

# THE SECOND WEEK IN ADVENT

## SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

8-14 December 2024

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Sunday

## WELCOMING CHRIST INTO OUR HOME

### A Reflection from a Homily by Origen of Alexandria

“Prepare a way for the Lord!” We hear this cry so often and we think, We too must prepare the way for the coming of Christ. That is how we understand the work of John the Baptist, and of Moses, and of the prophets—especially Isaiah. When we look at the texts of Scripture, we find many calls to turn to God. But the best way to turn to God is to follow Jesus, so all those who call people to God actually are calling them to Jesus.

Think of the person you were before you turned to God. Now renew putting your faith in Jesus. Doing this makes Jesus the foundation of your hopes. Recall Isaiah’s words, *“The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight and every valley will be filled in”*. You were called by Isaiah, and by John the Baptist, but you answered this call when it was repeated by someone you knew. Now you are the one who is to call others. But we all have “ways” that need to be straightened and leveled. Perhaps we were like deep valleys or even steep-sided pits, and we couldn’t get ourselves out to help anyone else. The Lord Jesus came and filled us with the Holy Spirit, and we found that we had all sorts of ways to help others, and to please God.

The love of God didn’t abandon us, struggling to get out of the dead ends we created as we sought good things. Jesus’ love ended the struggle and filled us with peace, patience, goodness, and all sorts of good works. We became a kind of home where God dwells; we even become mountains of God, so to speak. Once the human race felt blocked, as we did, by many hostile powers. Isaiah pictured these as mountains and hills that needed to be laid low. But they have been overcome and we can now walk on a straight and level path to God’s House, and find that God is right here within us. And we can help others do the same. We have become mountains of God because we show others God’s love and salvation, as a way out of whatever pits of frustration they may have fallen into.

Isaiah’s prophecy continues: *“Every crooked way shall be straightened.”* We were once crooked but we are so no longer. That is due to the grace of Christ. It comes to us often in the form of example. We pray each day to be able to cry out: *“It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me”*. Jesus, our Lord, has come. He has smoothed out the rough places and changed the crooked ways into straight ones. We each have been made into a level path that leads to Christ and so to God. God, the Heavenly Father, now walks in you. Christ, the Lord, now makes a home in you. You have been given the task of leading others to Christ so that they may be made God’s paths, and homes where God dwells and so can reveal divine life and love through their deeds.

In us a prophecy has been fulfilled: *“My Father and I will come and make our home in them”*. That is exactly what God has done through our faith in Jesus. It is by living *and* laboring with Jesus that we become revelations of God to one another. Accept these gifts and you will be a light of hope.

*Monday*

## **THE CALL TO BE IMMACULATE**

### **A Reflection by Hugo Rahner**

Exiled humanity seems to be standing at the outer edge of Paradise; we feel lost. In this state, we see two figures, two symbols. One is Eve and the other is Mary. In the first, we see the beginning of God's work and that of the Spirit. In the other, we see the Church foreshadowed. In this way, we see our own love of the Church joined with our devotion to Mary and we see that both receive a new depth of meaning.

The word 'immaculate' sums up the mystery of our spiritual life. We are members of the Church, and in us, the Church's mystery must be accomplished. It begins with Mary the Immaculate. We, in our turn, by the power of the Holy Spirit must become immaculate, as we were intended to be in the beginning of our race. In each of us, the victory over the serpent must be achieved. Each of us must once more find entry to the paradise lost from which Mary was never excluded! We must find entry into the eternal company of God and be presented spotless before the presence of God's glory, and with exceeding joy! The Epistle of Jude tells us as much.

It was Mary's privilege to receive this gift—not as returned because it was never lost—but given in virtue of the redeeming blood of her son, in order that in her a place be prepared for Him. And so to us, the heirs of Adam, the same gift is "returned", in virtue of the same blood. Thus St. Paul never tires of reminding his friends that Christ has reconciled them in the body of his flesh through death, to present us holy and unspotted and blameless before God. (cf. Col.1:22) He says that God chose them in Christ before the foundation of the world so that all might be holy and unspotted in his sight. (cf. Eph.1:4)

God, in love and mercy, from all eternity made the choice to look past all the sins of the world to the death of the Beloved Son, "who by the Holy Spirit offered himself unspotted (immaculate) to God". (Heb.9:14) In this glance from eternity, God also saw the one woman, immaculate through the blood of the Son, and in her and with her saw all who belong to her. Hers is the victory over the serpent of error and sin. Hers it is to bring the symbols to fulfillment—both that of Eve and of herself. Thus it is that the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God is in the deepest sense the consummation and the reality, the pledge and the beginning, of our own personal salvation.

What began in Mary, in the flesh, is in the Spirit fulfilled in the Church. Here perhaps is another reason why the Church celebrates so near the beginning of her liturgical year the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, for the Church thus celebrates her own mystery, the mystery of our personal sanctification, and being made spotless before our God. As we surrender our very selves into the hands of God the Spirit causes us to leave behind all that spotted us and left us exiles on the edge of Paradise. We are called to something much greater than Paradise.

*Tuesday*

## **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.

Wednesday

## **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, symbol of victory and glory, symbolizes the fullness 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 in 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.

*Thursday*

## **THE SIGNS OF SALVATION**

### **A Reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini**

God has given himself to the world through signs and wonders. “In the beginning was the Word”; it was not human searching or human effort to go to God that brought salvation. The beginning is God who through visible signs makes himself known to human minds and heart, and to those who search. The fullness of self-awareness is an awareness of the need to know what God says. That means knowing what God manifests through the signs of divine Will. Human persons are hearers of God’s word and find fulfillment by putting themselves and their lives totally in an attitude of listening to the word of God as manifested in Jesus.

Jesus came to us through Mary; i.e., through a person formed by Jewish cult and culture, and history. But Jesus didn’t come for Jews alone and so he had to make God’s word known to Greco-Roman peoples as well. If you read the opening chapters of the Gospel according to St. Luke you will see how the Jewish story of God’s incarnation was retold for a Greco-Roman audience. These people, after all, were called to share fully in God’s promise of salvation but couldn’t hear the promise if spoken only in Jewish cultural ways of speaking.

What God says to us through Mary, by her role in the incarnation, is so important that there have been what we call Marian apparitions all over the world. When we celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, we recall one of these and the message God gave to the Native American peoples through Mary. The words were in a Native American language and in their “picture writing” and were expressed using the forms of courtesy and piety of Native Americans. Mary appears as one of them and builds a cultural bridge between them and Europe by giving St. Juan Diego, a Native American, Castilian roses. A flower, in picture writing, is a word. The word was first for the Bishop of Mexico City because this kind of rose was native to Mexico. It was picked from a miraculous rosebush on Tepeyac hill to persuade the bishop to let a chapel be built on that hill. Even more persuasive to all was the word written on Juan Diego’s tilma, the picture of Mary as a Native American.

The chapel was a place to display that “word” to Native American peoples. In many of their languages, an unexpected opportunity is called “a flower of God”. That is what Mary was for them. St. Juan Diego was chosen to cultivate the flower as the centerpiece of the chapel. Mary said to Juan Diego just what Jesus said to us all on the cross—Mary is your mother. She added that she would show Native American people’s God’s love for them. She began by showing them the respect of speaking their language, wearing their clothes and using their form of writing. Mary really knew her Native American cultural anthropology!

Advent is a time dedicated to sharing the Gospel; i.e., to sharing God’s word as we have personally heard it. It is also a time for speaking of the signs and wonders God has worked for us and for our own people. We are to speak it in a language, perhaps a kind of sign language, which those with whom we share can understand in a way that penetrates to their hearts. St. Juan Diego—who had been the equivalent of a Knight in Aztec society and culture—spent the remainder of his life explaining God’s message, given through the sign of the Virgin who bears a child, to all the Native Americans who came to the little church to see God’s word and sign to them. They turned to God by the thousands. We have the same task, and who knows what wonders God will work through us.

Friday

## THE MESSAGE OF ST. LUCY'S MARTYRDOM

A Reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

If a single phrase could capture what is happening among us then it would be one provided by St. John: *"a light is shining in the dark, a light that the darkness can't overpower"*. Imagine a cave illuminated only by a tiny light, that is the place where Jesus is born. Darkness is everywhere in the world—confusion, lack of meaning and vain efforts at self-sufficiency. All efforts to build the life we want show how limited, desperate, bitter and resigned people are. It is dark within us and outside of us and there is almost no hope. People desperately try to cling to things like social position, wealth, pleasure. That is what drove the man whom Lucy had refused to marry to denounce her as a Christian. If she is going to ruin his life then he will take her to destruction with him.

From this perspective it isn't difficult to grasp the message of Lucy's life or why she has given it, given herself, entirely to Christ. She walks the way he traced out by his own refusal of the way of the world and of the contemporary arbiters of the social and religious rules that tell one how to be respectable and honored. There is, after all, a light shining in all the darkness and it gives a direction to life, an ability to walk toward something positive and a hope and a reason to love. That was what Lucy chose, and what led her to give away all the wealth that her suitor imagined he could have by marrying her.

When Mary looked upon the new-born Jesus, she saw the meaning of her life in a true and practical way that was realized for her only through Jesus. When Lucy met Christ, through her mother, she saw what her life could mean—not just for herself but for others—and it gave her a hope she hadn't expected. Every-thing was suddenly new. That is her message to us. All we have to do is believe and follow Jesus wherever his calls lead us. The light that was once a new born child now lives within each of us. It makes us lights for the world, for all those who hear the message of new life in Christ.

In a Christmas scene, such as we see in a creche, no one speaks. Something happens; an event speaks a Word which is a person and that person will live a life for others such as has never been lived before. In the Greek text of Luke, the shepherds say, *"Let's go to Bethlehem and see this word..."*. And when they returned from encountering Jesus the text says, *"they related the word they had been told"*. A bit later we hear that Mary treasured all *"these words"*.

The event that is Christ is presented to us as a word spoken to us by God and which we are sent to proclaim in our turn to others and to treasure in our hearts so we can reflect and meditate on it. What is just as important, we are to interpret that word to others, and the interpretation is to be our life as it is shaped and reshaped by our encounter with the Heavenly Father's Word, the Only Begotten Son. This life is poured out that we might have life and have it in abundance. Our message is actually the same as St. Lucy's message and our witness is the same as hers—even though given in a way unique to us. We are unrepeatable and called to give an unrepeatable witness of God's love.

Saturday

## **LISTEN TO MY BELOVED SON**

### **A Reflection from Ascent of Mt. Carmel by St. John of the Cross**

In Hebrew Scripture, we constantly hear about people enquiring of God about this or that, most often about what they can hope for. Although the responses that came to them take many and various forms, they are all ways of talking about the one gift that God has now given to all peoples, the gift that is Jesus Christ.

Our faith in Christ is the foundation of our lives and our hopes. Our faith is founded in Christ. In our era, an evangelical law has been given us and there is no reason to enquire of God the way our Hebrew ancestors did. God has given us his Son, who is God's Word. There is no other Word and having spoken that one Word there is no need for any others. All we need do is understand the One Word already spoken.

Jesus Christ has spoken to us all, and to all of us as gathered together in his Church. Once and for all the Heavenly Father has spoken. It is a single Word and it contains all that we need to know for salvation and to please God. This is the heart of what St. Paul is doing when he seeks to persuade his Hebrew brethren to let go of the old laws that had formed them and brought them to God. The Law of Moses is no longer the prime path of salvation. That is Christ.

*"In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son."* What was spoken formerly, in part, to the prophets, God has now spoken to us altogether in Christ, giving us All. That all is God's Son. So, if you want to enquire of God, if you want to seek a vision or revelation, you are acting foolishly and even wrongly. That is because if this is what you seek, you are not setting your eyes and hearts solely upon Christ and don't see the gift given in Him.

We have been given Christ; why would anyone want anything further? Is there something to be given that was not given in Christ? God might respond to such an inquiry, "If I have spoken all things to you in my Word, which is my Son, and I have no other word, what answer can I now make to you, or what can I reveal to you which is greater than what I have revealed?"

Set your eyes and minds and hearts upon Christ alone. In Christ, God has spoken and revealed to us all things. In Christ, we shall find even more than anyone could ask or even long for. But perhaps we don't realize this. On Mt. Tabor God descended upon Jesus in God's Spirit. God said *"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; listen to Him!"*

Listen to Jesus, God says, because in Jesus I have revealed all my love. There is nothing more to reveal! I have no more matters of faith to reveal, neither do I have any more teachings to declare. When I spoke formerly it was to promise Christ. If people enquired of me their petitions were directed to Christ and they were asking for Christ. There is nothing to expect except Christ. In Christ, you find every good thing. All that needs to be known is set forth in the teachings of the Evangelists and Apostles. All that remains is to do as Christ does. That is, it only remains to love.