

To Begin Again: Why we Need Advent

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DUCK, N.C. (Catholic Online) – For many of our readers in the United States of America, the smell of Thanksgiving still permeates the indoor air but the celebratory atmosphere is wearing off. Thanksgiving was a day for family gatherings and for giving thanks. Sometimes, it also becomes a day of stress, as families deal with all the intricacies of those special relationships and are invited to learn the way of love.

Now, the Catholic Church, good mother that she is, focuses the faithful on a beautiful liturgical season which calls us to live in anticipation of a new beginning, a new coming of the Lord. That season of joyful preparation - when we will be constantly invited through our liturgical readings and practices, to clear away all that entangles us and open a space in our hearts, our homes, our relationships and our lives - is called Advent.

The focus in the Office of Readings in the Liturgy of the Hours, the official prayer of the Church,

during this Advent season will be on preparing for the coming(s) of the Lord. One of my favorite readings is taken from an Advent homily given by St. Bernard of Clairveaux. His insight unveils the special truth of this wonderful season of beginning again. He reminds us of *all* the Lord's comings. He then situates us where we live our daily lives, on the road of continual conversion, the heart of the Christian vocation:

"We know that there are three comings of the Lord. The third lies between the other two. It is invisible while the other two are visible. In the first coming He was seen on earth, dwelling among men; ... in the final coming "all flesh will see the salvation of our God and they will look upon Him whom they have pierced". The intermediate coming is a hidden one; in it only the elect see the Lord within their own selves, and they are saved. In His first coming our Lord came in our flesh and our weakness; in this middle coming He comes in Spirit and in power; in the final coming he will be seen in glory and in majesty. Because this coming lies between the other two, it is like a road on which we travel from the first coming to the last." (St. Bernard of Clairveaux)

This Sunday the Season of Advent begins! Millions of the faithful throughout the world, will bring the advent candles out of storage and set them in a prominent place. Over these weeks preceding Christmas, families, religious communities and all of the faithful will gather, pray and sing together- inviting the coming of the Lord into our lives, our homes, our Churches - and into the world which God still loves so much that He sends His Son, through all who have been Baptized into the Body of Christ. We live in a new missionary age. In a culture where the influences of Christian traditions are waning many are again asking, 'why do Christians celebrate Advent?'

The word "Advent" is derived from the Latin words, *ad-venio* or *adventus*, which both signify a coming. It is a liturgical season in the Catholic Church that has birthed customs and practices in daily Catholic life meant to be filled with living faith. These customs form a framework, a pattern that moves us forward in the process of continual conversion that is meant to be what the Christian life is all about. We are always invited to begin again. That is the heart of the message which Christians can bring to an age often staggering in the existential sadness which is one of the horrid after effects of the dictatorship of relativism. The Advent candles we will light symbolize Jesus Christ, the True Light which can dispel the dreariness of an age which has all but lost real hope. The message we are to proclaim during this wonderful season is that Lord is always coming for those who look for Him!

The formal celebration of Advent dates back to the fourth century but the practice of preparing for the coming of the Lord by living as though he is always coming goes back to the very beginnings of the Church. Through the history of the Western Church the season of Advent has become a significant part of the pattern of life, faith, culture and worship that is Catholic Christianity. During the weeks which precede the Nativity of the Lord Jesus, ("Christ-Mass"), Christians (Catholics and others) will be invited by the Church to prepare, to "get ready", to make a place for the Lord in our lives and in our homes, to anticipate His coming(s).

Beginning with the Sunday Vigil Mass, we will sing the ever-familiar hymn "O Come, O Come Emmanuel". That song will become the backdrop of the season, sticking in our minds - both individually and collectively. I know the tune will be hummed incessantly and do what music does when it is repeated, get down deep into our subconscious. It may even become "annoying"- as music also can. However, even that annoyance, gets to the root of Catholic life and faith. It is, as they say in the Internet world, "granular" Christianity, ... filled with practices that root themselves experientially into your bones. Catholicism is "earthy", "real", "incarnational"

Christianity for “earthy”, “real” believers who understand that the Incarnation of Jesus Christ has changed everything and everyone. .

Sooner than we can imagine, the "liturgical air" will be filled with the beautiful "O Antiphons", taken from the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures in the Prophetic and Wisdom Books. They will be sung as a part of the formal "Liturgy of the Hours" beginning seven days before the Vigil of Christmas. These short prayers in the “Liturgy of the Hours”, or Breviary, which all clergy, most religious orders, and an increasing number of lay men and women use as the structure for daily prayer throughout the western Catholic world, are also a part of the treasury of Catholic faith and life. This liturgy forms a foundation for our faith and places us in the heart of a Church that stretches back two thousand years and reaches forward to the final coming of the Lord.

As a Deacon of the Church, I will wear lavender vestments when I serve alongside of the priest at the altar. Lavender is a color that connotes both repentance, and expectation. These two actions and attitudes are the "heart", the "spirit" of the season. Advent is a time to "get ready" and to build up the hope within our hearts for the promised coming of Jesus Christ! We do so by repenting of our sin and renouncing our wrong choices. We are invited to empty ourselves of the clutter of our daily idolatry and renounce the disordered self love that can squeeze God’s grace out of our lives. It is by His grace that we truly find ourselves, made new again in Jesus Christ!

Catholic Christians repeat together-experientially- through our "liturgy" (which means the "work" of worship), the meaning of the Christian life. We walk through the great events of Christian history so as to inculcate the "mystery" of faith more deeply within our “nitty-gritty” lives in the real world. We build a "way" -a pattern- of daily Christian living with these customs, practices, and celebrations. During Advent, the Church, as a mother, calls us all to get ready, to clean the house, to set special times aside, so that we will be ready for all of His comings!

The Scriptural texts that we will hear at "Mass" (the Divine Liturgy) will be introduce us to great figures, such as John the Baptizer, who embody the call to repentance and "preparing the way" for all who live between the first and the final coming of Jesus. These Old and New Testament passages will be beautifully juxtaposed in every Eucharistic Liturgy and in the “Liturgy of the Hours" in order to point to – and expound upon- all the "comings" that St Bernard so insightfully wrote about. The faithful will be invited to experience the extraordinary graces found in the full smorgasbord of sacramental and liturgical services. However, ultimately, it will come down to each person, each family, making the choice to accept the invitation and to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

As I grow older, I love being a Catholic Christian more and more. I remember reading a newspaper article in an airport many years ago in which a priest wrote that Catholicism was "religion for the long haul." I see the truth of that assertion more as the years seem to fly by. Oh, I know that some other Christians see practices such as Advent as "empty ritual"; and perhaps for some, that is what they have become. But for me, celebrating Advent, indeed all the seasons of the Church year, are continual calls back to faith, repentance, conversion and holiness of life, the things that really matter. The ritual of Catholic Christian life provides a form into which the freshness of the Spirit can be poured again and again. I remember an old Pentecostal minister once telling me when I was twenty one years old “Son, we get filled with the Spirit, but then we leak”. So we do.

The familiar patterns and practices of Catholic faith present an opportunity for shaping family life, customs, and inform a piety that all can help us to assimilate the beauty and truth revealed in the

comings of the Lord. They help us to break from the monotony of regular daily life in order to participate in something bigger than ourselves. They connect us to the One who always comes to those who are prepared. They are, as we used to say more often, "occasions of grace." As my life goes on I need more than ever to hear the clarion call to "prepare the way for the Lord." I need these special times of grace. I need these holy seasons. Unlike my youth when I thought I had it all "figured out", I find something quite different has occurred as my hair has turned white (and sparse) and I continue in my journey of faith. I realize how little I actually do know... and how much more conversion I need to get ready for that coming when I will pass from one life to the next.

The liturgical seasons of the Catholic Church are an extraordinary gift and opportunity. After all, human beings are going to mark time. We will mark it either with the ordinary stuff of ordinary life or we will fill it as well with the things of God, thereby transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary. Why celebrate Advent? I say because we need it. Bring on the candles, the songs, the colors, and the seasons. Bring on the special liturgical times, and fill the air with all the special smells.... I love it all. Advent is a road, a way of living the Christian life and vocation. We now live in that intermediate time between the first and the second comings. We are to be changed by the first and to prepare ourselves- and the world in which we live- for the second. During this process of conversion - He continues to come to all those who make themselves ready. Happy Advent, Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!

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