Sisters and friends, you and I have celebrated many Advent seasons. May I suggest that this year, we would make one resolution, not ten. When we achieve it, we will have become happier and holier.

Just to keep perspective, recognize that the accomplishment of spiritual goals always will remain incomplete on earth. A Scot proverb observes about material and especially spiritual goals, “Once you get there, there isn’t there anymore.” We naturally yearn for the elusive “more.” For example, regarding studying, “the more you know, the more you know you don’t know.” Regarding love, no matter how much couples profess and express their love, they declare, “and next year, I want to love you more.” Regarding faith, we admit with St. Peter, “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.” While we remain on earth, it is the nature of idealism to seek more, but simultaneously it is the nature of earthly existence to limit our satisfactions and successes. Perhaps St. Augustine best expressed this perspective in his pithy and poetic phrase, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Advent emphasizes preparation for the anniversary of Christmas. The Latin verb “advenio, advenire” means to wait for someone or some event which is coming. Year after year, for at least 1600 years in the East, and even longer in the West, Christians have been celebrating this season as a time of dynamic, i.e., active not passive, waiting, watching, and preparing. Notice how the liturgy changes. The Opening Prayer of the collect and our hymns shift from praising God to preparing for the birth of Christ. The singing of the Gloria, we forego. As the season advances, we increasingly include Christmas carols in our liturgy. On December 17, we start the Christmas Novena. Each Sunday of Advent has its special Preface.

The liturgical environment also changes. The colors green or white for vestments and decorations are supplanted by purple and pink, emphasizing the seasonal moods of doing penance and rejoicing. We progressively light candles on the Advent wreath in anticipation of the coming Divine Light into the world’s darkness. Liturgical enhancements such as music and flowers are moderated in the early weeks of Advent and grow to crescendo on Christmas Eve and Day. To develop our spirituality, i.e., our relationship with Our Lord and one another, the Church invites believers to adopt the classical practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Every diocese will conduct multiple Penance Services to assist the faithful in preparing for the coming of the Lord. To the chagrin of many liturgists, I, as a pastor, on the First Sunday of Advent used to place near the sanctuary the empty manger topped by an angel. On successive Sundays, I would add various figures of men and animals until Mary and Joseph arrived on the Fourth Sunday. Of course, the baby Jesus arrived on Christmas Eve. The wisemen appeared a few days later. Liturgists, who used to say that the manger should not appear until Christmas Eve, have yielded to pastors and suggest that the crib may appear as early as Dec. 17.
This theme of progression is demonstrated in today’s readings. Isaiah admits the sinfulness of the Israelites coupled with the unending fidelity of the Lord. The prophet declares, “You, Lord, are our Father. ... You are angry and we are sinful. ... Would that you might meet us doing right. ... We are the clay and you are the potter.” The people keep trying. The Lord keeps encouraging.

Paul criticizes the Corinthians for their immaturity in the faith. He calls them, “infants in Christ.” Paul writes, “I fed you with milk and did not give you solid food because you were not ready for it. You are not ready for it even now.” Some claim, “I am of Paul.” Others boast, “I am of Apollos.” Paul explains that both men are ministers: “I planted the seed and Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ... It is God who gives the growth.” Paul challenges and encourages these early Christians, and of course, all Christians, to grow up!

In today’s gospel Jesus concludes many chapters in which he proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God, with its concomitant doctrinal and moral teachings. He declares, “Be constantly on the watch. Stay awake. ... Be on guard. .. You do not know when the appointed time will come.” The very next chapter, i.e., the fourteenth, introduces the Jewish priests’ and scribes’ intention to kill Jesus, followed immediately by the anointing of Jesus at Bethany, Judas’ betrayal, and Jesus’ arrest. Here again, we see the progression of both good and evil.

Sisters and friends, you and I are veterans of many Advent seasons. May I suggest that each person might choose one focus, not ten, for the next four weeks. I will offer a few suggestions; you choose one, or develop one of your own. First, you might want to pursue a Scriptural route by studying and reflecting on the liturgical readings, especially the Book of Isaiah which we will be reading up to Dec. 17. Second, you might want to follow the Ignatian method by imagining and praying about the main characters of the Christmas story, namely, the figures whom eventually we will place in the crèche, plus the roles of Anna and Simeon. Or third, you might take the traditional path of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, and commit yourself to some special actions. Whatever you may choose to do, I suggest that you have a focus for these four weeks. To set any goal and objective and to achieve it, even partially, will make you happier. To set any spiritual goal and objective, and to attain it, even partially, will make you holier.