

Servant of God Chiara Corbella Petrillo and the Sacrament of the Present Moment, Part 2

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Hi, my name is Claire Dwyer, and welcome back to The Pray More Advent Retreat and part two of our talk on Chiara Corbella Petrillo. Let's begin as we always do with a prayer.

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Dear Lord, your servant Chiara was so luminous and so radiant. She was so given over to you that her life was transparent and it just reflected your love and joy to the world. And we pray that we can be like her and we can imitate her joyful trust, her total detachment from things of this world so that you can be more fully alive within us and we can show forth your love and glory to a world that so desperately needs you. I thank you for the gift of being able to gather this Advent and walk together, at least for a little while, in our journey with you. Please bless all those who are listening and participating in this retreat. We ask this all through and in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, whose birth we prepare our hearts for now. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Five Lessons We Can Learn From Chiara

All right, well, I just wanted to remind you of what we talked about in part one. I told you the story of a young Italian mother, Chiara Corbella Petrillo, who died when she was only 28 years old and was just declared a servant of God in 2018 by Pope Francis. She carried two babies to term even while knowing that they were going to die almost immediately after birth. And then Chiara was diagnosed with cancer during her third pregnancy and opted to delay the treatment that was available to her for the good of her baby. She suffered bravely, fully united to the cross, and she's just a wonderful example for us now.

So I wanted to focus this talk on some of the lessons from her life and one in particular, that of living fully in the present moment. I had a hard time, though, I will tell you, pulling out just a few lessons from her life because she lived the gospel so fully. There were so many things that we could say about Chiara, and when I do this as a full retreat, I really draw out even more. But let's focus on just a few today.

First of all, our bodies are made for self-giving and love. And just as through the body of Christ came our salvation so too we are literally to spend our bodies in imitation of Christ in service of the other. Chiara believed that in her pregnancy and birth, her body was for the child, even while knowing, especially in the case of her first two pregnancies, that the child was not for her. Chiara knew that her body was for the child even while knowing that the child was not for her. She also offered her physical sufferings in her cancer journey for others. She offered her physical sufferings for their conversions and their peace.

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Secondly, another takeaway is that God is in the suffering. He was hidden in her sickness as He is with all of our sufferings, which He permits only to lead us closer to Him. "In the beginning," Chiara admitted, "we didn't recognize Him in the tumor. We didn't recognize Him in the tumor." And she compared herself to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who walked with the Lord but didn't recognize Him until the breaking of the bread. She recognized the Lord in the breaking of her body, and her invitation, the invitation of her story, is for us to recognize the Lord even in and maybe even especially in our broken places. It is the breaking open of our lives that reveals where God has been with us, walking with us all along, leading us closer to Him.

And then third, speaking of breaking of the bread, to live close to the Lord in the Eucharist is essential. This was a lesson that Chiara and Enrico would've wanted everybody to know. They did not actually look to escape suffering. They prayed for a miracle and they would've welcomed a healing, but they wanted to live their suffering with the one who had suffered for them and who had not only made it bearable, but had redeemed it and worked it all for good. They knew that the Lord present in the Eucharist, body, blood, soul, and divinity, was their companion on the journey, and they wanted to live every step, every painful step of their journey, fully united to Him. So in every pregnancy, in every ultrasound, in every diagnosis, through every birth and every death, and every piece of news about Chiara's health, their first destination, their first stop, was the tabernacle.

And then fourth, another lesson that we can take away is that this is not, this life is not our homeland. This world is not our homeland. Chiara was journaling throughout her third pregnancy, her pregnancy with her son, Francesco. And she was revealing in her journal that she had been reflecting on the Jewish Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles. This was a feast that the Jewish people began to celebrate after they had entered the promised land after their 40 years of wandering in the desert. They wanted to remember those years of homelessness basically.

And so outside the walls of their city, they would set up tents, the kind of tents that they had lived in during their journey in the desert. And they would spend the days of that feast in the tents, eating and living as if they did not have a permanent home because they wanted to remember not to lay down deep roots here. They wanted to remember what God had done for them when the world was just part of the journey. And we want to live that way too. We want to live reminded that our true homeland is heaven and that we're just on our way there. And that's how Chiara lived, and that's how she had so much detachment about the things of the world and even joy, knowing that her time on earth would be short.

The fifth point is the centrality that we need to have for the blessed mother, that we need to make her central in our lives. Enrico said, "That without Mary, all that we were able to do would've been impossible." He says, "It was Mary who told us the truth that there is neither past nor future. The only certainties are the present moment and the fact that we shall die. It was she, the model, who taught us to base our lives on the Word of God." And then finally, and this ties into that fifth point on our lady, the necessity of living in the present moment. This was the key to peace. When Chiara was first told that she was a terminal patient, she actually asked not to be told how much time she had left because she wanted to live fully in the present moment. "For each day," she

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said, "there is grace. I need only to make space." But there is no space for grace if the bread that we're grasping for is bread for the future. Bread for the unknowns.

Chiara and Enrico were able to live each day and each moment completely in the present. Enrico would say, "The past to mercy, the present to grace, the future to providence. Let us ask for this grace." And I think he may have gotten this from Padre Pio, who said, "My past, Lord, to your mercy, my present to your love, my future to your providence."

And one thing that really struck me in this book, "Chiara Corbella Petrillo: A Witness to Joy," which was my primary source for all of this. This phrase in this book really struck me. "Chiara obeyed each day." Isn't that really the meaning of daily bread? Of daily bread? When we say the words of the our Father, give us this day, our daily bread, what we really want sometimes is food for the entire journey. We want to stuff our backpack, so to speak, with, like, canned goods. We want enough for the future, and then we can't figure out why we're like barely moving and barely making progress.

Well, God wants us to travel light. He wants us to keep our heads up turned and our mouths open, and He wants us to trust Him to be who He said He would be, to be our Father, to be our provider, because that's the key to trust. That's the key to living in peace. Jesus says in Matthew 6, "Tomorrow has trouble enough of its own, so we have to stay focused on the demands of the day and ask ourselves, what is God asking me to die to today? This and only this is what we are given the grace for."

The University of the Moment

Fulton Sheen, one of my favorites, Fulton Sheen wrote that all of our unholy anxieties, and I think all anxieties are probably unholy, relate to time. He says, "Man is the only time-conscious creature. He alone can bring the past to mind so that it weighs on the present moment with all of its accumulated heritage." And then he also brings the future into the present, so we imagine its occurrences happening now. So our unhappiness, all of our unhappiness really comes from two things, despair or regret from the past and worry and anxiety about the future. And what we really miss out on dwelling on the past or the future is the grace of the present moment and then also the lessons of this present moment.

What God is revealing us about Himself and about our relationship with Him in each moment, in each day of our lives. This moment is our school of love. Fulton Sheen actually called it the university of the moment. I just love that. The university of the moment because it had so much to teach us.

And Jean Pierre de Caussade, who wrote another one of my favorite books, "The Sacrament of the Present Moment," said that every moment contained a kingdom because it contained God's will. The kingdom is in our midst, the kingdom, God's will, is in the present moment. Will we miss it?

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I think this is a particularly poignant lesson for us during Advent because the world right now has us whirling and swirling into the future, into the Christmas season. And we are busy planning, and preparing, and shopping. And quite frankly, much of that is necessary, honestly. But I think it's the premature celebrating really that has impoverished the great feast of Christmas right now in our time. And we really can't do a lot to change the culture. But we can personally, like Chiara, be obedient to each day and be obedient to the long string of days that spread out together, and we call the liturgical season. And so we can be obedient to Advent, which is so important because there are graces in Advent, there are graces this Advent that will never come again.

There is this seasonal equivalent, I think, of our daily bread, and we have to be available to receive them. We have to be shaken awake, so to speak, to them. If we're living in a swirl of festivities, if we're feasting before the feast, then it's like a drug, and then we're going to be asleep to what is happening in our midst.

We Are Prone to Numbing Ourselves

There's a story I tell when I talk about the reality of, like, sleeping through the coming of Christ. It happened after my fourth child was born. I had my wisdom teeth out late, and there were some complications. I ended up developing an infection in my gums. But after the surgery, I didn't actually know that that's what was bothering me. I was just in tremendous pain, I felt terrible, and the dentist just kept prescribing more painkillers for me instead of really getting to the root of the issue. So after going through a few weeks of just, I had lost so much weight, I was in so much pain, I wasn't feeling well, just taking painkillers to kind of try to numb the pain.

My family had scheduled a trip to Disneyland, and we didn't want to not go. So even though I felt terrible, we went ahead and made the trip. And a few days into the trip, our youngest son, who was a baby at the time, needed to go back to the hotel and take a nap. And I was the first to volunteer to take him back to the hotel so that I could lay down too. We made our way back to the hotel, and I laid down and immediately fell asleep. And I don't know how much time passed, but eventually I woke up and realized that it felt like the room was swaying back and forth. I remember dimly being aware of footsteps in the hallway outside our room. I actually even remember voices screaming outside. But I was so drugged, I was so sick that all I could think was, in a foggy kind of way, "I think this is an earthquake, I think this is an earthquake." And I fell back asleep.

And when I woke up, when I really woke up, gathered up my little son, went down to the theme park, gathered with my family, and realized what had happened, and the whole place was closed down. It was not a small earthquake. I was horrified. I was horrified that I had slept through something so massive as an earthquake. The spiritual equivalent of that is that we spend our lives drugging ourselves because we don't want to feel pain. And so we numb ourselves with food and alcohol and shopping and gossip and social media and television and whatever else can numb us to what's going on around us.

But the danger of that is that we can sleep through Christ coming in our midst. There is something happening very soon that is bigger than any earthquake. It is the coming of Christ. He's coming, He's gonna plunge

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history in half, and we could sleep through it if we're not awake to the grace of the present moment and to the season that we're in. And so we need to pray for that grace to be awake, and attentive, and alive to what is happening in our midst.

A Few Tips For Advent

I think what we could look at it as is that we do really run the risk of running out of oil before the bridegroom arrives. And if you remember in my first talk when Chiara was about to die, Enrico sent a message to all of their friends, and he said, "The lamps are lit. We are waiting for the bridegroom." Chiara lived her life with her lamp lit. She was ready, she was awake to the pain so that she could be awake to Christ present in the pain.

And I want to just leave you with a few tips for keeping our lamps lit, for living in the present moment this Advent because it is hard. First of all, live liturgically. And when I say live liturgically, I don't mean that you have to do all of the crafts and decorating for every season in feast day, but really enter into the liturgy through the readings of the day. If you can't attend mass, which would be ideal every day, at least do the daily readings and connect yourself to the liturgical life of the church. So make the daily readings your prayer this Advent.

And then the other thing I would say is pray the rosary, but pray it as a prayer of the present moment and actually pray the rosary, asking for the grace to live fully the present moment. You can use the words of the prayers of the rosary to help you do this, because, this is amazing, each prayer of the rosary has a reminder about the present moment embedded right within it. Think about it. Our Father, give us this day our daily bread. The Hail Mary, now and at the hour of our death. And the Glory Be, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. On that note, let's end with a glory be, and let's pray that God be glorified in this retreat and in our time and in our prayer together and in all of our efforts to imitate the saints and all who have gone before us, like Chiara, whose yes to God inspires our own.

Closing Prayer

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be world without end. Amen.