

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 1st Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2020

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Advent Sunday is the beginning of the Church Year. And it will be a year of grace. That is guaranteed. When the gospel Good News is proclaimed, the Mass is offered and prayed, and the sacraments are received, *the greatest thing on earth happens*. Souls will turn to, or *re-turn* to, Almighty God in faith and practice. This year of grace provides many opportunities for each one of us to draw closer to Our Blessed Lord Jesus and be strengthened and directed by His Sovereign Presence in our lives. We will have plenty of opportunities to do what St Paul exhorted us to do: “Cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” Elsewhere the Apostle declared when we were baptized we “first put on” Christ. But here he refers to those *continual conversions* by which we come ever more into conformity with God’s will. You do not need me to tell you Christian discipleship is no one shot deal! There is no framed-graduate-degree proclaiming Christian moral perfection hanging on anybody’s wall. We are constantly casting off the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light.

Unless we are brand-new Christians we have heard this Advent call many times. In our personal history, some years have indeed been years of grace: God’s gracious kingship finding more and more room to rule in our hearts. Perhaps in other years there has not been so much progress. We may have missed opportunities, sadly recognized later, or actually turned away from God. Advent Sunday is the right time to ask: How will you respond to the year of grace which begins today?

Your response will not be to a new story, but to an old story made new in you. The way we become conformed to Christ is not by being entertained each year by a brand-new approach totally repackaged to get our attention! We become conformed to Christ when we patiently copy His life and teaching. By His grace the old story is made new. It is by His grace that this happens.

Some of you remember a version of the old Palmer Method teaching handwriting. Back in the day it was called *penmanship* and was an art form. In the late 19th century Austin Palmer developed an approach for awkward young hands to learn cursive. He emphasized using arm muscles rather than wrists and fingers. Over the years there were adaptations and improvements to the method. By the 1950s you were given large letters and parts of large letters on ruled paper. On the dark

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outline you traced over the letter “C” and kept practicing. Then on the next paper the outlined letter was lighter, and finally you were writing the beautiful letter “C” all on your own, but still on the ruled paper. At first your pencil stumbled. Young hands are awkward. But as you made your copies it all became easier. Finally you could make the letter “C” without effort, and without the ruled paper. And then it was no longer the Palmer Method’s perfect capital letter “C”. It was you very own.

Of course the invention of the typewriter and keyboard was the death knell to penmanship (and letter writing as well). But in its way the old Palmer Method was a reflection on the far more wonderful activity of God the Holy Ghost. His office is the Church. And in the Church He takes the things of Christ and shows them to us to copy in our lives. The Holy Ghost helps our awkward souls by guiding us to practice, and practice again, what He has revealed until it becomes second nature to us. It is the old story made new in us. The old story of salvation is heard again and again until it is internalized and put into practice in our lives.

What will make this a year of grace for you? Advent Sunday is the time for Christian New Year resolutions. There will be some events or occasions, perhaps personal or private, or social and public, in which the Gospel of Christ will suddenly come alive. The Gospel will have a fresh and vital penetration into the very place which rules and motivates everything you do. It may be as if you were hearing it for the first time and being excited by its freshness and endless possibilities.

Practicing Palmer Method had as its sole reason the happy day you could put down the ruled paper and wrote your own letter in your own hand. You had developed your own distinctive handwriting. The Christian Year tells us about the life of Christ, year after year, for our pattern and instruction. Not that we listen to it and eventually put it off like ruled paper! We *put it on*, as St Paul says: “Casting off the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light.” The armor of light, St Paul says, is the Lord Jesus Christ. We put him on as *Lord* to rule us; we put Him on as *Jesus*, to save us; and in the Lord Jesus we put Him on as *Christ*, anointed and appointed by the Father, to rule and save us all.