

ST. JOSEMARIA INSTITUTE PODCAST

PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

REV. PETER ARMENIO

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

Jesus, as we offer our minds and hearts to you, in a special way, because you're present in the Blessed Sacrament, we ask you, as we always do, to explain to us your words, or the words that are intimately linked with your salvation, with your work of sanctification.

In this time of prayer, as we traditionally recall the role of your cousin, St. John the Baptist, in announcing your coming, we ask you, Lord, to help us take this paradigm of evangelization, the example of this very last prophet that served as an instrument for your immediate appearance in the public forum.

Jesus, we ask you, to help us replicate, albeit in a flawed and imperfect way, that work of John the Baptist of preparing the way of Lord. Isn't that preparation of the way of the Lord intimately linked to our vocation we've officially received in Baptism?

To live the life of Jesus and to allow that seedling form of divine life, of Christ's life, infused in our hearts and souls at the moment of Baptism, completed in the Sacrament of Confirmation, that empowers us to proclaim the Gospel primarily by witness but also by word, words, inspired by love and affection and kindness. But also, fortitude, where our personal well-being or comfort, or even political correctness, may be compromised because we proclaim the truth in love and understanding, but nevertheless the truth.

We reconstruct that scene of this extraordinary man, of this saint, who traditionally is known as the last prophet of Our Lord. How can I imitate him? I notice that his words are very apropos. Inspiring, but with due respect and veneration, reverence, nothing terribly original: "Obey the commandments," "be just." Told some soldiers in another gospel, "Repent of your sins."

Why did throngs of people follow him? He was dressed as a prophet, so he probably had disheveled hair and lived in the wilderness, preparing his ministry with protracted time in prayer and penance, that his asceticism, his piety, his penance, served as the raw material for the Holy Spirit to transform because he became Christ-like in anticipation of the coming of Our Lord.

We recall that when Mary visited St. Elizabeth, Mary was carrying Jesus in her womb. And the Scripture says that St. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and that Holy Spirit filled the unborn John the Baptist. And John the Baptist allows that Holy Spirit, in a mysterious way that we can't explain completely, a transformation by which his holiness, his Christ-like personality, demeanor, attracted followers.

So when he articulated those unoriginal, but poignant words, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand," it was the persona behind those words, it was the authority of deep love, of deep holiness, that attracted the people like a magnet.

We read in today's Gospel, this description of John the Baptist, "A voice of one crying out in the desert, 'prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'" "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low." "The winding road shall be made straight, and the rough waves made smooth. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

These are metaphors of conversion. Rough waves being made smooth. Mountains and hills being made low. Allusions to the change. And then the climax of these words that were first articulated by Isaiah, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." As we prepare ourselves more intensely for the birth of Jesus, and celebrate Advent in three traditional ways, we commemorate the first coming in humility. We remotely prepare for Jesus' second coming and his final judgment.

But more close to home, which is a fluid Advent, this is taken from St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the third Advent where Our Lord comes to us. I'd almost like to talk about a fourth Advent, where we play the role of John the Baptist and duplicate these words, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." All flesh shall see the salvation of God through my imperfect witness.

We may ask ourselves, "Who am I to bring the birth of Our Lord to others? Who am I to reveal in the celebrated words of St. John Paul, 'the face of Jesus' to others? Who am I to move someone to Christ, to be an instrument of the evangelization of attraction," so often emphasized by our Holy Father, Pope Francis? "Who am I to make straight the valleys?"

We may say, "I'm so flawed. My track record contradicts these high ideals of the Gospel. And with a spirit of humility and supernatural outlook, this presentation of Jesus, this being an ambulatory Christmas, a walking Christmas, a Christmas on call, that we're carrying Christmas for everybody we meet.

It's not about my talents, my gifts, my skills, but it is about letting that Christ who lives in me through Baptism, to let him grow so he reaches a threshold of growth that he reveals himself through me, through myself, being an imperfect vessel, but a vessel of Jesus Christ, nevertheless.

Lord, as we address our attention to you, you're asking me to be a modern John the Baptist, a modern John the Baptist in my family circle, at my place of work, on my sick bed, on the sports field, at the party, at the Christmas parties, though technically we should be celebrating Christmas after Christmas not during Advent, which is a penitential time, but no need to fight that battle. I ask that question, "What shall I do?"

I recall, something that probably will never slip my mind, and I think it's been stated three times by two non-Catholic Christians who eventually became Catholic, and a recently converted Catholic who was formerly a non-Catholic Christian. I don't say Protestant because they're not protesting. All three expressed a desire for someone to make Christ real to them.

One gentleman realized that the Catholic Church had more resources to connect with the Lord, especially the Holy Eucharist. That's sort of the magnet that attracts Christian non-Catholics to the Catholic faith. The gentleman, rather nervous, said, "I don't mean to, uh, ruffle your feathers, Father. But I just truly desire some Catholics who make Christ real to me."

And I remember this couple, also thinking about entering into the Church: "We want someone to make Christ real to me." I re-read part of the celebrated apostolic letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* written by St. John

Paul at the dawning of the new millennium, since his feast, or his memorial was celebrated in the middle of October. And it was also the 40th anniversary of his installation. I happen to have been studying and preparation for the priesthood in Rome during those years. And I started to read through that letter. And what struck me was a quotation from St. John's gospel, where these Greek pilgrims are in Jerusalem for the Passover.

And they say to, I guess, Jesus' secretaries, they both have Greek names, Philip and Andrew, "We wish to see Jesus." That apostolic letter says, "This is the cry of the world. They want you to be Christmas for them." We want factual truth. But first, we want to see Jesus. We don't want to see a moralizer. We don't want to see someone who's behind very edifying and noble causes.

We want to see Jesus. We want to see the joy of Jesus. As Pope Francis marvelously states in his exhortation on joy, specifying that this modern work of evangelization is predicated upon joy, "That is how I prepare the way of the Lord. I can't do the work of the Holy Spirit whose role is conversion. But I could be that introduction to Christ, that magnet for Christ."

The first readings are a preface to the teachings of St. Paul from the prophet Baruch. I read the first couple of lines, "Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery. Put on the splendor of glory from God forever, wrapped in the cloak of the justice from God. Bear on your head the miter that displays the glory of the eternal name, for God will show all the Earth your splendor. You will be named by God forever the peace of justice, the glory of God's worship."

This is an image of what St. Paul will say explicitly throughout his teaching: "Put on Jesus Christ." That is my calling. That is how I could imitate John the Baptist: Look at Jesus Christ. Have a personal friendship with Jesus Christ. Abide in his love. As the branch is united to the vine, abide in the life of Our Lord.

As St. Josemaria states and teaches, "Two ports of entry into that heart of Christ is to meditate and to unite ourselves to Jesus Christ in the Bread," the Bread of God, the Holy Eucharist, his true presence. Putting words in the Eucharistic mouth of Jesus through his words of the Gospel and mulling over those words, and nourishing ourselves with those words, and talking to him about those words, and examining ourselves about his words, and desiring to incarnate those words. Put on Jesus Christ.

If I prepare the way of the Lord, I have to do what John the Baptist did: He connected with God. He focused on God. Not that we are going to live in some secluded place and make an unending retreat, but amid our daily tasks and activities, we want to keep on looking at Christ, putting him on, and having generous rendezvous with him without compromising our duties. Silent time with him where I am nourishing myself with the Bread and the Word.

I need to ask myself the question of St. Josemaria in these words, recorded in *The Way*, 382. We put ourselves in the historical context of *The Way*. It was a time of religious persecution in Spain. It was a time of experiencing apparent failure, not real failure, that never happens when we connect with Our Lord, it's always victorious, but apparent failure, persecutions, poverty, lack of freedom of movement, of religious expression, misunderstanding the role, the ordinary woman or man and middle of the world called to bear the burden of evangelization.

Until that time, collective opinion was you needed to join a religious order or become a candidate for the priesthood. But someone with a job, married or unmarried, but in the middle of the world, embracing the same level of holiness as a Teresa of Avila, or John of the Cross was unheard of. We're called to do that. So, we take to heart, and we put this question to our own selves: "When I made you a present, of that life of Jesus, I wrote in it this inscription, 'May you seek Christ. May you find Christ. May you love Christ.' These are three very distinct steps. Have you at least tried to live the first one?" There is a sense of urgency here.

I remember listening to words of Bl. Alvaro, St. Josemaria's immediate successor, and seeing a bit the contrast between him and St. Josemaria in terms of character and temperament, not in terms of spirit. One was very passionate, displayed a whole range of emotions, with the inspiring force of charity and love, where Bl. Alvaro, who I knew personally, was laidback; very engineering; had a beautiful smile; had very human affection; wasn't theoretical; wasn't otherworldly. Everything about you was of interest to him. He suffered when you suffered, he was joyful when you were joyful; sense of humor; self-deprecating; more reserved; and always cheerful. Liked a good laugh.

It was surrealistic when I attended his beatification. During his lifetime, he came across as an affectionate grandfatherly priest, eventually bishop. I would be at informal get-togethers with him, and then I go to his beatification and half a million people there. This wide-open space outside of the center of Madrid is packed with people.

I'm saying to myself, "Is this the same person I was in a living room with? Where we have a few laughs and exchange stories? Be a recipient of his affection, of his love, of his joy?" Yes, and I remember very vividly, without using those explicit words, how he would teach what St. Paul taught, "Put on Jesus Christ."

He said that our life of piety should never be perfunctory, that we need to truly make each act of piety, especially the Mass, the mental prayer, some like to use the classical phrase, *Lectio Divina*, meditation, hanging out with Jesus, whatever term one wants to use, says, "Those have to be very special moments." And he would say, "Don't just get it done. Put your heart into it. Revolve your day around it. That's your most important activity of the day," those times of more protracted prayer, whether it's Mass, whether it's meditation, whether it's Rosary.

And taught, or reiterated, St. Josemaria's teaching that this revelation of Christ, bringing the greatest Christmas present, which is Jesus Christ himself, he does call himself "gift." To quote him, "If you only knew the gift of God, who is asking you for a drink, you would have asked of him living water," as he addressed to the Samaritan woman. That this preparation of the way of the Lord is an overflow of our interior life from within.

Last brief point, more anecdotal. Being a priest, we hear lots of confessions and give spiritual direction. And I'm very grateful to God that people have brought lots of their friends, their family members, to confession, to spiritual direction.

But I must say, without even attempting to cast even a positive judgment, that this work of evangelization through the confessional, through spiritual direction, which is in a sense where the rubber meets the road, is a consequence of the holiness of their friends, or their parents or their wives or their husbands or their siblings or their acquaintances. On some level, new person for confession, for direction, experienced Christ through their friend or through their family member.

Lord, give me the faith, not to face obstacles, but in a very positive way, even though it comes across negative, that the big challenge, the big obstacle, is not all those insurmountable -isms with Christ, every -ism is surmountable, but it may seem insurmountable, will be my lack of holiness, that I have not given my whole heart to you, so that you could reveal yourself through me, so that I can prepare the way of the Lord.

Mary, engrain this point of *The Way* in my heart. This is the goal. And we approach it little by little. “Said a prayerful soul: In intentions, may Jesus be our end; in affections, our love; in speech, our theme; in actions, our model.” Mary, may it happen.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations you’ve communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



ST. JOSEMARIA INSTITUTE

WWW.STJOSEMARIA.ORG

Content may not be published or reprinted without permission.

*We are pleased to offer a transcript of this podcast to serve the needs of all our subscribers.
Please note, however, that this transcript is generated by AI and may not be perfectly accurate.*

➤ SUBSCRIBE TO OUR NEWSLETTER