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The Journey of Advent

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If someone wished you “Happy New Year” on December 1st, you might initially suppose that they had been looking at the wrong page of a calendar. But in fact, our liturgical “new year” did begin on December 1st, the First Sunday of Advent. For me, there is always a quiet joy that comes with the start of Advent. It is, in many ways, a counterweight to the feverish and frenzied pre-Christmas activity that so many associate with this time of year. Advent, rather than being a time of noise and bustle, is actually a time for quiet prayer and hopeful expectation. While many in the world around us seem obsessed with looking for the best bargains, and some even want to banish “Christ” from Christmas, the church invites all of us to focus on the real meaning of this blessed time of year - the advent, or coming, of our God.

Don’t get me wrong. I love Christmas, and I thoroughly enjoy the festivity and joy of the Christmas celebrations. But, I also love Advent, and I firmly believe we could all benefit from greater attentiveness to this meditative and quietly beautiful season of grace. The symbol of the Advent wreath, the haunting chant of “O come, O come, Emmanuel,” and the beautiful liturgies of this season all point to the coming of Jesus, our Savior, into the world. The Old Testament prophecies of Isaiah, which we hear so often at Mass during these weeks, remind us of the longing of Israel for its Messiah. That spirit of longing is ours too, as “we await the blessed hope, the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”

The word “advent” derives from the Latin phrase *Adventus Domini*, the coming of the Lord. It is a time of prayerful preparation prior to the celebration of Christmas. But Jesus Christ, the Son of God, comes to us in several ways. It might be said that Jesus comes to us in history, in grace and in glory. He comes first in history through his Incarnation. As the Prologue of St. John’s Gospel tells us, “The Word became flesh and dwelled among us.” At a place and moment in history, the Son of God took on our human nature and was born into our world. This is the heart of the Christmas celebration, and Advent helps us to recall and relive that great event. Through a good observance of Advent, our hearts will be made ready to welcome the newborn Christ at Christmas.

Jesus also comes to us in grace. At every moment of every day, he draws near and extends his saving grace to us, especially through the Sacred Scriptures and through the sacraments. The Second Vatican Council teaches us that the church itself is “the universal sacrament of salvation (LG 48),” and through the church, Jesus comes to offer mercy and light to his people. He also comes to us in our daily prayers and in the acts of charity and virtue that we perform, often hidden from the notice of the world. This coming in grace is another dimension of Advent that perhaps is overlooked but that deserves our daily notice and reflection.

Finally, Jesus will come to us in glory. At the end of ages, the Son of God will come “to judge the living and the dead,” and he will bring to fulfillment the Kingdom that he inaugurated at the beginning of his public ministry. Many of the readings and prayers of the Advent liturgies remind us of this glorious and awesome coming of Christ at the end of time, and they call us to prepare for that final moment when we will make a reckoning before our mighty Lord and King. If our lives are not in good order, and if we look to this judgment with fear and trepidation, then Advent is the perfect time to prepare and to make some necessary changes. Lent is usually associated with prayer and penance, but Advent too has a character of repentance that we should not neglect. One of the key characters of the season is John the Baptist, who cries out across the centuries, “Repent, prepare the way of the Lord and make straight his paths!” The practice of a good sacramental confession during Advent is one of the best ways to prepare for the coming of the Lord, not only at Christmas, but at the moment of our own particular judgment.

Frequent participation at Mass is another way for us to enter into this time of grace and hope. Jesus comes to us in the Eucharist at every Mass, and truly prepares us by this sacramental coming for his sublime coming at the end of our earthly lives. As we unite ourselves to him now through this greatest of sacraments, we will be prepared for the perfect and eternal communion with God that we all hope for. There are few better ways to celebrate Advent and experience the coming of the Lord than to attend Mass as often as possible.

Gift-giving is a popular part of this holiday season. But just as “it is better to give than to receive,” so it is incumbent on all of us, especially during Advent, to give of ourselves and live a life of charity. Selfless love should be a defining characteristic of every follower of Jesus, and as we prepare to celebrate his birth in the flesh, we must also be willing to serve him in the brothers and sisters who walk with us on our earthly journey. Christ comes to us in the guise of our neighbor, the needy, the sick, and the lonely. Do we recognize him when he approaches? There are many laudable public efforts to assist the poor and disadvantaged during these weeks before Christmas, but hopefully the season of Advent will open our hearts to charity all year round. And perhaps a simpler material celebration of the holidays will give us a richer experience of the coming of our God.

“*Maranatha* -come, O Lord.” This great cry of the early church still resounds in the hearts of Christians throughout the world. May our own devout observance of Advent be a fitting prelude to the celebration of our Lord’s birth, to his daily coming in grace, and to his glorious coming at the end of days.