

Living the Spirit Advent

This insert repeats much of a previous writing about Advent. In these days of preparation for Christmas we are reminded that it is wise to be spiritually prepared for the coming of Christ. In this insert I address Advent as a time of mitigated penance. Advent is, of course, much more. In fact, it seems that as a separate time for living the Spirit, it will be very much what we make of it.

Much of our Advent time is spent in activities of preparation for Christmas as a secular holiday. As I often wrote before, we try to make these preparations take on some spiritual meaning. Our concern for the giving of gifts can be a way of showing our commitment to love one another, a truly Christian activity. Our attention to those whom we do not contact during the year may signal the often-unexpressed concern we have for others.

Advent has a history. It is a religious season that the Church set apart much later than the season of Lent. Celebrating Advent probably took root in religious communities. The dates and times were very fluid. One group of religious began the season of Advent on September 14th, the Feast of the Holy Cross. I suppose they were as eager to anticipate Christmas in a spiritual way as our stores are in a practical way.

As we celebrate Advent we begin to recall the coming of the Son of God into our world as one like us in all but sin. The mystery of the Incarnation that took place nine months before Christ's birth is a profound theological doctrine for Christians. We may wonder why God would want to enter our world, to be human as we creatures are.

Contemplating this mystery, we will realize that there was a promise made to our First Parents and to the Chosen People. In the Old Testament, we find the constant hope for a Messiah developed more and more as the time led up to Christ's coming. It helps us to live amidst any troubles we experience if we understand that God keeps His promises.

Jesus became man to be one of us so that there would be proper satisfaction for sin. If we measure an offense by the one offended, we will judge that sin as an offense against God is the greatest of evils. It brings with it untold sorrow. It needs an infinite reconciliation to bring humanity back into the favor of God. To allow us to experience Peace!

That is what Jesus did. Certainly by His Passion and Death, but just as well by his Birth and hidden Life. As we live Advent we ask ourselves if there is something about the event of His Birth and Childhood that fulfill the purpose of that grand reconciliation with the Father. We find the answer here by reliving the Christmas Gospels.

In the Gospels we find truth that brings us joy. Jesus is born poor in circumstances that need no elaboration to reveal that the event for Him was a mortification of body. If we take a serious look at His willingness to be born poor, powerless, exiled from home – and then, consider that angels reveal this event as bringing glory to God and peace to those on whom God's favor rests, -- then we have to accept that His birth, His coming was a supreme reconciliation for all the sins of our humanity. A reason for spiritual joy!

Because we are likely to experience rather happy emotions at this time of year – unless we have made ourselves modern Scrooges – Advent’s call to penance and mortification simply cannot equal that of Lent. I think that we cannot live Christmas and anticipate it without a return to our childhood. Ours is united with that of Jesus. We think of Mary and cannot help thinking of our own mother. We look upon Joseph, and should not forget the father who inhabited our childhood’s world. We think of Jesus, and recall our own earliest memories of the outpouring of love we were given.

Perhaps that is why moral theologians speak about the fast once imposed on Christmas Eve as the *jejunum gaudiosum* – the joyful fast. In some cultures you will find that the foods of Christmas Eve are those once allowed on fast days, meatless and simple (contrasted to the rich fare served the next day).

Are there ways I could suggest to enhance the spiritual in your Advent? I think that there are. I suggest that you find time to get to confession. Make Christ’s purpose in coming to us, the purification of the world by an infinite reconciliation, become your purpose in Advent. Understand that the reconciliation continues with each sinner cleansed from sin. Let your goal be to share in that saving mission of Jesus.

Try to practice one or other of the virtues that you personally find a bit hard. Try patience. Control frustration and anger. Avoid bitterness. Forget old insults or past injuries. Embellish your faith, going from word to deed – for example, offer an extra Mass for entirely unselfish reasons. Work at being filled with hope, relying on God’s promises. Let your charity mirror the love God has for you and for all others.

While I mention such ways of bringing about the self-denial that is required for a more perfect Christian life, I do so with awareness that there is a long history in the practice of mortification. Earlier times called for a more physical penitence. In the early Church public penance included painful kneeling at the doors of the church building, asking for prayers. Later penitence involved severe fasts or endurance of pain in various forms.

Today experts in spirituality suggest that the Christian take a different road to achieve perfection. If in the past the saints sought out penances, today’s saints are likely to find the penances seeking them out. By this, I mean that we can deny our selfish interests and bind ourselves to the will of God by enduring whatever comes our way in our daily life.

Haven’t you found the Cross at times, the very one that is to be taken up as you follow the Lord? Most of us have. Having said all this, I do not want anyone to think that penitence is to be a kind of marathon. We will run the race and finish the course as St. Paul calls the journey of our lives with the chief means of our perfection based in a consuming love of God. To love Him we will do all we can to know Him. Then we will find ways to serve Him, usually in serving others. That is how to live the Spirit. In Advent even our penitence is joyous. After all, we know that Jesus has already come!

God love you always!

Monsignor Morrison

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