

THE SACRED MYSTERY OF TIME

I remember once at this time of year going into our local supermarket. It was early December, a wet Wednesday afternoon, but the place was heaving: trolleys stacked high, people rushing around as if no tomorrow, long queues at the checkout. When eventually I got to the till, with my pint of milk and packet of digestives, I asked the girl: 'What's going on? It's so busy'. She looked flabbergasted: 'Don't you know? It's Christmas!' 'Oh!' I said in my clerical collar. 'Well we're Catholic, and we have our Christmas towards the end of the month.' She took it well!

SEE THE DAYS ARE COMING WHEN GOD WILL FULFIL THE PROMISE MADE TO THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL. Today the First Sunday of Advent, the Church begins her official preparations for Christ's Coming. Advent lasts but four weeks yet it's magical. On this first Sunday, we think about Christ's Second Coming at the End-Time, then the next two Sundays about John the Baptist, and on the Fourth Sunday, about Our Lady and St. Joseph before Our Lord's Birth. The Old Testament readings are all prophecies about the Messiah and the Messianic age, whilst the Second Readings from Paul are exhortations about how we should live. This first Sunday of Advent is also the first day of the Church's liturgical year: I should wish you Happy New Year! For over the months ahead, we will follow in the Liturgy Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection. The Gospels of this Year C come from the Gospel of St. Luke. Luke's Gospel is essentially a travel narrative from Galilee to Jerusalem and, in Acts, from Jerusalem to the Eternal City Rome. It's about the journey of Christ to suffering and glory, a journey in Him each one of us too must make.

Time is a sacred mystery. As bishop I receive many letters complaining that the Church these days is going backwards. It's 50 years since the Second Vatican Council, which is why we're keeping a Year of Faith. But I always point out, it must have felt the same 50 years after the Council of Trent, when once the new things had come in, old things reappeared. In his Essay on Development, Newman says any authentic development in the Church is always conservative of the past. The new never replaces the old, but absorbs it into a higher synthesis. This is exactly what's happening now. The Church has entered a period of consolidation. Some older Catholics find this disappointing. Yet the Church can never really go backwards. Founded on Christ, she is propelled forwards through space-time by the Holy Spirit, who leads her into the fullness of truth. It's right 50 years on from Vatican II, to take stock, to ensure that those elements of the Tradition in danger of being lost, are re-appropriated. The Year of Faith is neither a time to go back nor a time to go forward. Rather, it's a time to deepen, to deepen our faith, to deepen our love, to deepen our communion with Christ and his Church.

STAY AWAKE, PRAYING AT ALL TIMES TO STAND BEFORE THE SON OF MAN. In her 2000 year history the Catholic Church has never before passed through such an affluent, pluralist, secular culture as our own. We now realise what happens when she does: faith grows thin, people stop going to Mass, marriages break down, priests leave, parishes are clustered. The Year of Faith invites us to buck the trend. Let's deepen our faith in Christ and his Church. Let's keep this Advent and Christmas special, perhaps by saying the Angelus or fasting on Fridays for our priests. Today, then, Happy New Year - and have a very blessed Advent.