

Homily for the First Sunday of Advent (Cycle C)

1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2

Perseverance in Holiness: The Long Road to Glory

Introduction: The Marathon of Faith

Good morning, everyone! Advent is here, the season when the Church tells us to prepare for the coming of Christ. And no, this isn't just about putting up lights or planning that perfect Christmas meal. Advent is about getting ready for something far more exciting—the second coming of Jesus!

In today's reading, St. Paul gives us a pep talk. Think of it as spiritual training for the marathon of holiness. And yes, sometimes our journey toward God feels like a marathon. It's long, it's tiring, and occasionally we trip and fall flat on our faces. But here's the good news: God is like the coach who not only cheers us on but also picks us up when we stumble.

Breaking Down St. Paul's Message

St. Paul writes to the Thessalonians, "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all." (1 Thess 3:12) Let's pause here. The goal of holiness isn't about checking off a list of "do's and don'ts." It's about *love*—love for God and love for others. St. John Chrysostom teaches that love is "the mother of all virtues," the foundation upon which all holiness is built. Without love, all our efforts mean nothing.

But Paul doesn't stop there. He prays that the Thessalonians may be "blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus." (1 Thess 3:13) Now, *blameless* might sound intimidating. Are we supposed to be perfect? St. Augustine reminds us that holiness isn't about never making mistakes—it's about striving for God daily. He says, "The Christian life is not about being sinless, but about sinning less." It's about perseverance.

Finally, Paul urges the Thessalonians to "live in a way that pleases God." (1 Thess 4:1) This isn't a one-time thing. Holiness isn't like cramming for an exam the night before; it's a lifelong process. St. Gregory the Great compares it to climbing a ladder: "We ascend step by step, always reaching higher, but we never stop until we meet Christ."

Why Perseverance Matters

Let's be real: the journey to holiness can feel discouraging. Maybe you've thought, *I've tried to pray more, but I keep getting distracted. Or I want to forgive, but it's so hard.* St. Paul understands these struggles. That's why he emphasizes perseverance. The Church Fathers remind us that the devil's favorite tactic isn't always to tempt us with big sins—it's to make us give up on the journey entirely.

Think of holiness like planting a garden. You can't just toss seeds on the ground and expect instant roses. You have to water, weed, and wait. And yes, there will be storms, bugs, and maybe even the occasional rabbit nibbling at your lettuce! But as St. Teresa of Avila says, "Patience obtains everything."

The Spiritual Gym

Let me give you a modern analogy. Think of holiness like joining a gym. When you first start working out, you're full of enthusiasm. But after a few weeks, you're sore, tired, and wondering

why you signed up. Holiness is like that. It's spiritual exercise. Daily prayer strengthens your soul, acts of charity build your spiritual endurance, and the sacraments feed you like protein shakes for your faith!

And just like at the gym, you'll see progress if you keep going. Maybe you start with a tiny act of patience—biting your tongue instead of snapping at someone. Over time, those little efforts build a habit of virtue. Before you know it, you're spiritually stronger than you ever thought possible.

Encouragement from the Church Fathers

The Church Fathers offer plenty of encouragement for the journey:

- **St. John Chrysostom** reminds us, "God does not demand that you be victorious; He only asks that you do not abandon the struggle."
- **St. Ambrose** says, "Holiness is not in never falling but in rising every time you fall."
- And my personal favorite from **St. Augustine**: "God provides the wind, but man must raise the sails."

God gives us grace, but we have to cooperate with it. It's not about perfection—it's about persistence.

Practical Tips for Persevering in Holiness

1. **Daily Prayer:** Start small. Even five minutes of prayer each day can transform your relationship with God.
2. **Frequent the Sacraments:** Confession is like a reset button, and the Eucharist is spiritual fuel for the journey.
3. **Acts of Charity:** Love is the heart of holiness. Volunteer, forgive, or simply listen to someone who needs a friend.
4. **Find Encouragement:** Surround yourself with people who share your faith journey. Join a Bible study, prayer group, or just chat with someone who inspires you.
5. **Don't Give Up:** When you fall, get back up. Every saint started as a sinner who refused to quit.

A Fun Twist: The GPS Analogy

Holiness is like following a GPS. When you make a wrong turn, it doesn't say, "Well, that's it! You're hopeless. Go home!" It says, "Recalculating." God's grace is like that GPS—it recalculates our route every time we mess up. The goal hasn't changed, and as long as we keep moving forward, we'll get there.

Advent as Training Season

Advent is the perfect time to recommit to your journey. The world tells us to aim for perfection in gifts, decorations, and parties. But God invites us to aim for holiness in love, patience, and perseverance.

So, as we start this season, let's take St. Paul's words to heart. Let's abound in love, strive for holiness, and persevere with joy. Because the finish line is worth it. At the end of the race is Jesus, waiting to say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

And that, my friends, is the ultimate Christmas gift.

Amen!

