

Living the Spirit Reflections on Advent

In this insert I write some reflections about this season of the year, both secular and liturgical. I hope they help you take spiritual advantage of this Advent period. Advent invites us to do more than prepare for a Christmas holiday observance. It invites us to find ways to prepare spiritually for the celebration of a day that is holy. It is a Christ-centered time. Yes, Jesus really is the reason for the season

We cannot understand Advent unless we understand Christmas, and perhaps much more. As our theology and practice of the faith developed, the Church began to observe the time before Christmas as a time of mitigated penance. In its Liturgy the Church looked to the celebration of Christmas as a time to give thanks for the first coming of Jesus into this world of ours. It also saw this time as a time for reflection on how Christ will come again. It quickly united the celebration of the Eucharist with the theme of Christ's coming, as we all know that Christ comes to us in the Eucharist.

No one knows the exact date of Christ's birth. The Church in a sense is said to have baptized the pagan custom of celebrating the winter solstice by making it a celebration of the coming of Christ, instead of the renewal of the Sun in the heavens. There is a concordance in the calendar with the Annunciation/Incarnation on March 25th and the celebration nine months later of the Birth of Christ.

Those who would like to connect this season and their own activities with the spiritual meaning of the time will reflect much upon the first event. Mary becomes the chosen Mother of the promised Messiah. She accepts the will of God even though she does not know all its implications for her own life. Her Advent time would have been one of anticipation of the practical aspects of the Gospel. She hastens to help Elizabeth. From her experience of prayer and union with the Holy Spirit she reaches out in charity and good works to bring a practical message of love, God's love!

It will help us to remember that in its essence this time of the year is a time of preparation for the celebration of Christmas. At least that is what it is for Christians. Since our country is very much occupied by Christians, it is not surprising that Christmas would have a part in its national life and spirit. Sadly, this is at times attacked as divisive.

In the founding of this country, Christmas was not always celebrated. Christians of Massachusetts Colony, for example, were adamantly opposed to its celebration. Its observance was considered a Romish (Catholic) custom, causing much concern to Puritan Christians. The history of anti-Catholic prejudice reveals that even after independence, Christmas was not publicly observed. In fact, despite our Constitution, it was forbidden. For many Christmas was made a workday. Catholics had to go to Christmas Mass quite early in the morning or even during the night hours.

Today some see Christmas as a divisive celebration. This, to me, is a strange view. The same people are found quite willing to celebrate the winter solstice, just as pagans did centuries ago before Christianity took root in ancient lands. Some push celebrating a relatively new observance named Kwanzaa. Others desire nothing more than seeing the time as a "winter break." That is why we Catholic believers should not fear to be counter-cultural and openly show our faith in Christ and this mystery of our faith. Catholics who know their faith must show that Christmas is more than a secular observance. It is a religious one, and it has its own liturgy, developed over centuries. Accompanying this formal religious celebration are the many family traditions and

cultural customs that mark the feastday and its entire season. Such worthy customs should be preserved, even in our pluralistic society.

The liturgy of the Church for this feastday developed into the celebration of three Masses. The first was celebrated at Midnight, the second at dawn, and the third during the day. The liturgy included the Gloria, a liturgical hymn, first introduced into the Liturgy by Pope St. Telesphorus in the fourth century. At first limited to the Mass of the Bishop, it became the norm for all Masses on that day. All Christmas Masses are joyous in spirit.

In time there were other marks of this celebration that we are quite familiar with. Our churches have a crèche, a representation of the Christmas event. It is believed that St. Francis was largely responsible for starting this custom. Imagine, he used a live baby! I recall how the crèche was at the center of the Christmas customs I found in Rome as a priest-student years ago. Christmas trees were not in great supply. It was Pope John Paul II who had the first such tree – as well as the crèche – placed in St. Peter’s Square.

My first Christmas in Europe was spent in Switzerland. There the familiar Germanic customs were observed. Our residence had a beautiful hand-carved crèche. As an aside, it was a monastery town, and the day after Christmas saw the monks allowed by their Abbot to go skiing. Yes, in their habits! I also recall the terrible cold that made it necessary for the wine and water to be heated for use in the Abbatial Mass.

This brings me to Advent. Whatever else we can say, it is the time of preparation for Christmas. A great part of our preparation and our activities will likely be more secular than religious. We have to work to see in them some kind of spiritual meaning. For example, we will try to make many of our Christmas dinners and parties a celebration of the love of neighbor and the unity of believers in Christmas.

The danger is that all this activity can crowd out the spiritual. It takes creativity to make Advent work for our spiritual advantage. So it is that we find Advent wreaths, Advent calendars and other customs becoming popular. Some will make Advent a time for some fasting, and so continue the custom of making Advent into a little Lent. Most religious communities have this observance. Almsgiving will be a part of the season, and our giving of gifts will not neglect the poor. A good Advent confession should also be a part of our spiritual preparations.

Meanwhile, I hope that this season does not become for you a time of frustration, of a busyness that leads to exhaustion. Try to do what you feel you must do with a moderation that does not weaken your spiritual resolve. Use Advent’s opportunities for a spiritual observance of your time. Make them inclusive of the spiritual. Remember, Advent means “Coming.” Be happy, for Christ has come, Christ is here, Christ will come again.

God love you always!

Monsignor David Morrison

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Let us pray the Church’s ancient prayer: Maranatha, Come, Lord Jesus, Come!