

Second Sunday of Advent, Year A
December 4, 2016
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The wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, the calf and the lion shall browse together, the baby shall play by the cobra's den ... no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain.
The words are those of Isaiah. The dream is all mankind's. And we have tried for it.

In the 18th century, the enlightened ones thought that the application of rational thought could drive away the spooks of Medieval superstition and free mankind to realize the dream. The French revolutionary government beheaded the king and his wife, issued a decree abolishing Christianity, launched a reign of terror that pioneered techniques for Hitler and Stalin, and sent Napoleon rampaging across Europe.

In the 19th century the industrial revolution began to produce material abundance and mechanical marvels like the world had never seen-- railroads, automobiles, and the airplane. The industrial nations conquered and exploited empires around the globe, and then collided with each other in the devastation of world war. Twice.

The 20th century was the age of high technology. Our knowledge and mastery of nature grew by leaps and bounds. We went to the moon and back and television brought it to us live. There were computers, internet, smart phones, medical miracles, a standard of living unprecedented in human history. Kings of the past would have loved to live as comfortably as do the poor in today's America. Mastering nature has freed us from the hard discipline of mastering ourselves, and so we have become slaves of our appetites and creatures of convenience. We live in a push-button world, and it is full of gambling and consumerism, anxiety and addiction, porn and promiscuity, abortion, divorce and fatherless children.

Is that ancient dream of all mankind possible in this world? We seem to make progress, enlightened progressive types keep pointing to the bright dawn just over the horizon if we just get rid of deep seated prejudices and religious beliefs, so we keep building towers reaching up to the heavens and keep falling back into the hell of corruption and conflict. Is the promise of human progress a pipe dream?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church has an interesting paragraph on the Anti-Christ which offers a commentary on the prospects of man achieving paradise on earth by earthly means alone.

It is paragraph 675, entitled "The Church's Ultimate Trial":

"Before Christ's second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will

unveil the 'mystery of iniquity' in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is that of the antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh.”

There have already come totalitarian leaders who could qualify as Anti-Christ. There may yet come a supreme Anti-Christ. But at root, Anti-Christ is an attitude-- choosing apparent solutions to our problems at the price of truth, man glorifying himself in place of God and of his Messiah.

The Catechism makes clear that Christ will not come as the crowning end-point of mankind's progressive achievement of that ancient dream of peace and plenty. We can expect our own perverse self-destructiveness, with satanic assistance, to continue to thwart genuine human progress.

But, let us not be downbeat and pessimistic. Just because the world's a mess doesn't mean that our relationships have to be. Just because this world will never be perfect doesn't mean that it cannot be improved.

God has entered into this messy world, has become a member of this struggling human race. If the Creator is our brother, how can this all end badly?

The Creator, Who gave us intelligence with all its wonderful potential for material improvement, also gave us the means for spiritual improvement.

The Spirit of the Lord that rested on the messiah come in the flesh, Jesus Christ, wants to rest on us as well – the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord. And when we welcome these gifts of the Spirit, we begin to bear in our lives the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity.

Why, that sounds a lot like that ancient dream of all mankind. The human race cannot achieve it on our own in defiance of God. But we each can welcome the Spirit of the Lord into our own hearts and start producing those wonderful fruits in our families, in our parish, among our friends and co-workers; the wolf of greed made gentle as a lamb, the lion of aggression tame as a calf, the cobra of lust curbed so as to care for the child.

When the Lord returns and all is last made manifest, then knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as water covers the sea. In the meantime allow his Holy Spirit to realize the dream where you live, for yourself and for those whom you love.