

Hope



Happy Advent! As we begin a new liturgical year, our Lord beckons us to immerse ourselves in the spirit of Advent. Advent is a sacred time. It empowers us to **exercise the great virtue of Hope** as we anticipate the coming of the Lord. At Christmas we will find ourselves once more with our Blessed Mother welcoming the Child Jesus with heartfelt gratitude, wonder, and love. At the same time, the virtue of hope will come to life within us as we are reminded that our Lord will come again in glory at the end of time and every one of our tears and trials will be turned to joy! Is that not reason to rejoice and renew our strength?

Advent is also **a season of repentance**. In the Gospel (Luke 21:25-28; 34-36), Jesus exhorts us to prepare ourselves to meet the Lord: “Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap.” In the Second Reading (1 Thes 3:12-4:2), St. Paul offers a beautiful prayer and admonition which I hope we can all take to heart today:

“May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we have for you, so as to strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones. . . . we earnestly ask and exhort you in the Lord Jesus that, as you received from us how you should conduct yourselves to please God—and as you are conducting yourselves—you do so even more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.”

Finally, Advent is **a time of prayer**. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us, “Against our dullness and laziness, the battle of prayer is that of humble, trusting, and persevering love” (#2742). I leave you with a beautiful Advent meditation given by Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity (A Carmelite Nun who died in 1906):



“Think what must have been going on in the Virgin’s soul after the Incarnation, when she possessed within her the Word incarnate, the Gift of God. . . . In what silence, what recollection, what adoration she must have buried herself in the depths of her soul in order to embrace this God whose Mother she was. My little Guite, he is in us. O let us stay close to him in this silence, with this love, of the Virgin. That is the way to spend Advent, isn’t it?”

Well, isn’t it?

Your Servant in Christ,
Fr. Terry Staples



Saint John of Damascus

Feast Day: December 4

Born: Approximately 675 AD

Died: December 4, 749 AD

Patron: pharmacists, icon painters and theology students

John grew up in the rich, luxurious court of the Muslim ruler of Damascus, where his father was a wealthy Christian court official. To make sure John had a solid Christian foundation, his father employed a brilliant Sicilian monk named Cosmos, who was a war captive, to teach John. Cosmos schooled the boy in science and theology, in the Greek and Arabic languages, and in the culture of Islam. When John was ready to assume a high place in the government, he followed his father in a government position under the Arabs. But the spirit of the Muslim rulers was turning against Christians, so John resigned, went to the Monastery of Saint Sabas and became a monk in Jerusalem.

We know about John's faith through his writings. In his writings he explained the mysteries of the Christian faith, such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Real Presence in the Eucharist, and Mary's Assumption. On the Trinity he wrote: "The abiding and resting of the Persons in one another is not in such a manner that they coalesce or become confused, but, rather, so that they adhere to one another, for they are without interval between them and inseparable and their mutual indwelling is without confusion." John was also a poet and hymn writer. Some of his songs are summaries of the truths of faith.

However, he is most famous for his writings against the Iconoclasts who opposed the veneration of images. Oddly, it was the Eastern Christian Emperor Leo, III who forbade the practice. The Iconoclasts claimed that it was superstitious to have religious images. They wanted to destroy all religious icons, pictures, and statues. John of Damascus defended the use of sacred images. He explained that the respect given to them is really given to the person they represent. Because John lived in Muslim territory, his enemies could not silence him.

His patronage of pharmacists likely stems from his family's background in medicine, while his defense of icons during the iconoclastic controversies led to his association with icon painters. Saint John of Damascus's theological works, particularly his comprehensive "Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," had a profound influence on both Eastern and Western Christian thought. His efforts to defend the faith; his clear articulations of complex doctrines; and his synthesis of earlier patristic writings made him one of the most important theologians of the medieval period, earning him the title in 1890 of "Doctor of the Church" in the Roman Catholic tradition.

Based upon John of Damascus' writings, *On the Orthodox Faith: A New Translation of An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* was published in 2022. This new translation by Norman Russell addresses the major areas of Christian belief such as the Trinity, Christology, salvation, the sacraments, and the veneration of icons, saints, and relics.

Reflection: If you look around an Orthodox Church today, you will see that John won the debate on icons. He defended the Church's understanding of the veneration of images and explained the faith of the Church in several other controversies. For over 30 years, he combined a life of prayer with these defenses and his other writings. His holiness expressed itself in putting his literary and preaching talents at the service of the Lord.