

LEADER



DO I NEED A SAVIOR?

An Advent Retreat Guide on the Prophet Isaiah

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INTRODUCTION

DO I NEED A SAVIOR?

RETREAT OVERVIEW

Advent is about new beginnings. The Church year, also known as the liturgical year, starts afresh on the First Sunday of Advent. And the whole season is dedicated to preparing ourselves for the celebration of Christmas, the day that Jesus was born, the day on which new hope dawned and a new creation began. Even the natural world gets a fresh start at Christmas. In the northern hemisphere the darkness of winter begins to fade as the days start to get longer again.

Advent and Christmas are supposed to be joyful seasons, because the thought of a new beginning can fill us with hope. We all need fresh starts in life, because we all make mistakes. Our sins and selfishness does damage to ourselves and to those around us. Christ comes with his saving grace to redeem those failures and fill us with new life.

But sociologists tell us that this season also tends to stir up sadness. More suicides happen this time of year than any other. In Advent's atmosphere of hope we sometimes feel anxiety, even discouragement. Faced with our brokenness and weakness, we recognize our inability to give ourselves the fresh start we long for, and sadness is the result. Christ's light seems distant and illusory; darkness and spiritual danger seem close at hand.

That was the situation of God's Chosen People during the time of the Prophet Isaiah, whose prophecies are read every year throughout Advent and during all the Christmas Masses. He was sent by God to strengthen their hope and nourish their joy. In this Advent Retreat Guide, *Do I Need a Savior?*, we will let him do the same thing for us.

- The First Meditation will look at Isaiah's core message and its relation to the historical situation in which he preached.
- The Second Meditation will spend time savoring some of his favorite images and symbols, so that his message penetrates our hearts.
- And in the Conference we will review a frequently forgotten dimension of our own Christian vocation—that each one of us is called and equipped to be a prophet.

Let's begin by quieting our souls and turning our attention to Christ, who is already thinking of us and eager to spend this time with us. Let's thank him for his blessings and tell him, once again, how much we need him to be our Savior.

NOTES



FIRST MEDITATION

WHO WILL BE MY SAVIOR?

INTRODUCTION

The Prophet Isaiah lived in the eighth century BC, a tough time for the people of the Old Testament. The world's two superpowers at the time were Assyria and Egypt. And they were not friendly with each other. And guess who was caught in the crossfire? Israel. That's right, the small nation of God's Chosen People was located right between Egypt and Assyria. It was a buffer between the two competing superpowers, always at risk of being invaded and conquered by either one of them.

Assyria, based right in the Fertile Crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, in modern day Iraq, was an expanding empire. It eventually spread to include the entire Middle East. At the time of Isaiah, its expansion was well underway. This is how it worked.

The Assyrian Emperor would send a messenger to the smaller nation that it wanted to absorb, making a polite offer to allow that nation to continue existing if it agreed to submit to Assyrian authority. If not, the powerful army would sweep in to conquer, and when the weaker nation eventually fell, which it always did, the native population would be deported (to avoid possible rebellions) and Assyrian-friendly rulers and peoples would be installed.

Whether willingly or unwillingly, once a nation became an Assyrian vassal it had to pay exorbitant taxes and was required to worship the pagan gods of Assyria. Conquest in the ancient world was never merely political; it always included a religious dimension as well.

A DIVIDED KINGDOM

As if being located between the pincers of Assyria and Egypt wasn't enough, Palestine itself was divided during the time of Isaiah. After King Solomon died two years earlier, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel rebelled against the southern Kingdom, which came to be called the Kingdom of Judah and whose capital was in Jerusalem, and formed their own Kingdom in the north. This was the Kingdom of Israel, whose eventual capital was established in the city of Samaria. This Kingdom made alliances with other pagan peoples in Palestine in order to shore up their political influence.

So besides feeling pressure from the outside, from Egypt and Assyria, the Chosen People were divided among themselves, to the point where civil wars continually erupted throughout the period leading up to and including the lifetime of the Prophet Isaiah.

THE HEART OF THE MESSAGE

This was the situation when the young Isaiah, a well educated and well connected resident of Jerusalem, was entrusted with his prophetic mission. He himself describes the moment in which he heard the call in one of the Old Testament's most famous chapters:

“In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple ... Then I said, ‘Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!’ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, holding an ember which he had taken with tongs from the altar. He touched my mouth with it. ‘See,’ he said, ‘now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?’ ‘Here I am,’ I said; ‘send me!’ And he replied: ‘Go ...’

—Isaiah 6:1, 5–9

After centuries of internal strife and corruption, in the midst of a precarious and volatile political reality, the people of Judah were unsure of themselves. They desperately wanted to regain stability, prosperity, and peace. God chose Isaiah as his messenger to explain how to do that. And the core of his message stays the same throughout the sixty-six chapters of his book. To be saved from devastation and conquest, they must put their confidence in God, not in brilliant diplomacy and alliances with earthly empires. God is the only Savior, and trusting obedience to him is the path to salvation. This is the heart of Isaiah's message.

This message comes across with dramatic clarity in Chapter 30. First the prophet points out the futility of an alliance with Egypt:



☞ Ah! Rebellious children, oracle of the LORD,
Who carry out a plan that is not mine,
who make an alliance I did not inspire,
thus adding sin upon sin;
They go down to Egypt,
without asking my counsel,
To seek strength in Pharaoh's protection
and take refuge in Egypt's shadow.
Pharaoh's protection shall become your shame,
refuge in Egypt's shadow your disgrace.

—Isaiah 30:1–3

And then he points out the true path to security and peace:

☞ For thus said the Lord GOD,
the Holy One of Israel:
By waiting and by calm you shall be saved,
in quiet and in trust shall be your strength.
But this you did not will.

—Isaiah 30:15

Throughout his writings, Isaiah predicts not only political events of his own time, like the failed siege of Jerusalem by Assyria in 701 BC, and political events of future times, like the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 587 BC, the ensuing exile of the Jews, and the miraculous end of the exile in 538. He also predicts the even greater events of which all those Old Testament happenings were mere images: the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, his Galilean ministry, his divine and human nature, his passion and resurrection, and the spreading of the true faith beyond the people of Israel to all the nations of the earth. This is why he has such a central role in the liturgical seasons of Advent and Christmas.

And yet, amidst all his predictions and his exhortations, his core spiritual message remains the same: God wants to be our Savior, and if we let him, we will thrive!

CONCLUSION: THE PERENNIAL TEMPTATION

Unfortunately, the people to whom Isaiah was sent refused to accept this message. They felt that they didn't need a savior, that they wanted to be their own savior. They trusted in pagan idols and pagan princes, in their efforts to control the powers of this world, to bring them the happiness they longed for.

This is the perennial temptation for all of us, especially in post-modern times, when science and technology have

given us more outward control than ever. We too are tempted to be our own savior, to manufacture our own happiness instead of finding strength in trustfully obeying God and accepting the offer of his grace.

When Pope Benedict XVI visited the United States of America, a country where materialism and secularism are exerting more and more influence, he pointed out this danger. In a meeting with bishops, he highlighted the importance of recognizing that we need a savior:

☞ It is easy to be entranced by the almost unlimited possibilities that science and technology place before us; it is easy to make the mistake of thinking we can obtain by our own efforts the fulfillment of our deepest needs. This is an illusion. Without God, who alone bestows upon us what we by ourselves cannot attain, our lives are ultimately empty. People need to be constantly reminded to cultivate a relationship with him who came that we might have life in abundance.

—Benedict XVI

Address to United States Bishops, 16 April 2008

The spiritual dangers facing every human heart haven't changed much since the time of Isaiah. In the next meditation, we will savor some of his more beautiful passages, the ones that appear in the Christmas liturgies. But for now, let's simply take some time to speak with God in the quiet of our hearts about our own answer to the question do I need a savior? I can't think of a better way to prepare for Christmas. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.


QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

1. In what ways do I depend on God? In what situations or areas of my life do I tend to lack confidence in God?
2. What does "trusting obedience" to God look like in my life?
3. What can I do this Advent to renew and deepen my "relationship with him who came that we might have life in abundance"?




THREE QUOTATIONS TO AID YOUR MEDITATION

NOTES

 For thus said the Lord GOD,
the Holy One of Israel:
By waiting and by calm you shall be saved,
in quiet and in trust shall be your strength.
But this you did not will.


—Isaiah 30:15

NABRE

 Idols exist, we begin to see, as a pretext for setting ourselves at the centre of reality and worshiping the work of our own hands ... Idolatry does not offer a journey but rather a plethora of paths leading nowhere and forming a vast labyrinth. Those who choose not to put their trust in God must hear the din of countless idols crying out: “Put your trust in me!” Faith, tied as it is to conversion, is the opposite of idolatry; it breaks with idols to turn to the living God in a personal encounter. Believing means entrusting oneself to a merciful love which always accepts and pardons, which sustains and directs our lives, and which shows its power by its ability to make straight the crooked lines of our history. Faith consists in the willingness to let ourselves be constantly transformed and renewed by God’s call. Herein lies the paradox: by constantly turning towards the Lord, we discover a sure path which liberates us from the dissolution imposed upon us by idols.

—Pope Francis

Lumen Fidei, 13

 People today need to be reminded of the ultimate purpose of their lives. They need to recognize that implanted within them is a deep thirst for God. They need to be given opportunities to drink from the wells of his infinite love. It is easy to be entranced by the almost unlimited possibilities that science and technology place before us; it is easy to make the mistake of thinking we can obtain by our own efforts the fulfillment of our deepest needs. This is an illusion. Without God, who alone bestows upon us what we by ourselves cannot attain, our lives are ultimately empty. People need to be constantly reminded to cultivate a relationship with him who came that we might have life in abundance.

—Benedict XVI

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SECOND MEDITATION

THE SAVIOR COMES

INTRODUCTION

The core of Isaiah's message, as we saw in the first meditation, was his exhortation to put all our hope and our trust in God and in obeying his will, instead of trying to engineer our happiness by depending on merely earthly and human strengths and smarts.

He warned the Chosen People that if they refused to trust and obey God, things wouldn't go very well—they would be conquered and exiled. And that's what happened. In 586 BC Jerusalem was destroyed and the people of Judah were deported into Babylon. It seemed that the failure of Israel, first under Assyria and now under Babylon, was the end of the story.

But it wasn't. Isaiah also prophesied something else. He pointed out that even when we are unfaithful to God, God remains faithful to us. God promised, through Isaiah and also through the other prophets, to deliver Israel from their exile and to bring them back to the Promised Land. He promised to send a savior who would redeem Israel and spearhead the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

And those prophecies also came true. In 539 BC Babylon was conquered by Persia, and the new emperor, Cyrus the Great, permitted the Jews who were in exile to return to Palestine.

NOT JUST AN EARTHLY KINGDOM

But even that wasn't the end of the story. After their return, the Jews continued to suffer persecution and injustice. They never really achieved the heaven-on-earth that they had hoped for.

Gradually, as they reflected on this experience, they came to realize that these prophecies must have a deeper significance. They began to see that no earthly Kingdom would be able to give them the meaning and happiness they longed for. They slowly started to understand that God's plan was much bigger than they originally thought: he was going to send a redeemer, a savior, who would establish a heavenly kingdom, the Kingdom of God.

This savior was Jesus Christ, whose first sermon in the Gospel of Mark begins with a proclamation that the prophecies are now being fulfilled—he says:

“This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.

—Mark 1:15

Throughout the Gospels, in fact, we see Jesus referring to the ancient prophecies, and pointing to himself as their fulfillment.

This is why the Advent and Christmas liturgies make such ample use of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Advent and Christmas are all about the birth of the Savior, which is God fulfilling his promises of redemption and salvation. During Advent and Christmas, the Church invites us to pause and savor those promises and their initial fulfillment in the birth of Jesus. The Church also invites us to look forward to their final fulfillment when Jesus comes again at the end of history, to right every wrong and to wipe away every tear.

GOD REVEALS HIS HEART

These prophecies, then, are a revelation of God's commitment to each one of us, of his love for and interest in our lives, and of his desire to pour his saving and redeeming grace into our hearts. Let's take the rest of this meditation to accept the Church's invitation, to pause and savor these beautiful expressions of God's love.

One of the most well known passages from Isaiah is found in the ninth chapter. It starts out with the image of light and dark, referring to life under conquerors or in exile as life in darkness, and God's saving action as the coming of a new light. Here are the words of Isaiah:

“The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom
a light has shone.
You have brought them abundant joy
and great rejoicing,



as they rejoice before you as at the harvest,
as people make merry when dividing spoils.
For the yoke that burdened them,
the pole on their shoulder,
and the rod of their taskmaster
you have smashed, as on the day of Midian.


—Isaiah 9:1–3

The “land of gloom” refers to life under the oppressive conquerors of Palestine, and it also refers to life in this fallen world, cut off from God’s grace—life darkened by sin.

In Jesus, whom the Gospel of John refers to as the “light of the world,” we can receive forgiveness from sins, hope of heaven, and lasting, meaningful happiness. This is the “abundant joy and great rejoicing” that the Israelites experienced when they regained their freedom. The yoke and the pole and the rod all symbolize the oppression of the conquerors, both Assyrians and Babylonians, and also the oppression that sin and meaninglessness bring to our lives. The message and grace of Christ free us from that, if only we believe in him. In Jesus, God smashes the power of evil, just as through the Judge Gideon he smashed the power of the Midianites who were persecuting the ancient Jews in northern Palestine, just like the Assyrians were doing during the lifetime of Isaiah.

A CHILD WHO WILL RULE FOREVER

Then the prophecy goes on, it says:

 For every boot that tramped in battle,
every cloak rolled in blood,
will be burned as fuel for flames.
For a child is born to us, a son is given us;
upon his shoulder dominion rests.
They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero,
Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.
His dominion is vast
and forever peaceful,
from David’s throne, and over his kingdom,
which he confirms and sustains
by judgment and justice,
both now and forever.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this!

—Isaiah 9:4–6

Here Isaiah is referring to an end of the violence that subjugated Israel, the violence of war and injustice. And

it is a child who will put an end to it, a child who will inherit David’s throne, establishing peace and justice in the place of war and oppression. But unlike David’s rule, which passed away under the Assyrians and Babylonians, the Kingdom of this Prince of Peace will last “both now and forever.”

When we contemplate the birth of Jesus in the little stable-cave of Bethlehem, this is who we are contemplating. When the three Wise Men come to adore him and offer him their gifts, this is whom they are adoring. When the angels appear in glory to the shepherds announcing the birth of the savior and messiah, this is whom they are talking about.

CONCLUSION: WHO GOD WANTS TO BE FOR US

In the ancient near east, when new kings took their thrones it was common practice for them to take what were called “throne names.” These were titles that attributed to the king certain qualities or accomplishments. They were meant to describe his greatness and give hope to the people under his rule.

In this passage from Isaiah, the future Messiah receives four of these throne names, each one of which is more like an entire sentence than a single word. These names are meant to reveal what God wants to be for each one of us, and what he will be if we put our faith and trust in him.

- He wants to be our “Wonder-Counselor,” someone who gives wonderful counsel, whose wisdom guides his followers in wonderful ways.
- He wants to be “God-Hero,” the God who does mighty works, who is omnipotent. This is a clearly divine characteristic, showing that the Messiah will share in the divinity and put his divine power at the service of those who follow him.
- He wants to be “Father-Forever,” the everlasting father, who always treats his followers with the protection, goodness, and gentleness of a true father.
- He wants to be “Prince of Peace,” a ruler who will create for his people the conditions in which they can truly flourish and reach their full potential.

This is our God. This is his own revelation of who he is, of the kind of Savior he wants to be for each one of us,



starting now in this life, and extending into the next life for all eternity.

We need this savior. We need to grow each day in our faith and trust in Jesus, so that he can be, more and more, all those things for us. That's what Advent and Christmas are all about—turning our attention to God, renewing our trustful obedience to him, and letting him be our Savior.

Let's take some time now to speak with our Lord, in the quiet of our souls, about his desire to be our Savior, to bring his light and grace deeper and deeper into our hearts. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

1. When have I most experienced the light and the joy that Jesus brings to those who believe and trust in him? Savor those memories and thank God for them. Activate your hope in God by looking forward to more experiences like those.
2. Who do I know who is suffering under the darkness of sin or discouragement right now? Pray for them to find, or find again, a savior in Jesus. What can I do to help encourage them?
3. What do I like most about Advent and Christmas? How do those things tie into the kind of savior that Jesus wants to be for me? How can I use them to deepen my faith in him?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO AID YOUR MEDITATION

☞ For Zion's sake I will not be silent,
for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet,
until her vindication shines forth like the dawn
and her victory like a burning torch.

Nations shall behold your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
you shall be called by a new name
pronounced by the mouth of the LORD.
You shall be a glorious crown in the hand of the
LORD, a royal diadem held by your God.
No more shall people call you "Forsaken,"

or your land "Desolate,"
but you shall be called "My Delight,"
and your land "Espoused."
For the LORD delights in you
and makes your land his spouse.
As a young man marries a virgin,
your Builder shall marry you;
and as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride
so shall your God rejoice in you.

—Isaiah 62:1–5
NABRE

☞ See, the LORD proclaims
to the ends of the earth:
say to daughter Zion,
your savior comes!
Here is his reward with him,
his recompense before him.
They shall be called the holy people,
the redeemed of the LORD,
and you shall be called "Frequented,"
a city that is not forsaken.

—Isaiah 62:11–12
NABRE

☞ How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings glad tidings,
announcing peace, bearing good news,
announcing salvation, and saying to Zion,
"Your God is King!"

Hark! Your sentinels raise a cry,
together they shout for joy,
for they see directly, before their eyes,
the LORD restoring Zion.
Break out together in song,
O ruins of Jerusalem!
For the LORD comforts his people,
he redeems Jerusalem.
The LORD has bared his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations;
all the ends of the earth will behold
the salvation of our God.

—Isaiah 52:7–10
NABRE



CONFERENCE¹

YOUR PROPHETIC MISSION

INTRODUCTION

Did you know that you are a prophet? Well, you are. You became one on the day you were baptized. Here's how the Catechism explains it:

☞ ... [T]he faithful, who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ and integrated into the People of God, are made sharers in their particular way in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ, and have their own part to play in the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the World.

—*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 897

When you were baptized you became a sharer in Christ's own life and mission, which has priestly, kingly, and prophetic dimensions. So even if you aren't an ordained minister or an official preacher, you still share in this "prophetic office of Christ." You have received the call and the anointing to be for your circles of influence what Isaiah was for his.

SPREADING THE LIGHT

This doesn't mean that you are necessarily able to predict the future. Prophecy as understood in the Bible sometimes includes that kind of thing, but not always. As one spiritual writer explained it, the essence of prophecy isn't foretelling the future, but forth-telling the truth, the truth about God's loving plan of salvation, and how people can experience it.

You have been made, by having received God's grace, a messenger of the King, an Apostle of his Kingdom. Here again is how the Catechism explains it:

☞ Christ ... fulfills this prophetic office, not only by the hierarchy ... but also by the laity. He accordingly both establishes them as witnesses and provides them with the sense of the faith and the grace of the word. To teach in order to lead others to faith is the task of every preacher and of each believer.

—CCC 904

You have been given the "grace of the word." Your words are powerful. When speaking to others about Christ, or about what it means to believe in him and to follow him, God's grace is at work in your words. This is part of who you are, who you are called to be.

And it doesn't require anything particularly dramatic or charismatic. It's something that can happen right in the middle of your daily occupations, since it flows not only from what you do, but from who you are. Here's the Catechism again:

☞ Lay people also fulfill their prophetic mission by evangelization, that is, the proclamation of Christ by word and the testimony of life. For lay people, this evangelization ... acquires a specific property and peculiar efficacy because it is accomplished in the ordinary circumstances of the world.

—CCC 905

God wants to be Wonder-Counselor, Father-Forever, and Prince of Peace for everyone. And he has made us his messengers—we are called to help those around us welcome the Savior and live the fullness of life that comes from trustfully obeying him. We, like Isaiah, are prophets.

You may not *feel* like a prophet. That's okay. Feelings can deceive us. But faith makes things clear. As Christians, we are witnesses of God's goodness and mercy. And that witness necessarily involves, sometimes, speaking to others about Jesus. Here's how Blessed Pope Paul VI explained it:

☞ The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed.

—Blessed Paul VI,
Evangelii Nuntiandi, 22

[1] This conference is adapted from Chapter 15 of Fr. Bartunek's book, *Go! 30 Meditations on How Best to Love Your Neighbor as Yourself*



JESUS IS THE CURE

Think about it this way. If you had discovered the cure for cancer, the truly loving thing to do would be to share that discovery with those who suffer from the disease. Even if the cure were bitter and painful, keeping it to yourself for fear of offending a cancer victim who may resent the bitterness of the pill would be a lack of love, a self-centered and vain pretension.

This seems so obvious. And yet, when it comes to spiritual diseases and spiritual cures, the obvious sometimes gets obscured. Jesus Christ truly is the cure for life's moral and spiritual ills—he is the Savior. His teaching, preserved and communicated in every generation by the Church, points the way to healthy and happy living:

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

—John 8:12

To know him, accept him, and follow him opens up the door to the interior freedom and fulfillment that we all yearn for:

“If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

—John 8:31–32

He is not only one worthy figure among the world's great philosophers; he is not only one respectable founder among history's great founders of religions; he is not only one wise teacher among humanity's top gurus: he is the incarnate Son of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity become man; the sole savior of the world. He made this clear during the Last Supper, when he said:

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

—John 14:6

And his Apostles made it clear when they began to spread the Gospel:

“There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved.

—Acts 4:12

People who are searching for happiness, inner peace, and meaning, who feel like they are in darkness and exile, are searching for Jesus, whether they realize it or not. He is the cure—the only cure—for their spiritual diseases, which can be immensely painful and debilitating even for people who seem to be doing pretty well by all external appearances.

YOU HAVE THE CURE

Only Jesus can forgive sins and heal the wounds caused by sin. Only Jesus can give the answers to the deepest questions of the human heart. Only his teaching provides sure guidance through the confused, maddening moral labyrinths of the post-modern world. And you know him. You believe in him. You are familiar with those teachings. You have the cure for your neighbor's spiritual ills—will you keep it to yourself?

We cannot force people to accept Jesus and his teachings, but we are called to tell people about him. If we don't, some of those people in our circles of influence may miss out on their chance to put faith in the Lord. St. Paul pointed this out clearly in his Letter to the Romans:

“For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach?

—Romans 13:14

Telling people about Jesus, sharing the gospel with people, explaining to people the reasons behind the moral and theological tenets of Christianity—this is a fundamental dimension of every Christian's mission, a central way to love one's neighbor as oneself and to exercise the prophetic facet of our Christian vocation.

DELIVERING THE MESSAGE

Many times we exercise this prophetic office without even realizing it, when we encourage each other or offer advice or remind our friends and family members of God's closeness and the Church's wisdom.

But at times God also nudges us to speak about him intentionally, in situations that may not seem so natural. Sometimes, in other words, he wants us to take the



initiative and bring up the topic of religion. We need to be ready and willing to do that. More often, perhaps, we need to be ready to respond to questions that are asked of us directly or that come up indirectly in conversations. We need to know how to express and explain what we believe, and we need to cultivate the courage—based on true love for our neighbor—to do so when the need or opportunity arises.

That requires doing our homework. We can never have all the answers to every question or objection, but we can gradually increase our knowledge and understanding of the faith so as to be better and better at explaining it. A good rule of thumb is to try to avoid having to say, “I am not sure how to answer that” more than once. When someone brings up a question that you can’t answer, make a commitment to investigate and study until you can answer it, so that the next time it comes up you will be able to shed God’s light on it.

OUR MANNER AFFECTS OUR MESSAGE

Of course, the manner in which we speak about Jesus and his teachings is almost as important as the content of what we say. If our manner lacks respect and humility, our words will simply go unheard. Timing matters. Tone matters. Attitude matters. It is not primarily about winning arguments and making converts in order to feed our vanity—it is about loving our neighbors as ourselves, passing on to them the good news that we have received from others. We are simply heralds of Christ’s message, ambassadors of his Kingdom, and so our egos don’t have to get involved: “Whoever listens to you listens to me,” Jesus pointed out: “Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me” (Luke 10:16).

CONCLUSION: TRUE LOVE AND LOVING THE TRUTH

True love seeks ways to communicate the truth that truly saves—it doesn’t cop out by throwing up its hands and saying, “Whatever you want to do and believe is perfectly fine with me.” That’s not how Jesus fulfilled his redeeming mission of love, and it’s not how we should live our mission either.

Each one of us is a prophet, called to speak forth the truth about the Savior, called to help bring the joy of Christmas to hearts who desperately need it. Are you ready?

Take some time now to prayerfully reflect on the ten questions in the following personal questionnaire, which will help you find practical ways to live out this theological truth.

PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How does knowing that I am a sharer in Christ’s prophetic mission make me feel? Why?
2. How well do I know my faith? Could I explain the gospel to someone who asked me to?
3. What am I doing to continue deepening my knowledge and my ability to share that knowledge with others?
4. How well do I understand the reasons behind the Church’s moral teachings, which are so maligned in today’s world?
5. Which ones am I most comfortable talking about? Which ones am I least comfortable talking about? Why?
6. Which of the following resources do I make use of in order to keep growing in my knowledge of the faith and in my ability to share that knowledge with others?
 - Listening to Catholic radio
 - Listening to Catholic podcasts
 - Reading the “Ask-a-Priest” Q&As at RCSpirituality.org
 - Taking part in faith-formation activities at my parish
7. A visible sign of one’s faith—wearing a necklace with a cross, or a rosary ring, for example—can often serve as a providential conversation starter. Have I experienced this before? Would I be willing to wear something like this in the future? Why or why not?
8. Blessed Paul VI once said that “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (*Evangeliu Nuntiadi*, 41). What did he mean by that? How can I apply it to my own life?
9. Consider this quotation from St. John Paul II. How firmly do I believe this? Speak to the Lord about it:

 Through his Church Christ entrusts you with the fundamental mission of sharing with



FURTHER READING

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

- *The Prince of Peace: Meditations*
by Alban Goodier, sj
- *Evangelizing Catholics: A Mission Manual for the New Evangelization*
by Scott Hahn
- *Yes or No: Straight Answers to Tough Questions about Christianity*
by Peter Kreeft
- *The Better Part: A Christ-Centered Resource for Personal Prayer*
by Fr. John Bartunek, LC
- *Go! 30 Meditations on How Best to Love Your Neighbor as Yourself*
by Fr. John Bartunek, LC

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