



First Sunday of Advent (Year B) and St Nicholas of Bari 3 + 6 December 2023
Reflection Mgr Daniel McHugh

“Towards an ever wider ‘we’ ”

(Message of Pope Francis for World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2021)

Not long ago I fulfilled my hope of visiting the Puglia region of Italy and made a Pilgrimage to Bari where there is a magnificent Cathedral with the Shrine of St Nicholas. We don't make so much of the Feast of St Nicholas as they do in parts of Northern Europe where 6 December is a pre-Christmas Festival for children. In Germany, for example, shoes (nicely polished) are set out the night before, though sometimes red plastic boats have replaced the shoes: the expectation is that they are filled with sweets and nuts in celebration of St Nicholas or Santa Klaus, a contraction of Nicholas in Dutch and German. St Nicholas is patron saint of children. He was originally a Bishop in the 4th century, from Myra in Turkey, and was known for his generosity and kindness and the miracles worked through his intercession for the poor and unhappy. There are many stories (legends) about the Saint, the most enduring being the story of the saving from prostitution 3 girls by throwing 3 bags of gold as dowries through their window at night. He is also said to have saved sailors in distress off the Lycian coast; so that may be why Italian sailors stole his relics in 1087 from Myra and took them to Bari where a huge and beautiful Basilica was built to house them.

When I visited the Basilica I was unable, at first, to get to the Shrine of the Saint as the Sanctuary and a good part of the Church was crowded while an Eastern Rite Liturgy was taking place. I had not realised the fact that Bari has played a major part in the coming together of Christians from East and West, especially in more recent years. In 2018 Pope Francis met with Leaders of the Orthodox and Catholic Church there: he spoke of it as the *“Capital of Unity”*, and was aiming to promote peace through Bari's links to the Middle East and Africa. The Mediterranean (of which the Adriatic forms part) is at the crossroads of many different nations and cultures. Mgr Raspanti speaking for the Italian Bishops Conference in 2020 preparing for the first Mediterranean wide Conference said: *“The Mediterraneans can be a theatre of war or a space for unity, a place where migrations are linked to the quest for personal dignity or, on the contrary, a place where human rights are trampled on or derided. A sea of death or a welcoming haven.”*

The First Sunday of Advent is being observed as Migrants' Day in our Churches. In February 2020 the first Mediterranean Bishops' gathering identified migration as one of the major issues facing the Churches. Cardinal Bassetti Chair of the Italian Bishops Conference at that time, and Cardinal Puljić of Bosnia both identified migration as a major issue, and referring to Giorgio La Pira of Florence the tireless champion of peace

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and human rights, who worked for the betterment of the poor and disadvantaged, they spoke of how the Churches suffer as many of the young leave because of war and poverty.

I am reminded of the 'Angels Unaware' bronze sculpture installed in St Peter's Square in September 2019 on the occasion of the 105th World Migrant and Refugee Day; the Sculptor is Timothy Schmalz a Canadian and he took his inspiration from Hebrews 13:2 "*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares*". Pope Francis said he wanted the Sculpture "*to remind everyone of the evangelical challenge of hospitality*".

This week and next in Cycle B our Advent Gospel Readings on Sunday are from St Mark's Gospel and focus on two Advent themes: the Lord's return at the end of time and St John the Baptist's preparation for Jesus. This week's passage emphasises the need for watchfulness. The Son of Man will come unexpectedly and disciples must not be caught unprepared when this time comes. This first Sunday Gospel reminds us that Advent is about more than our preparation for the celebration of Christ's birth at Christmas. Advent is about preparing ourselves for Christ's return in glory at the end of time; like the disciples and the faithful in Mark's community, we must stay alert and watchful. As the Bishops gathered for reflection and spiritual renewal in Bari, in the light of present day challenges to the Churches, so we should use this special time for spiritual renewal too. I suggest we reflect on St Matthew Chapter 25 where Jesus speaks of the end of time: "*Come, you whom my Father has blessed for I was a stranger and you made me welcome ...*" Like St Nicholas may we respond with love and generosity to those in need.

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