

YOUR LIGHT GIVES US HOPE

24 Daily Practices for Advent

ANSELM GRÜN

Translated by Mark S. Burrows



PARACLETE PRESS
BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

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TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

Fr. Anselm Grün needs little introduction in Germany. He is well-known as a best-selling author of books on Christian faith and spirituality, which together have sold more than 14 million copies, and regularly gives talks and workshops across the country as well as appearing frequently on television. He does all this while living out his vow of “stability of place” at the Benedictine abbey of Münsterschwarzach, not far from the city of Würzburg in Lower Franconia. There, he joins his brothers in what St. Benedict described in his *Rule* as “a school for the Lord’s service,” which in this case is a large community of monks with a strong local ministry and a global vision of mission.

Within this community, which he joined as a nineteen-year-old in the early 1960s, Fr. Grün joins his brothers in the commitment to “work and pray,” as the motto of the Benedictine order puts it. For more than thirty years, he held the important position St. Benedict called the “cellarer,” the monk charged with managing the provisions of the monastery and thus responsible, as the *Rule* puts it, “for everything”—a kind of CFO for the abbey’s business operations. In this role, he had oversight of a workforce employing more than three hundred people in some twenty departments, hardly what we think of when we imagine a monk observing the rule of silence.

Yet while his work as cellarer surely grounded him in the often stressful realities of modern business, the wisdom he brings in his writings has more to do with St. Benedict’s daring conviction that

“the divine presence is everywhere”—in our work and in our prayer, in the monastery as in “the world.” Readers will come to recognize the impact of this belief throughout the pages that follow.

All this suggests why, in reading Fr. Grün, one does not encounter the voice of a reclusive monk. His God is not hiding somewhere in the monastery, out of reach of ordinary folks. On the contrary, and in keeping with the Advent tidings, he discovers God in the scriptural promises that point to the One who comes among us, the incarnate Lord in Jesus of Nazareth. At the heart of this season, we come face-to-face—quite literally—with the God who takes up human life and lives as one with us. This is the Messiah announced in Advent as Emmanuel, the God-with-us who was born in a simple manger in Bethlehem. And it is this God who seeks to be present “everywhere” among us in our lives today.

This day-by-day devotional guide to Advent appeared in the original German edition in 2015 and quickly became a well-loved companion for thousands of readers: Roman Catholic and Protestant, doubters and seekers. They found here what they have come to expect from Fr. Grün’s wide-ranging writings: namely, nourishment for their spiritual hunger and illumination for their path in life. It is a privilege to bring this devotional gem to English readers.

What you will find in these pages, meant to be read and pondered day by day during the weeks leading up to Christmas, is a message shaped by a dialogue between theology and psychology, faith and spirituality, divine revelation and human experience. Throughout the short chapters here, Fr. Grün meets us in our longing for wholeness, the desire that marks Advent as the “overture” to the larger symphony of the church’s year. These daily readings offer a

centering path through these often hectic weeks, reminding us, as the opening words of the *Rule* put it, to learn to “listen . . . with the ears of [our] heart.”

How do we learn to do this? Here, a few words of introduction might help orient you to this “guidebook” and the wisdom it reveals.

First, *Advent is a season of rebirth*. Fr. Grün reminds us that Advent is not simply a backward-looking celebration of ancient history, but rather a period of spiritual preparation when we ready ourselves for Christ’s birth *in us*. This theme, above all others, shapes the pages of this devotional book, drawing on ancient prophecies and later church traditions to suggest how this season proclaims the coming of God in our lives, here and now. Not accidentally, this season marks the beginning of the church’s year, which starts not with the first of January but with the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. Thus the author reminds us that Advent celebrates the story of the Incarnation as a “new beginning,” not simply in a manger long ago and far away, but in the realities of our daily lives. God longs to be born among us in our world—and in your life.

Second, *Advent is a season of renewal*. It is an opportunity to give ourselves to the work of uncluttering our lives, a time when we learn to open ourselves to the renewing gift of grace. In this season, we find ourselves called to “begin again” with the gospel, which promises light in the darkness, the light that brings us hope against the tides of despair. It is the season when we celebrate the birth of new life, *our* new life, in the midst of what we experience of disappointment and death.

Third, *Advent is a season of arrival*. This season invites us to celebrate God’s coming in the ordinary realities of our lives. Daily readings take their point of departure from scriptural texts, the

occasion of particular saints' days, and Advent traditions, all inviting us to make progress in our journey into the life of God. Alongside readings for the first twenty-four days of December are longer chapters devoted to each of the four Sundays, suggesting how the themes of these weeks shape an overarching narrative pattern of "arrival" for Advent. Readers steeped in the church's practices as well as those less familiar with them will find this book a helpful guide into the theological, spiritual, and psychological meaning unveiled to us in this season. Advent is about God's arrival in our lives, accompanied as we are by unexpected messengers and invited to "prepare the way" in our lives for his coming.

How might you use this book? The simplest way would be to begin with the first Sunday in Advent, reading the short introductory chapter and then setting aside time each morning to read the short chapter for each day. One might also begin at the end, with the author's afterword, for it is here that Fr. Grün gathers the themes explored throughout this book in a useful overview. The "Sunday" chapters might also be read each week at home, around the dinner table, or with a church group. But none of this is necessary; the short entries devoted to each of the twenty-four days leading up to Christmas are sufficient in themselves.

Whether used by individuals or with families or parish groups, this book hopes to deepen our *experience* of God during Advent, and that means coming to know ourselves for who we truly are. The encouragement and challenge Fr. Grün shares with us here has much to do with the utterly human focus of the story: the birth of a child born in difficult circumstances far from the comforts of home, and the family's hasty departure as migrants in search of safety from threat of death. In this case, they sought refuge in Egypt, a land Israel had long remembered as a place of

slavery; it was there that the holy family found protection, against all expectations.

Rarely has this story seemed as poignant as it does now, particularly in Europe, where a refugee crisis has led millions of displaced persons to flee their homelands in the Middle East and North Africa because of the threat of war, religious persecution, or hunger. Fr. Grün reminds us that the gospel stories face such struggles head-on: a vulnerable infant, born out of wedlock to Jewish parents, becomes with his parents a refugee, seeking safety from the threat of death and finding welcome in a strange and forbidding land.

Fr. Grün presents this ancient story as it has come to be embellished over the centuries with vivid traditions in the church's life. He guides us, as an author widely recognized for a wisdom at once spiritual and practical to the inner riches of our Advent faith. In these pages, through the days of this season, you will find yourself called like the shepherds, and lured like the Magi, to receive the gift of God's birth, in the "manger" of your heart. This is a book written to nourish your hunger for love and meet the longings of your heart. May you here find yourself welcomed ever more deeply into the mystery of the God who, as Fr. Grün reminds us, "desires this day to begin anew with you," for this God is "the one who is always eternally new"—"everywhere" in this world, as Benedict claimed, and in the daily realities of our lives.

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INTRODUCTION

Advent, the Season of Arrival

Advent is the quiet season when we wait for Jesus's coming. For the word *Advent* simply means "arrival." We wait for Jesus's arrival in our heart. But we also wait for his coming at the end of the ages. Over the ages Christians have celebrated this season as a special time of preparation leading to the celebration of Christmas, one marked by many family observances. It is a season when we draw on traditions and rituals that usher us into the mystery of Christmas, not simply in the church but in our daily lives. In such ways, we come to discover the theological truth of this season in intimate ways that stir our hearts.

In this book, I hope to introduce the most important message of Advent through brief, daily meditations that explore some particular aspect of this message, together with a practice inviting you to deepen your experience of its meaning in your daily life.

You will also find here short chapters introducing the message central to each of the four Advent Sundays. The first of these Sundays focuses on apocalyptic passages from the Scriptures that tell of the end times and warn us to be watchful. The second and third Sundays place John the Baptist at the center of the story, the voice "crying in the wilderness," calling us to repent and await the coming Messiah. The fourth and final Sunday focuses on Mary, who is to give birth to the promised Savior. She embodies the true

meaning of Advent, directing us toward Christ, who is coming *to us* and also desires to be born *in us*. For this reason, I have included a meditation for each of these Sundays, alongside one for each of the days in December leading up to Christmas. My intention throughout is to offer these reflections in order that the mystery of Advent might illumine our daily lives as well as those of our families and church communities.

It has long been customary in Germany, as in the United States, to hang up an Advent calendar at home during this season, with windows for each of the twenty-four days preceding Christmas. In earlier times, each concealed an Advent symbol, image, or Bible verse; today, though, these calendars seem intended mostly for children, with each window holding a piece of candy, chocolate, or a small toy. In this book, each day will offer a short reflection together with a simple practice designed to be used either singly or with one's family or friends. For example, on the Saturday evening before the start of each new week during Advent, one might read the short biblical text that precedes each of these meditations, using this theme to shape one's path through the coming week. Alongside these four entries is one for each of the days leading up to Christmas, offering a meditation on a particular theme and related practice to shape the day ahead. When we choose to give shape to Advent in such deliberate ways, we will find this season to be a time of blessing for us and for our families. In so doing, we learn to welcome this season as a time when we await Christ's coming in our lives, thereby coming to experience Advent in a new way.

Today, the season of Advent has become a premature celebration of Christmas. As with the Christmas markets found in cities and towns all across Germany, department stores begin broadcasting

Christmas carols in early November, weeks before Advent has even begun. This pushing forward of Christmas prevents us from experiencing the mystery of Advent as it should be celebrated. One of my intentions here is to recover the original meaning of this season as a time of stillness, waiting, and watching in order to experience more intentionally its saving power in our lives.

Yours,
Fr. Anselm Grün, OSB

I

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Come, Lord Jesus!



Each of the first three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—include Jesus’s teachings about the end of time, and one of these passages is traditionally read on the first Sunday of Advent. Such readings about the “apocalypse” might well be difficult for us as modern people, but the root of the word simply means “to discover,” or “unveil.” These texts seek to show us what’s what in our world, reminding us that this world is not eternal. It is not our ultimate home. We yearn for another world, one shaped by God and not by the powers of this age. This is the reason the church reminds us of this theme today, honoring our yearning for God’s world and our longing for Christ’s coming at the beginning of Advent. When Jesus comes again, this world as we know it will be transformed.

Of course, Jesus desires to come to each of us in every moment of our lives. Indeed, the parable of the gatekeeper, recounted in Mark’s Gospel, reminds us of his continual coming among us. We, too, should be like the gatekeeper who waits for the coming of his Lord, refusing to allow any strangers into the house but waiting

patiently to open his door for the Lord. Evagrius of Pontus, a monk of the fourth century ce, describes our proper posture through this image of the gatekeeper. We should guard the doors of our hearts, as this gatekeeper had done, keeping an eye on this inner door so that no strange thoughts or emotions might enter. For we are often not lords of our own house, which all too often seems filled with other occupants—injuries that hurt us, annoyances that root themselves in us, fears and disappointments that dwell in us. We should ask of every thought that seeks entry into our hearts this question: *Who are you? And what do you want with me? Do you have some important message for me, or are you simply an undesirable stranger who wants to claim me for his own purposes?* Only in such a way can we discern what to let in, and what to keep out. We should keep watch over the door of our heart so that we are truly present when the Lord himself comes to us and asks to enter. This, then, is the goal of our watching: to be ready to receive the Lord, who stands at the door of our heart and knocks, asking to come in.

Of course, we know that the Lord, who is “everywhere” as St. Benedict reminds us, is already present in our lives. But because we are often not paying proper attention, and too often seem to be absent from the house of our own heart, we experience the Lord as the one who is coming. In Advent, we await Christ’s coming, and hope for his entrance into our heart. Thus the call of longing—“Come, Lord Jesus”—that so shaped the earliest Christians is the call to come home to our true self, which means to come home to our own heart. Only when we are truly present to ourselves can the Lord come to us and enter our lives. Thus Advent is a season in which we hope to awake from our sleep, and so come to see what is truly real in our lives. Advent is a season meant to prepare us for the Lord’s coming so that we might be at home when he

knocks at our heart's door. And he comes to us every day, and in so many ways: in our brothers and sisters as in the stillness when the clamor of our noisy thoughts finally abates. He knocks on our door through the quiet impulses of our heart. When we open to him, Advent comes to fulfillment in us, because when the Lord comes to us, the one whom we long for enters into the house of our heart, coming into us as the King of Glory.

When the Gospel speaks of the end of the world, we don't need to worry about *when* this world might end. For each of us, the world ceases to exist at the time of our death. The end of the world arrives for each of us at *our* ending, and then it is that the kingdom of God breaks upon us. At that time God will come to change us entirely. Thus Advent is the time when we become aware of the temporality of our life. The thought of our death, when the world as we know it comes to an end for us, is ultimately an invitation—to live with purpose and come to sense the mystery of our life in every moment. Precisely because our life is finite, we are challenged to become aware of the present moment and consider what path we want to pursue in this world.

1 December

LIGHT

DURING ADVENT we hear marvelous texts that come to us from the prophet Isaiah. Often these speak of the light that breaks into the darkness. The composer Georg Friedrich Handel set to music the beginning of the ninth chapter of Isaiah in a wonderful bass aria that reads:

*The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light;
and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death,
upon them hath the light shined. (Isa. 9:2 KJV)*

The light that is coming into our world in Jesus wants to bring light into our darkness. Who are those who dwell in the land of darkness? Those whose hearts are dark and sorrowful. But when the light of God shines into this darkness, everything becomes light in our lives and we find our mood brightening. Advent is a season in which we find ourselves invited to face our darkness and bring it to the light of Christ so that his light might shine within us.

Practice

Light a candle in a dark room in your house and sit comfortably and quietly in front of it. Watch to see how the flickering light brightens everything in the room, casting a soft light upon it all. In your mind consider how Christ, at Christmas, shines his tender light into every room within your heart—illuminating your

fears and your restlessness, your superficiality and your anger, your jealousy.

Close your eyes and see, with your inner eye, how the light of this candle shines upon you: on your body, your chest and heart, your neck, your hands, your legs and feet, and all the way to your toes. Now allow this light to find those places in your life that are dark and in greatest need of it.

This is the light that wants to shine in your home, in the places where you work and sleep. But also in those places where you are worried and troubled. In the times when you gather with your family and friends. And in all the conflicts and tensions you face with others.

Trust this light, which sometimes seems dim to you, to shine brightly upon every aspect of your life, bringing the mystery of God's love into your heart and home. In this way, you will begin to discover that you can be truly at home wherever you are. For we can only dwell in the "house of our heart" where this mystery dwells. Here we find our true home, and here we learn to welcome God who seeks to come to us as light and love. Only then do we find ourselves truly at home, even in the midst of what is restless within us.

2 December

WAITING

WAITING IS a fundamental part of our lives. We often find ourselves waiting. We all know what it is like to wait for someone we expect to come, often becoming quite impatient until they finally arrive. Or we find ourselves waiting for a call and looking at our watches as we hope to hear the phone ring; after all, we'd agreed on a time to talk. And we often find ourselves waiting in lines at a store, a bus stop, or in airport security lines that stand between us and making our flight on time. Waiting shapes much of our lives. And, to be honest, we often find it hard to wait, especially in circumstances over which we have little control.

Advent is a time of waiting, a season of expectation when we learn how to wait for God's coming into our hearts—again and again. In these weeks, we know in our hearts that when God does come all will be well and we will experience what it means to come home to ourselves. We have just this experience when we give ourselves to those longings of our heart that reach beyond this world, and when we come to see that, we do have the strength to wait. For it is in this waiting that we come to know our true self; in this experience, we feel ourselves becoming one in the moment. We discover a quiet center within ourselves, and realize that this moment holds everything that is important for us. We are simply here, now, in this moment—aware, attentive, and present.

Practice

Pay particular attention, throughout the day, to times when you find yourself waiting—for an elevator, for a bus or subway, in a line at the store, in traffic congestion, for a guest to arrive.

In such moments, pay attention to what it means to wait—with *expectation*. Attend to your impatience, saying quietly to yourself: *It really is not that important when I arrive.* Give yourself fully to this moment, and seek to rest within yourself. Say to yourself: *“I’m not just waiting for the bus; I’m waiting for God, who is already present in my life. I’m waiting for the Lord who wants me to welcome him, and who will come when I am truly present.”*

If you sense your own impatience, give it to God. When you do this, you’ll find yourself becoming quiet in your heart and begin to sense God protecting you. You’ll start to feel yourself becoming free of the pressure of fulfilling others’ expectations. In this moment, give your waiting and even your impatience to God. In doing so, you’ll begin to find your discomfort fade away. A newfound patience will bring new energy and aliveness to you.

December 3 WATCHING

ADVENT IS a time of attentiveness, vigilance, and mindfulness. Theologians writing during the early centuries of Christianity often interpreted the human condition as one of drowsiness. They knew that we are easily lulled to sleep by the illusions we hold about our lives. We want to live with greater intentionality, but in actuality find our spirits becoming dulled by the onslaught of images that the media besiege us with. During Advent, we even find ourselves becoming deaf to the Christmas carols constantly playing in stores and malls. All this can create an unreal atmosphere that immerses us in a make-believe world.

Our task is to awaken ourselves from the stupor of this world of appearances. Indeed, the Jesuit writer Anthony de Mello defines “mysticism” in these terms: it is an awakening to what is truly real. I must wake up so that I can begin to see reality for what it truly is.

Practice

One form of watching is mindfulness. Decide to approach this day with a mindful heart. When you wake, pay attention to the fact that this is a new day, one in which God invites you into his presence. When you shower, pay attention to what you are doing: as you wash, savor the experience of cleansing yourself of what is unclean, both on the outside and within. When you sit down to breakfast, pay attention to what you are eating. Slow down. Savor each bite.

When you leave your home, be mindful of the people you'll meet. Try to be present to each one. Be mindful of the steps you take. Be aware of the fact that you are not simply going from one place to another. Your outer progress is a reflection of what it means to be on an *inner* journey, one you did not determine. For your life is an ongoing journey bringing change in your life.

Be mindful of what you begin this day. And pay attention to what will come to an end. Give up imagining that you have finished with this or that, so that you might become mindful of what still awaits you. Be aware that God's blessing rests within each moment like a protective mantle. With such mindfulness, you'll find yourself walking differently as you go.

December 4

YEARNING

ADVENT IS a time in which we become more aware of our yearning—for a sense of home and security, for love and happiness.

While every season of the church's year is a time of healing, Advent is the season when our addictions should be transformed into healthy forms of longing. For addictions are forms of suppressed yearning, which properly speaking are meant to lead us beyond what is finite and earthly. For no person, no character trait, no success can ever satisfy our deepest desires. These can only be fulfilled by God. That's why our true yearning carries us through and beyond the things of our daily lives, and finally into God's presence.

Such desire, as poets often remind us, constitutes our true worth as human beings. The writer Marcel Proust put it this way: "Yearning helps bring things to bloom." In reality, desires are traces God has rooted deeply in our heart. Many complain, of course, that they can't sense God's presence, and it's true that we can't always experience God directly. But we can become more aware each day of the traces of God in our hearts. And our longing for God is already a sign of his presence, just as love is already present in our yearning for love.

Today, the fourth of December, is the Feast of St. Barbara. Following an old European tradition for this saint's day, we cut and place what we call "St. Barbara Branches"—these are generally branches from cherry trees—into vases of water, watching through the days of Advent as they begin to show signs of budding until they blossom on or around Christmas. These branches are like the

signs of love we carry within us, which even in this cold season want to blossom and fill our hearts with joy.

Such St. Barbara Branches are an expression of our longing for love and for a sense of comfort, a yearning for warmth and tenderness in the midst of such wintry times. If possible, cut several branches from a flowering fruit tree near your house, and put them in a vase of fresh water in your home. Imagine how they will eventually begin to grow from the small buds, finally blossoming at Christmastime.

Practice

Sit before a burning candle, perhaps with the vase of cut branches nearby, and place your hands at the center of your chest. Your hands will feel a warmth here, and this gesture evokes the sense of yearning you carry in your heart. Think about what it is you long for—for love, for happiness, for peace, for stillness, for God.

Think about how love is present to you within this longing, even here and now. You need not feel unhappy about someone who has not returned your love. In your yearning for love you already sense the love that no one can take from you.

Carry this yearning into your daily life. You will discover that when God meets this yearning, you no longer need to depend on anything or anyone to satisfy your desires—in your workplace, in your family, or in other relationships. Simply become grateful in the ways you enjoy your life for what it is. Indeed, experiences of fulfillment and disappointment, of success and failure, are what keep this sense of longing alert. Within *this* yearning, begin to feel a measure of the deep inner peace that nothing can take away.

December 5

ARRIVING

WE WAIT during Advent for the coming of Jesus in our lives. In German, we have several variations for the word *arriving*. One of these is the word *Ankommen*. When we go on vacation, we often feel—especially on the very first day—that we’ve not properly “arrived.” We find ourselves still thinking about work. Or problems at home still occupy our thoughts.

And we often have the sense that we’ve not yet arrived at our true self. That we haven’t yet come home to who we truly are. That we’re living outside ourselves. We find ourselves caught in a hamster wheel, feeling as if we’re always on the move but never coming to our real self—and so never fully “arrive” at all.

Advent invites us to come home to ourselves. In Jesus’s parable of the prodigal son, some translations speak of the moment when the prodigal son “came to his senses” (Lk. 15:17), though the Greek literally speaks of when he “came to himself.” Having squandered his inheritance, the prodigal son threw himself into a life devoted to external things. But when he finally “came to himself,” when he “arrived” at his true self, he came to see the mistakes he’d made in letting his lower desires control him.

Advent is the season when we find ourselves invited to come home to who we truly are. When we do, we come to sense the second meaning of the prodigal son’s experience of arriving—that is, when he discovered his true identity. Only when we come home to who we truly are do we begin to discover how we can get along better with others. In this way, we find ourselves accepted by them,

for they can sense when we are present to our true self. When this is not the case, we fail in our attempts to find acceptance from others; in such cases, our encounters with them remain superficial at best.

Practice

Take time for a long walk sometime today. Once you have walked for a bit, look for a place where you can pause and be still for a little while. Find a place to sit, or stand quietly, asking yourself this: *“Have I truly come home to the person I am? Have I ‘arrived’? Am I just here in this place? Or am I truly here, in my real self, in this particular place where I find myself now?”*

Imagine coming home, like the prodigal son, to your true self. Think about how you have come to this place and time, through all the commotion of your daily life, in order to arrive at who you really are. Take a moment to sense what this is like, in the quiet of your heart. Savor what it feels like to be present to yourself. Then imagine Jesus coming to meet you here and now, like the father who came out to embrace his lost son, because like him you are now present to your true self. Open your heart so that Jesus can come into you and welcome you in this moment.

December 6

SAINT NICHOLAS DAY

T O D A Y I S the Feast of St. Nicholas, a bishop who lived in the city of Myra (in present-day Turkey) in the fourth century CE. He is surely among the most beloved of all the saints. Many traditions surround this good man, most of them focusing on children. The legends about him describe the remarkable kindness he showed toward others, especially those in need—and above all children.

I have an icon of St. Nicholas in my room that portrays him as a person of immeasurable love. I cannot look at this image without feeling drawn to be filled with the same love Nicholas had and shared with others. One could say that this saint didn't simply love individuals; he embodied love itself. His very being was grounded in the desire to enable this love to flow out into the world.

A well-known story about St. Nicholas relates his encounter with a nobleman, a rich man who'd fallen on hard times and lost his wealth. In despair, and to avoid starvation, he gave his three daughters over to a life of prostitution. Now when Nicholas heard of this, he came to the distraught man's house—not once, but on three successive nights, each time throwing a larger sum of money into the house in order to save each of the daughters from this fate. On the third night, the man decided to stay awake in order to see who his generous benefactor was. He immediately recognized the good bishop and fell to his knees in gratitude, but Nicholas ordered him to stand and promise not to say a word about this to anyone.

You see, Nicholas wanted to do such good works secretly. His desire was to lead others to God as a loving father figure, like

our heavenly Father who cares for us. And he did this not with a mother's tender love, but with the strength of a father's love, which is able to free and protect us.

Such a father's love calls us to live beyond ourselves and leads us to the very source of life. It is an appropriate reminder of the life and witness of St. Nicholas, then, that on this day we celebrate his coming to children, showing them how to live generously by showering them with a father's gifts. What a marvelous tradition that on this day, in Germany, we give gifts to children to sweeten their lives so that they might experience a measure of the sweetness of God's fatherly love for us.

Practice

In a quiet moment, think about your own father. What has he given you? What does he mean for you? How does he support you? Can you turn to him with all your worries and troubles? Can you rely on him? Surely he gave you gifts. But he also had his limits, and couldn't fulfill all the expectations you might have had for him as a father.

Now, imagine God as the Father who fulfills all the yearnings we associate with fatherhood. He accepts us unconditionally. He supports us to the point that we dare to take responsibility for our lives. Think of those who've shared with you some portion of God's fatherly presence. Thank God that he has sent you such persons who, like St. Nicholas, showed you the strength of a father's love. Give thanks for the ways they've encouraged you to affirm that, yes, it is good that you're alive. And, on the strength of this sense of goodness, dare to live your life!

If you're a father yourself, pay special attention today to the many ways you might support your children. Take time to share with them encouraging words. Embrace them and tell them this: *"It's a gift that you're alive! I'm here for you! I'm behind you, no matter what happens along the way!"*