

THE FIRST WEEK IN ADVENT

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Sunday

THE COMING OF CHRIST IN US

A reflection by St. Cyril of Jerusalem

Almost everything relating to our Lord Jesus Christ takes place in two ways. His begetting provides one example. He was begotten by the Heavenly Father before all ages, but he was also born of the Virgin Mary at the end of the ages. Again, when he comes down from heaven, he first does it in obscurity but when he comes again it will be in the sight of all humankind. When he first came, he was wrapped in swaddling clothes but when he comes the second time he will “clothe himself in light as in a garment”. First, he endured the Cross and shame but soon he will come again attended by hosts of angels.

We must not let our hearts rest in Christ’s first coming. We must be full of longing for him to come again. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” This is a cry appropriate for both comings. Therefore, it is also a motto by which must live by passing from our faith in his first coming into exultation in his second.

When he first came Christ was judged and condemned. His second coming will bring true justice to those who were formerly his judges. “These things you did to me and I was silent.” That is what he will say to all when he comes again as judge. He will ask us to look at him and remember what he did among us and then he will ask us whether we have imitated him. As he loved us, did we love one another?

Recall the words of the prophet Malachi: “And suddenly the Lord whom you seek will enter his temple. Look, he is coming, the all-powerful Lord! Who can endure the day of his Coming? Who can remain standing when he appears? His coming will be that of the fire which refines ores or like the cleansing by the bleach of a fuller.” But we need to listen to these words together, to what we have heard from St. Paul: “The grace of God, our Savior, has appeared to all humankind. It teaches us that we must not go on living without any thought of God but must renounce all evil desires and practice self-control. While we are in this world, we should live devout and upright lives and wait for the fulfillment of our blessed hope of the coming of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ!”

The Creed we recite reminds us that Christ has ascended into Heaven and sits at the right hand of the Heavenly Father, and then that he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. He judges simply by asking us to compare our lives and conduct with his own and that of his apostles and holy ones. That means our task is to live so as to be prepared for his second coming. The more we think of the first coming at Bethlehem the more we must look forward to his coming again and the harder we must work to prepare ourselves for that second coming. It is an easy thing to do. Walk in Christ’s grace by loving one another, and all those in need, as Christ has loved and still loves you. This is how Christ comes into you so as to reveal himself to others. As you welcome him into your heart and soul, you prepare and help others prepare, for his coming in glory as judge.

Monday

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF ADVENT (Part 1)

from a talk by Fr Vincent Ryan OSB

When the feast of the Nativity was introduced to Rome in the early years of the fourth century, it was celebrated as a simple memorial and was not preceded by a time of preparation. It was not until about the middle of the sixth century, by which time Christmas had become a major solemnity almost on a par with Easter, that the Roman Advent made its appearance.

It is outside of Rome, especially in Spain and Gaul, that the earliest form of Advent appears. The Council of Saragossa in Spain in 380 refers to a three-week period of preparation extending from 17 December to the feast of the Epiphany. It urges the faithful to be assiduous in going to church daily during this time. The Epiphany, like Easter, was a time for the conferring of baptism, and this suggests that the weeks of preparation were conceived mainly in the function of the sacrament of initiation. But for all the faithful this was a time of prayer, ascetic effort and assembly in church.

The Roman church did not see the need for a prolonged pre-Christmas fast such as that existed in Spain and Gaul. When the season of Advent eventually made its appearance, it was liturgical rather than ascetical in character. From the start, it was directly oriented to Christmas, not Epiphany, and took its whole meaning from that feast. It had no connection with baptism.

As it developed the primitive form of the Roman Advent, had six weeks before Christmas. This was the practice of some other churches, and is still a feature of the Ambrosian rite in Milan. It was during the pontificate of Pope St. Gregory the Great that the number of weeks was reduced to four, and that has remained the tradition ever since. The great pontiff curtailed it because he judged it inappropriate that Advent should have the same duration as Lent.

In its earliest form Advent was basically a preparation for Christmas. It focused on the liturgical commemoration of Christ's birth. Within a fairly short time, however, it acquired an eschatological character. From the beginning of the seventh century, Advent was understood not only as a time of waiting and preparation for Christmas but also, as a time of waiting and expectancy for the return of Christ in glory. In other western churches, this eschatological thrust became even more pronounced. Through the influence of the preaching of the Irish missionary monks, with their stress on the coming of the Lord in judgment and the need to do penance, the notion of Advent as a time of joyful waiting tended to be obscured.

Tuesday

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF ADVENT (Part 2)

from a talk by Fr Vincent Ryan OSB

No doubt the best-loved symbol of Advent and the one we are most familiar with, is the Advent wreath. Around this symbol, in church and at home, there has evolved an expressive prayer ritual. It originally began as a symbol of light, evolving from a pagan custom into a Christian practice. They took what may have been a cartwheel, wound it with greens and decorated it with lights, and offered it to God. Medieval people kept many of the symbols of fire and light as popular traditions with pagan or superstitious overtones. It was in the sixth century that the custom was Christianized, so to speak, and the Advent wreath made its appearance in homes and churches. The custom spread initially throughout Germany and was popular with Catholics and Lutherans alike. Today it is widespread throughout the world and in many Christian churches. It is the ritual of lighting an extra candle each week on the Advent wreath, that gives expression to the hope and longing of the people of the Old Covenant for a redeemer, and the gradual realization of the promises of God through the prophets and finally John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary. The wreath itself, a symbol of victory and glory, symbolizes the fulness of time, and the glory of his coming.

One of our modern problems is that Advent has become an extended shopping spree and we can become weary of a surfeit of Christmas carols. Let us be joyful in anticipation, certainly, but let us not pre-empt the Christmas festivity by untimely festivity. Even the best of our carols can be sung too early in the season. After all, we do not sing our Easter Alleluias on Ash Wednesday or Good Friday.

The renewal of the liturgy effected by the Second Vatican Council did not fundamentally alter the season of Advent. In what pertains to the four weeks of the season, the liturgical renewal has brought about a tremendous enrichment of the texts of the lectionary, missal and breviary. As for the spirit of Advent, we are now left with no doubt that this is a season of joyful hope, not a time of penance. For some time before the Council, there was some ambiguity about this, and there was a tendency to impose a penitential discipline on the season, thus assimilating it into Lent. Some vestiges of the older observances do remain, such as the suppression of the Gloria at Sunday Mass and the wearing of purple vestments. But the Gloria is dropped in order to allow it to ring out with a new freshness at Christmas, and likewise, the sobriety of color will make the white vestments appear all the more brilliant on Christmas Day. All these things help us to appreciate more the depth and beauty which is Advent.

Wednesday

TAKING UP THE CROSS TO FOLLOW CHRIST

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

If we celebrate this feast of St. Andrew lovingly, we will find much that builds us up. Have you noticed how St. Andrew, when he reached the place where a cross had been prepared for him, began to utter burning words through the Spirit? The love that burned within him flashed forth like a flame, expressed in these words: "O cross, so long desired and now ready for my eager spirit! With joy and confidence, I come, so receive me gladly as the disciple of one who hung on you, for I have always been your lover and have longed to embrace you!" Those are words all of us would want to utter if the grace were given.

What is the source of such unheard-of joy and exultation? Where do such great constancy and confidence come from in the midst of human fragility? How can a mere human experience such spiritual ardor and such burning love? Certainly, it doesn't come from Andrew's own strength! It is a perfect gift coming down from the Father in Heaven who is the source of all light and alone does such great wonders. It was indeed the Spirit who came to the aid of Andrew's weakness and poured into his heart that love which was stronger than death. Grant that God gives us all a share in it!

If we grow weak and fall asleep instead of praying then our own fragility explains it. But what God did for Andrew, on the cross and in his death, God will do for us in our toil and our penance and our efforts to pray. Not only will these things no longer seem a burden but they will become a delight. My spirit, says the Lord, is sweeter than honey. Nothing can take away that sweetness if only our Lord will give it to us.

So, we seek this Spirit. Let us do our utmost to receive the gift. Don't we want to possess Jesus, and his Spirit, more than anything else? He is already dwelling in us and now we ask him to dwell there more and more fully and completely. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of God, Scripture says, is not God's and doesn't belong to Christ. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit which is from God. It is given so we may understand and live the gifts bestowed on us by our God.

What we have to do is take up our cross along with St. Andrew, and even more with the One whom Andrew followed. He is our Lord and Savior. The cause of Andrew's joy and exultation, even as he prepared to die, what not only for having Jesus as Lord but for being given the gift of suffering and dying with Jesus. Do you want to be crucified with Christ? Listen to Christ's words: "If anyone would come after me, let that one take up the cross and follow me" (Mt. 16:24). In the cross is our salvation, provided we cling to it firmly. The cross, as St. Paul reminds us, is folly to those who are perishing. But to all who are being saved, it is the power of God! Accept the gift of that power and you too will be with Christ in joy forever.

Thursday

ON THE SEASON OF ADVENT

from the Pastoral Letters of St Charles Borromeo

The season of Advent is one of particular importance. As the Holy Spirit says, it is the time of the Lord's favor, the day of salvation, peace and reconciliation. It is a sacred season. The patriarchs and prophets longed and prayed and yearned with all their hearts for this time. That just man Simeon at long last saw this time and his joy was boundless. And the Church has always kept this season in a special way. So, we too must continue to celebrate it fittingly, giving praise and thanks to the eternal Father for the mercy he has shown us in this mystery of the coming of his Only-begotten Son.

The Father sent his Son out of his immeasurable love for us sinners. He sent him to free us from the tyrannical power of the devil, to invite us to heaven and to lead us into its innermost sanctuary. He was sent to show us truth itself, to teach us how we should live, to share with us the source of all goodness, and to enrich us with the measure of his grace. Finally, he was sent to make us sons and daughters of the Father and heirs to eternal life.

The Church calls this mystery to mind each year to stir us to renew our memory of the great love God has shown us. The commemoration teaches us that our Savior came not only for the benefit of the people of his own time. His goodness is still there for us to share in. But, for our part, through faith and the sacraments, we must lay hold of the grace he won for us and live by it in obedience to him.

The Church wants us to understand that as he came into the world in the flesh, so now, if we remove all barriers, he is ready to come to us again at any minute or any hour, to make his home spiritually within us in all his grace.

Like a devoted mother, keenly concerned for our salvation, the Church uses the rites of this Advent season, its hymns, songs and other utterances of the Holy Spirit to teach us a lesson. She shows us how to receive this great gift of God with thankfulness and how to be enriched by its possession. She teaches us that our hearts should be as prepared now for the coming of Christ into the world as if he were to still come into the world.

Friday

THE WORD OF GOD WITHIN US

from a sermon by St Bernard

We have come to know a threefold coming of the Lord. The third coming takes place between the other two. They are clearly manifest but the third is not. In the first coming the Lord was clearly seen on earth and lived among men and women in the days when, as he himself bears witness, they saw him and hated him. In his last coming “all flesh shall see the salvation of our God” and “they shall look on him whom they have pierced”. The other coming is hidden. In it, only the chosen see him within themselves. In brief, the first coming was in the flesh and in weakness, this intermediary coming is in the spirit and in power, and the last coming will be in glory and majesty.

This intermediary coming is like a road leading from the first to the last coming. In the first coming of Christ. Was our redemption, in the last, he will appear in glory as our life, in this intermediary one he is our rest and our consolation.

Do not imagine that what we are saying about the intermediary coming is simply our own fabrication. Listen to Christ himself. “If anyone loves me, they will keep my words, and my Father will love them, and we shall come to them”. I have read elsewhere, “The one who fears the Lord will do good, “but it is my opinion that love is greater than fear and that more can be said of the one who loves. Where are we to keep his words? Without any doubt, they are to be kept in the heart as the prophet says “I have kept your words in my heart, lest I sin against you”.

Keep the Word of God in your heart. Let it pierce into your inmost soul and penetrate your feelings and actions. Eat well and your soul will grow and grow. Do not forget to eat the bread of the Word or your heart will falter. Let your soul feast richly.

If you keep the Word of God in this way, without a doubt you will be kept by it. The Son with the Father will come to you. All things will be made new. The effect on you will be that you will bear the image of the living Word. So now, let Christ take possession of your whole self, for he created you, he redeems you and he will glorify you forever.

Saturday

THE FRUITFULNESS OF THE GOSPEL

A reflection from a letter by St. Francis Xavier

I and Francis Mancias are now living among the Christians of Comorin. They are very numerous and increase largely every day. When I first came, I asked them if they knew anything about our Lord Jesus Christ. But when I came to speak of the articles of faith in detail and asked them what they thought of these and what more they now believed than they had before they became Christian, they could only replay that they knew they were Christian. As they cannot speak Portuguese, they know little of the mysteries and precepts of our holy religion.

I picked out the most intelligent and well-read among them and then sought out, with the greatest diligence, persons who knew both Castilian and Malabar. We held meetings for several days and by our joint efforts and with infinite difficulty we translated the Catechism into Malabar. This I learned by heart and then I began to go through all the villages of the coast, calling around me by the sound of a bell as many as I could, children and adults. I assembled them twice a day and taught them the Christian doctrine. Thus, in the space of a month, the children had it well by heart. And all that time I kept telling them to go on teaching in their turn whatever they had learned, especially to their parents, family and neighbors.

Every Sunday I collect them all, men and women and children, in the church. They come with great readiness and with a great desire for instruction. Then, in the hearing of all, I begin by calling on the name of the Most Holy Trinity—Father and Son Holy Spirit—and I recite aloud the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary and the Creed, all in the language of that country. They all follow me in the same words and delight in this. Then I repeat the Creed by myself, dwelling upon each article singly. Then I ask them about each article, whether they believed it unhesitatingly. All, with a loud voice and with their hands crossed over their breasts, professed aloud that they truly believe it. I take care to make them repeat the Creed oftener than the other prayers. I tell them that those who believe all that is contained in the creed are Christians.

After the Creed I go on to the commandments, teaching them that the Christian law is contained in these ten precepts and that everyone who observes them all faithfully is a good and true Christian and is certain of eternal salvation. I teach that, on the other hand, whoever neglects a single one of them is a bad Christian and will be cast into hell unless truly repentant of the sin committed.

Converts and unbelievers alike are astonished at all this in a way that shows them the holiness of the Christian law, its perfect consistency with itself, and its agreement with reason. Then I recite the principal prayers and go back to the Creed with a short hymn. As soon as I have recited the first article I sing in their language, "Jesus, Son of the Living God, grant us the grace to believe firmly this first article of your faith, and grant that we may we obtain this faith from you as we offer you this prayer that you yourself have taught us."

Thus, I accustom them to ask for these graces using the ordinary prayers of the Church. I tell them at the same time that if they obtain them they will have all the other things that they can wish for in greater abundance than they know how to ask for them. I make them all, particularly those who are to be baptized, repeat the form of general confession. Last of all, I admit them, thus prepared, to baptism.