

1st Sunday in Advent

Cycle C-2024

Several years ago on the NFL Network, Chuck Noll was named one of the top ten coaches of all time. He was the head coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers from 1969-1991. He inherited a franchise that had never won a playoff game since they came into existence in 1933. In fact, they had only been to one playoff game. They were known as the “loveable losers.” Under his leadership, they made it to the playoffs every year from 1972-1979 and won four Super Bowls in a six year period. In spite of his unprecedented success, Chuck Noll has never really been given the credit he deserved. It all had to do with his personality. He was a behind the scenes kind of guy. He avoided the limelight. His focus was helping his players to be the best they could be, both on the field and in life. He had a real subtle way about him.

In the Book of Wisdom, it is revealed that subtlety is one of the attributes of God. The subtlety of God really comes to mind as we begin the Advent Season, in anticipation of the birth of our Brother and Savior, Jesus Christ. Instead of coming into the world by dazzling us

with the fullness of His glory, He came to us as a powerless and vulnerable baby. He was born in almost complete anonymity. He was born outside in a cave and was exposed to the elements. During the first thirty years of life, he lived an ordinary and obscure Jewish life. He enjoyed a normal childhood and adolescence and as an adult, worked as a carpenter. It was only during His three years of public ministry that His Divinity came shining through, for all to see. And the sole purpose was to reveal the love, grace, mercy, and salvation of God.

Once His public ministry began, He was rejected by the majority of the people, because He did not match the expectations they had of the long-awaited Messiah. He was not the powerful national leader that would restore Israel to political and military glory. Instead, with His characteristic subtlety, Jesus was the Suffering Servant who entered into a profound solidarity with those who were often overlooked and viewed as lacking dignity: the poor, women, non-Jews, the sick, the suffering, the sinner, and the rejected. The subtlety of Jesus continued while the King of Kings suffered and died on the cross as a common criminal. Even the exact moment of His resurrection was subtle as it was observed by no one, even though He eventually revealed Himself to His

followers. After He ascended into heaven, His presence among us remains subtle through the reality of a blessed but imperfect church in which we encounter Him through the Sacred Scriptures, the Sacraments, the community of believers, and the Magisterium, which is composed of the Pope and the Bishops who are in union with Him.

It is not an understatement to proclaim that we have a God who is a master of subtlety. It is only by understanding and embracing this spiritual truth that we will be able to discover and stay in touch with Christ's continual presence and activity in our lives. God comes to us through the subtlety of our daily existence and life circumstances. Through it all, He is loving, helping, teaching, preparing, inspiring, healing, molding, transforming, and saving us. Whether we are experiencing joy or sorrow, prosperity or deprivation, health or sickness, love or rejection, success or failure, the Risen Christ is loving us and seeking to bring about His higher purposes. God is subtly present and active in every nook and cranny of our internal and external existence.

Since our God is the master of subtlety, what are some important ways that we can imitate Him. The first thing

that comes to my mind is the Gospel reading from Ash Wednesday. The basic message is that in our prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, we are not to bring attention to ourselves. With subtlety, we are called to do the right thing with the proper motivation and disposition of heart. We are called to do everything for the glory of God, by loving God and others. In our own unique way, we are called to embrace John the Baptist's motto in reference to Jesus: "He must increase, and I must decrease." We are called to be living saints without those around us being "none the wiser." Jesus promises that our Heavenly Father always sees the subtle things we do and will generously bless us in this life and repay us with heavenly glory.

Another way we can imitate the subtlety of Jesus, is by outreach and interaction with those who are often overlooked or underappreciated. Who are those people among our family and friends? Who are those people within our church, neighborhood, and local community? Who are those people within our workplaces and schools? How can we be the subtle presence of the Risen Christ for everyone we encounter?

Finally, we can imitate the subtlety of Jesus through a renewed attentiveness and respect to the important

people in our lives. These are the ones we are often most tempted to overlook. Familiarity tends to breed complacency, indifference, and blindness. Through a renewed focus on the subtle things in our relationships, we can: build them up through words of love, encouragement, affirmation, appreciation, and courtesy; make time for them and truly be present to them in those shared moments; do thoughtful things that reveal we are thinking of them and they are valuable to us; do our fair share of the chores and responsibilities; and bless them with the power of positive and life giving touch.

I have learned that subtle people who do subtle things can have a powerful impact on the lives of those around them, even though it is not always known by others or appreciated in the moment. This reality is brought home through the life of the Sulpician priest, Fr. Joseph Martin. Whenever he was a new priest, he had an overwhelming desire to be a superstar priest within the academic world. He did his best to win popularity and acclaim from both his students and colleagues for his preaching and teaching. No matter what he did and how hard he tried, the glory and success he longed for eluded him. To cope with his growing anxiety, depression, and feelings

of failure, he began to drink heavily. He eventually became a full-fledged alcoholic. It got so out of control that he became unemployable within his religious order. He was completely rejected and ostracized by his fellow Sulpician brothers, even though he still lived in community.

When Fr. Martin eventually died, they prepared a small funeral in their daily chapel. They did not expect anyone outside of the community to attend. They were blown away when they had to move the Mass to the main church, because over 2,000 people showed up. As the Sulpicians talked to those in attendance, they learned that all of them were there to honor Fr. Martin because they credited him with saving their lives. You see, whenever he hit rock bottom, he finally surrendered his heart and life to God and acknowledged his complete powerlessness over alcohol and other things in his life. He began going to AA meetings to obtain and maintain sobriety. He eventually began to help others to do the same. Even though Fr Martin did not become a superstar priest in the way he had envisioned, in the most subtle of ways, he became one. He was a superstar to those 2,000 fragile and wounded people who found healing and wholeness through his life, witness, and ministry.

As we prepare ourselves to receive the subtle presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, may we pray for the following graces. First, the grace of recognizing and responding to the subtle love of Jesus in our daily lives. And second, the grace to subtly bring His love to others, trusting in Jesus's words: "And your Father who sees in secret, will repay you." In imitation of our Brother and Savior, may we become masters of subtlety.