply* challenge. This initiative commemorates the 40th anniversary of 'Populorum Progressio', the encyclical of Pope Paul VI on social justice issues. It was this encyclical that inspired the foundation of CAFOD. The key message of *Live Simply* is that God calls us to look hard at our lifestyles and to choose to live spiritually, simply, sustainably and in solidarity with the poor. In this way we can help create a world in which human dignity is respected and everyone can reach his or her full potential. This challenge may seem unattainable for most people, but through prayer we can all find ways in which we can live simply.

May I wish you every grace and blessing on your Advent journey. As you draw closer to God through prayer, his Son will be revealed to you, as surely as He was when He was born to Mary in Bethlehem, all those years ago.

Bishop of Nottingham