

On his pilgrimage to Turkey this week Pope Benedict tried to reconcile a world of division. There are not many Christians in Turkey, but they've been there since the time of the apostles. Pope Benedict visited a number of spiritual sites where he requested greater tolerance for Christians in a predominately Muslim country. Muslims are asking the rest of the world to overcome prejudices toward them; they are caricatured as believers in violence, but they insist they believe in peace. Many Muslims are still offended by remarks Pope Benedict made in September, when he fed this misperception of Islam. Now the pope admirably is promoting dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

There is also division between Christians. Many Turkish Christians are Eastern Orthodox, not Catholic. We hold most beliefs in common, but there are differences in leadership and liturgy. Our churches separated 1000 years ago primarily over belief in the Holy Spirit. Each Sunday in the Creed we say the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son." The Orthodox say the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. To ordinary people, this is a small point, but to theologians it became huge. The Catholic Church recognizes the sacraments of the Orthodox Church, and we would welcome them to share communion with us at the eucharist, but the Orthodox do not feel the same way about us.

My family ran smack into this controversy last week at my nephew Bryan's wedding. The ceremony took place in the bride's Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The local priest presided. I wore my clergy suit, not my vestments, and I stood with the wedding party. At the end the priest very kindly allowed me to say a few words. I gave a short homily in English, and the maid of honor translated it all into Bulgarian. There was no communion, but if there had been, we would not have been permitted to receive. Pope Benedict would like that to change. One of the reasons for his trip was to build stronger Christian unity where there has been division.

During Advent we prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ. In today's Gospel, Jesus talks about the coming of the Son of Man, and he tells his disciples not to be caught off guard when he comes again: Jesus says, "Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap."

If the Son of Man were to come this December 25, would you be ready? Or are you too attached to carousing, drinking and the anxieties of daily life? Many of us experience divisions with family, acquaintances, supervisors, or non-Christians. We would have to change some things to be ready for the coming of Christ. Pope Benedict tried to heal divisions this week in Turkey. We all have personal divisions we could try to heal. If you knew that your life would be over this December 25, if you knew that the world would end on December 25, if you knew that Jesus was coming on December 25, what you do between now and then? What would you change so that day would not catch you by surprise like a trap?