

The power of candles

In Advent it has become a tradition to place the Advent Wreath in our churches and increasingly also in our homes, lighting one candle each week... while singing and praying a few prayers. Some will see it as merely decorative, others as a nice ritual. There are even those who see the gesture as a childish tradition... because they think that an adult in the faith is involved in other more transcendent and profound things. We should understand the meaning it can have, using historical facts that are not so far removed from our own time.

In South Africa during *apartheid*, people used to light candles in the windows of their homes as a sign of hope that one day the unjust order in which they lived would be overthrown. But at a certain point the South African government decided to ban it. Putting lighted candles in the windows became as illegal as carrying a gun around your waist. The children, so sharp at times, did not miss the opportunity to make fun of such a ban. Soon a joke began to circulate among them: "*The government is afraid of candles!*".

As we know, *apartheid* was eventually overcome. When you reflect on the forces that contributed to it, it becomes clear that candles, burning candles, were surprisingly more powerful than guns. Hope is more powerful than any army.

But what is hope? Many of us can confuse it with the burning desire for something to happen. Beware of being confused. They are not the same reality. The desire for something to happen is purely and simply fantasy. I can, for example, wish to win the Christmas lottery jackpot; but that has no connection with reality. It is a daydream. And we should not light the candles of the Advent Wreath out of mere daydreaming, naively fantasising.

Hope is based on a promise. It is God's promise that, despite the sin and evil that dwells in the human heart, justice, peace, love, truth and mercy will finally be realised. So lighting a candle means that the love that Jesus brings us and the strength he gives to the community gathered in his name are ultimately more powerful than all threats, torture, wars, atheism, indifference, injustice.... To light a candle is to proclaim to the world that our true allegiance is to "something", or rather, to Someone whose promise is indestructible. The South African government was right to be paranoid about those candles. A lit candle is a *powerful statement of hope*.

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