

First Sunday of Advent

Mount Olivet Cemetery is located about 10 miles south of here on Blue Ridge Boulevard. It features a tall limestone tower that rises above the graves of two of our former bishops, Edwin Vincent O'Hara and John Sullivan. On either side of them are the graves of dozens of priests of our diocese. Shortly after I was ordained a priest, I bought a plot out there too. It's the only piece of property I own. If I disappear from here some day, that's where you'll find me, though I hope it will be a while. Still, it's a good idea for all of us to lay some plans for the end of our lives. Where will my money and possessions go? Which funeral home will take care of me? Where will I be buried?

Some people have heard a doctor tell them, "Your life is coming to an end," but then a miracle happens, and they live longer than the doctor thought. Many people with this experience say that it changes their priorities. Some annoyances are less bothersome. Spending time with people becomes more important. Many of us have a list of things we'd like to do before we die, but we never know when that day will come, or how much time we will have to prepare for it.

Saint Paul wrote his First Letter to the Thessalonians less than 20 years after Jesus died. It was probably the first book written for the New Testament. Paul thought that the Lord Jesus would be coming back very soon. Paul's life would be coming to an end, and so would the lives of everyone else. Therefore, near the end of this letter, Paul addresses the Christians in Thessaloniki like a doctor giving sobering news. If they have some things they want to do before they die, they'd better get started now.

In particular, Paul gives this advice: The one thing he wants them to improve is love. He prays that the Lord will make the Thessalonians "increase and abound in love for one another and for all." If they do that, they will be "blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones." Paul observed the love of the Thessalonians; he knew that they possessed this virtue. But he wanted them to increase it and to share it with more people. Paul makes us think: If you believed that the Lord Jesus was coming soon, how would you change the way you love?

We hear this passage on the First Sunday of Advent because of the focus of this season. Many people think of Advent as the time to prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. This is true, but Advent has another focus that is on display at the start of the season: not the first coming of Christ at Bethlehem, but his second coming at the end of time. This month we're not just preparing for Christmas, we are preparing for death. If you knew that Christ was coming for you this Christmas Day, how would you spend Advent this year? It's clear how St. Paul would answer that question. He wants love to increase and abound.

Sometimes we love the wrong people. Sometimes we do not support the people we love. Sometimes we love ourselves more than others. Sometimes we refuse to love a stranger. Sometimes we miss opportunities to love. Advent is the Church's way of saying to us, "Your life is coming to an end." What is the best way for your love to increase and abound now, before Christmas Day?