

Educate Magis Advent Recollection: Do You See What I See?

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I'm going to start off by being very honest with you. Advent has not always been a favorite season for me. Having been a student and then being on staff at schools, the Advent season has always been associated with the immense pressures of exams, projects, waning attention spans, weariness, and just the desire to be done and on holiday break. The few days of break before Christmas were always a mess of trying to figure out gift-giving and family expectations and responsibilities. Stress, stress, and more stress. Anxiety, anticipating problems, and just trying to get everything done... It's not much of a way to enter into the season or enjoy Advent and Christmas for what they signify. Advent is a dark time physically in many parts of the world like mine because of the lack of sun, but it may also be a dark time of the year for students, school faculty and staff, and many families.

But I don't want to go too far down the road of stress and anxiety because there is a happier ending to my experience of Advent. The darkness changed for me a few years ago when making the 19th annotation of the *Spiritual Exercises*, also known as the Spiritual Exercises in daily life. Even though the stressful, challenging circumstances didn't change then (and they still haven't changed now), back then my spiritual director encouraged me sit quietly looking at a lit candle in the dimly lit room for a couple of minutes. He asked me to let the light dance in front of me and in my eyes. After a couple of minutes sitting in the silence looking at the candle, he asked me to close my eyes and tell him what I saw. What I saw was that the image of the flame remained and the light continued to dance on the other side of my eyelids. The flame remained – itself light and joyful and free, continuing to be and give itself to me. Part of the lesson I learned

that morning was to look at the light, be with the light, and allow the light to free me from the constraints that I had just accepted as what to expect and what would always be, constraints that I allowed to define me.

The bigger lesson for me was realizing that Advent is about vision. More specifically, Advent is about God's vision and our vision aligning. We have the opportunity to tune our eyes anew to God's vision for us as individuals and humankind as a whole. In this way, Advent, even now, is an entry into the uniquely ongoing, creative, redemptive act that continues from the first period of waiting and preparation for the coming of Christ. The story is not finished until all is transformed and returned to God.

Thus the story continues with us and the need to tune our vision to God's vision and say "yes" to the invitations God offers us these days, particularly as educators who mold the future child by child. As Jesuit school educators we have the incredible gift of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius to help us. I am passionate about the *Spiritual Exercises*, in part because I have not found a better way to place myself at the disposal of God to be returned and re-tuned to the Divine vision. This is my hope for our time together today too. We will walk with each other in this recollection through the contemplation on the Incarnation as St. Ignatius offers it to us. But then we will step back into our own time and schools and see the incarnation come alive right here and now, allowing ourselves to experience God's vision in our time and place.

To each of us, God asks the question, "Do *you* see what *I* see?" This is the starting point for noticing and beginning to understand God's love for the world and God's activity within it. This is a question that God proposes to us daily, but there's a really special sense to it during this Advent and Christmas season. St. Ignatius extends God's invitation for us to join the Three Divine Persons in the contemplation of the Incarnation. We gaze with them upon the whole

world from their place in eternity, outside of time and a particular place. We are invited into this intimate circle of conversation to see the reality of the earthly situation alongside the Divine Persons. If you are comfortable doing so, feel free to close your eyes so that you can see in your mind the images that the Divine Persons see too.

We can imagine that they see the tremendous beauty of the creation that they made, its lushness and vibrant colors, the different textures of the landscapes, and the various forms of life teeming in this small planetary space. As they gaze closer at the earth, they see a world full of incredibly diverse people, all from different races and ethnic groups, dressed in the ways that make sense for their physical locations and cultures. They see the natural circle of life happening- birth & death; young ones growing, playing, and learning; celebrations of all kinds, tears of joy and tears of grief. We are reminded in the contemplation that the Divine Persons also gaze upon earth and see a world full of people who are failing to be what they were created for. They see people at war; people abusing themselves, others, and the precious earth itself. They also hear the sounds of the earth and people: discord, anger and yelling, swearing and blaspheming, but also laughter, joy, and let's not forget prayer too.

St. Ignatius's guidance for the contemplation gives a pretty dark image of the situation on earth. It's an overwhelmingly dark image actually. In the end, the gaze of the Divine Persons from their place in eternity observes that "all the people are dying and going down to hell." Some may want to think about this as a literal hell, but I think that we can understand this more broadly as an experiential or living type of hell too, where separation from light, goodness, mercy, and love is at the forefront of the social conditions human beings have created. The Divine Persons conclude that the oppression and death, the physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering that have

been experienced through the ages are a result of humanity's great blindness. Advent is about vision.

Just like in the television commercials I grew up watching, we can pause and say, "But wait, there's more!" The darkness of the contemplation is not total darkness. There are sparks of life and light that the Divine Persons also see in their gaze. Just think – their gaze is eternal. So they saw the light and faith of the holy women and men throughout the ages. They saw the liturgies and heard the prayers and ceremonies of peoples from all cultures and places. Just think – their gaze took in this very group. I can't help but think of Jesuit Fr. Tony de Mello saying, "Behold God beholding you...and smiling." Yes, the eternal gaze of God took in all of us and the women and men of goodwill and faith too.

So their sadness at the overall blindness of the people and the resulting hell was not the last word, as we all know. The Divine Persons from their eternal place of overflowing love say, "Let us work the redemption of the human race" and conclude that the Second Person should become a human being. I don't think it's a coincidence that the words "let us" begin that sentence in the contemplation, just like when God created human beings in the creation account in Genesis 1. "Let us make human beings in our own image..." "Let us work the redemption of the human race." The work of redemption is uniquely creative and at the center of this work is God and human beings together in what seems for many outside of faith an impossibly intimate bond.

The contemplation continues with the Archangel Gabriel visiting Mary and announcing God's plan for redemption. He announces to her that she will become pregnant with the Son of God – the promised one. It's at this point that we see perhaps the first human being whose vision needs to be tuned to God's vision. Whatever notion or image Mary had for herself, her people,

and all of humanity, it probably did not include herself in this integral role. Mary was the first human being who needed to discern her role and God's vision for the work of redemption. What did God's redemptive work look like? It looked like a young pregnant woman, bringing forward a new, little, fragile life into the world. So Mary asked questions. She thought about it. All the while, God waited. She overcame her fear of grappling with the impossible to give her "yes" and step into the vision...to allow God's vision become as God became a part of her. Redemption and a creative becoming worked hand in hand within her.

Then Joseph, the protector and dreamer, a holy man filled with compassion, needed to discern the creative redemptive role being offered to him. It would not have been easy for Joseph to let go of his confusion and anxiety when he was visited by the angel messenger in his dream. Just like Mary, he was told not to be afraid. We can imagine his incredulous question upon waking, "Did that really happen or did I just dream it?" Well, yes, Joseph, to both. From there, Joseph also had to think, discern, and decide. He chose to be a partner to Mary and with God for the redemption of his people.

In choosing to be participants in God's redemptive work, Mary and Joseph had the difficult task of bringing a new life into the world, nurturing him, raising him, teaching him, and in all ways caring for him into adulthood. All the while, as faithful Jewish people, they listened to the scriptures that we have been listening and responding to during this Advent season. Did they look at this little one and wonder how he was the key to bringing relief and rejoicing to the parched desert land; how he would heal and strengthen the weak, poor, and frightened; how he would become a friend of the oppressed and bring justice to them? Did they wonder how this small, vulnerable, fragile little boy would return sight to the blind, raise the dead, and be the answer to God working redemption for humankind?

As we know, the redemptive work of God continues today – God’s complete vision of the Kingdom has not manifested yet. The Kingdom is still in the process of coming into being. The Incarnation was the beginning of the process bringing with it the knowledge and faith that God is with us in our very humanity. By means of our baptism into the Body of Christ we have both the joy and responsibility of continuing the redemptive work of the Divine Persons that was started with Mary and Joseph. As we gather ourselves to God’s vision, we recognize that redemption comes through humanity itself, Jesus’s humanity joined with ours. In our individual contexts, we are called now to tune our vision to God’s. We are called to be open to receiving a vision for the working of our redemption that may seem impossible or even ludicrous. We are called to have the courage and compassion of Mary and Joseph to say yes to God and those God would give over to our care to raise.

As Jesuit school educators, we are given the responsibility to care for a very particular piece of the Kingdom of God as our role in the redemptive work of God. Our students, whether 7 or 17, are young, fragile, vulnerable human beings who need our courageous love, guidance, and protection. They need us to say yes to them as Mary said yes to receiving Jesus. Our yes to God is to receive these sons and daughters as our own and to allow ourselves to be filled with wonder about what God is doing here. And so we align our vision with God’s vision. We must recognize that our roles in the redemptive mission intersects with their roles. What should be our true joy is helping them discover and realize their part in the mission. They are Emmanuel – God with us. But just like Jesus needed Mary and Joseph to help him understand that he had a mission, our students need the same from us. They need us to notice God’s presence and creative activity happening in us, in them, and in the connected space between us.

So I propose that we once again visit the Divine Persons, but this time walk with them through our individual schools. Like earlier, feel free to close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so in order to enter into the vision more easily.

As you join the Divine Persons, allow your gaze to be upon your school with the same love and desire that they have for you and all of the students, faculty, and staff they encounter there. Open yourself to them, the location of their gaze, and their vision for what is and what is possibly becoming right there at your school.

So see yourself with the Divine Persons at your main doors. What do you see as you approach? What do you see upon entering? What is there that tells of who you are, the mission, and your school family?

Walk with the Divine Persons down the central hallway of your school. Who do you see? What do you hear? What are the conversations being had? What images are prominent in this space?

Go with the Divine Persons to the areas where students' physical needs are cared for, like the cafeteria, nurse's office, or gymnasium. How is the Christ-child in your students being helped... healed...encouraged to play...having appetites satisfied?

Walk with the Divine Persons through the areas of your school dedicated to academics. What is being taught? Where is there openness and sharing? Who is leading or involved in the conversations?

Visit the areas of your school where the spiritual and emotional well-being of the community is taken care of. Who are the people in these areas? What are the images and artwork that stand out? How is mission being communicated? Will all in your school community recognize themselves in these spaces?

Now take a moment to go to any other area of your school that the Divine Persons desire to gaze upon. Allow yourself to follow them and gaze upon these areas as you did the others. Notice what they see.

Now take a seat with the Divine Persons as they talk about your school. Do they speak about any areas of darkness among these places where there is an acute need for re-creation?

What are the areas that they delight in because they sparkle with the light of new creation?

What space of your school is waiting for or is welcoming the birth of the Christ-child already?

Finally, allow your gaze to behold the gaze of the Divine Persons on you...what are they asking of you at this time for your school and the Christ-child within it?