

## **Chapter 3**

### **Practice During Advent**

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### **From The Liturgical Year**

If our holy mother the Church spends the time of Advent in this solemn preparation for the threefold coming of Jesus Christ; if, after the example of the prudent virgins, she keeps her lamp lit ready for the coming of the Bridegroom; we, being her members and her children, ought to enter into her spirit, and apply to ourselves this warning of our Saviour: ‘Let your loins be girt, and lamps burning in your hands, and ye yourselves be like unto men who wait for their Lord!’ The Church and we have, in reality, the same hopes. Each one of us is, on the part of God, an object of mercy and care, as is the Church herself.

If she is the temple of God, it is because she is built of living stones; if she is the bride, it is because she consists of all the souls which are invited to eternal union with God. If it is written that the Saviour has purchased the Church with His own Blood, may not each one of us say of himself those words of St. Paul, ‘Christ has loved me, and has delivered Himself up for me’? Our destiny being the same, then, as that of the Church, we should endeavour during Advent, to enter into the spirit of preparation, which is, as we have seen, that of the Church herself.

And firstly, it is our duty to join with the saints of the old Law in asking for the Messiah, and thus pay the debt which the whole human race owes to the divine mercy. In order to fulfil this duty with fervour, let us go back in thought to those four thousand years, represented by the four weeks of Advent, and reflect on the darkness and crime which filled the world before our Saviour’s coming. Let our hearts be filled with lively gratitude towards Him who saved His creature man from death, and who came down from heaven that He might know our miseries by Himself experiencing them, yes, all of them excepting sin.

Let us cry to Him with confidence from the depths of our misery; for, notwithstanding His having saved the work of His hand, He still wishes us to beseech Him to save us. Let therefore our desires and our confidence have their free utterance in the ardent supplications of the ancient prophets, which the Church puts on our lips during these days of expectation; let us give our closest attention to the sentiments which they express.

This first duty complied with, we must next turn our minds to the coming which our Saviour wishes to accomplish in our own hearts. It is, as we have seen, a coming full of sweetness and mystery, and a consequence of the first; for the good Shepherd comes not only to visit the flock in general, but He extends His solicitude to each one of the sheep, even to the hundredth which is lost. Now, in order to appreciate the whole of this ineffable mystery, we must remember that, ‘since we can be pleasing to our heavenly Father only inasmuch as He sees within us His Son Jesus Christ, this amiable Saviour deigns to come into each one of us, and transform us, if we will but consent, into Himself, so that henceforth we may live, not we, but He in us. This is, in reality, the one grand aim of the Christian religion, to make man divine through Jesus Christ: it is the task which God has given to His Church to do, and she says to the faithful what St. Paul said to his Galatians: ‘My little children, of whom I am in labour again, until Christ be formed within you!’(Galatians 4:19)

But as, on His entering into this world, our divine Saviour first showed Himself under the form of a weak Babe, before attaining the fullness of the age of manhood, and this to the end that nothing might be wanting to His sacrifice, so does He intend to do in us; there is to be a progress in His growth within us. Now, it is at the feast of Christmas that He delights to be born in our souls, and that He pours out over the whole Church a grace of being born, to which, however, not all are faithful.

For this glorious solemnity, as often as it comes round, finds three classes of men. The first, and the smallest number, are those who live, in all its plenitude, the life of Jesus who is within them, and aspire incessantly after the increase of this life. The second class of souls is more numerous; they are living, it is true, because Jesus is in them; but they are sick and weakly, because they care not to grow in this divine life; their charity has become cold! The rest of men make up the third division, and are they that have no part of this life in them, and are dead; for Christ has said: 'I am the Life.' (John 14:6)

Now, during the season of Advent, our Lord knocks at the door of all men's hearts, at one time so forcibly that they must needs notice Him; at another, so softly that it requires attention to know that Jesus is asking admission. He comes to ask them if they have room for Him, for He wishes to be born in their house. The house indeed is His, for he built it and preserves it; yet He complains that His own refused to receive Him; at least the greater number did. 'But as many as received Him, He gave them power to be made the sons of God, born not of blood, nor of the flesh, but of God.'

He will be born, then, with more beauty and lustre and might than you have hitherto seen in Him, Oh ye faithful ones, who hold Him within you as your only treasure, and who have long lived no other life than His, shaping your thoughts and works on the model of His. You will feel the necessity of words to suit and express your love; such words as He delights to hear you speak to Him. You will find them in the holy liturgy.

You, who have had Him within you without knowing Him, and have possessed Him without relishing the sweetness of His presence, open your hearts to welcome Him, this time, with more care and love. He repeats His visit of this year with an untiring tenderness; He has forgotten your past slights; He would 'that all things be new.' Make room for the divine Infant, for He desires to grow within your soul. The time of His coming is close at hand: let your heart, then, be on the watch; and lest you should slumber when He arrives, watch and pray, yea, sing. The words of the liturgy are intended also for your use: they speak of darkness, which only God can enlighten; of wounds, which only His mercy can heal; of a faintness, which can be braced only by His divine energy.

And you, Christians, for whom the good tidings are as things that are not because you are dead in sin, lo! He who is very life is coming among you. Yes, whether this death of sin has held you as its slave for long years, or has but freshly inflicted on you the wound which made you its victim, Jesus, your Life, is coming: 'why, then, will you die? He desires not the death of the sinner, but rather that he be converted and live,' The grand feast of His birth will be a day of mercy for the whole world; at least, for all who will give Him admission into their hearts: they will rise to life again in Him, their past life will be destroyed, and where sin abounded, there grace will more abound.

But, if the tenderness and the attractiveness of this mysterious coming make no impression on you, because your heart is too weighed down to be able to rise to confidence, and because, having so long drunk sin like water, you know not what it is to long with love for the caresses of a Father whom you have slighted—then turn your thoughts to that other coming, which is full of terror, and is to follow the silent one of grace that is now offered. Think within yourselves, how this earth of ours will tremble at the approach of the dread Judge; how the heavens will flee from before His face, and fold up as a book; how man will wince under His angry look; how the creature will wither away with fear, as the two-edged sword, which comes from the mouth of his Creator, pierces him; and how sinners will cry out, ‘Ye mountains, fall on us! Ye rocks, cover us!’

Those unhappy souls who would not know the time of their visitation, shall then vainly wish to hide themselves from the face of Jesus. They shut their hearts against this Man-God, who, in His excessive love for them, wept over them: therefore, on the day of judgement they will descend alive into those everlasting fires, whose flame devours the earth with her increase, and burns the foundations of the mountains. The worm that never dies, the useless eternal repentance, will gnaw them for ever.

Let those, then, who are not touched by the tidings of the coming of the heavenly Physician and the good Shepherd who giveth His life for His sheep, meditate during Advent on the awful yet certain truth, that so many render the redemption unavailable to themselves by refusing to co-operate in their own salvation. They may treat the Child who is to be born with disdain; but He is also the mighty God, and do they think they can withstand Him on that day, when He is to come, not to save, as now, but to judge? Would that they knew more of this divine Judge, before whom the very saints tremble! Let these, also, use the liturgy of this season, and they will there learn how much He is to be feared by sinners.

We would not imply by this that only sinners need to fear; no, every Christian ought to fear. Fear, when there is no nobler sentiment with it, makes man a slave; when it accompanies love, it is a feeling which fills the heart of a child who has offended his father, yet seeks for pardon; when, at length, love casts out fear, even then this holy fear will sometimes come, and, like a flash of lightning, pervade the deepest recesses of the soul. It does the soul good. She wakes up afresh to a keener sense of her own misery and of the unmerited mercy of her Redeemer. Let no one, therefore, think that he may safely pass his Advent without taking any share in the holy fear which animates the Church. She, though so beloved by God, prays to Him to give her this fear; and in her Office ‘of Sext, she thus cries out to Him: ‘Pierce my flesh with Thy fear.’ It is, however, to those who are beginning a good life, that this part of the Advent liturgy will be peculiarly serviceable.

It is evident, from what we have said, that Advent is a season specially devoted to the exercises of what is called the purgative life, which is implied in that expression of St. John, so continually repeated by the Church during this holy time: Prepare ye the way of the Lord! Let all, therefore, strive earnestly to make straight the path by which Jesus will enter into their souls. Let the just, agreeably to the teaching of the apostle, forget the things that are behind, and labour to acquire fresh merit.

Let sinners begin at once and break the chains which now enslave them. Let them give up those bad habits which they have contracted. Let them weaken the flesh, and enter upon the hard work of subjecting it to the spirit. Let them, above all things, pray with the Church. And when

our Lord comes, they may hope that He will not pass them by, but that He will enter and dwell within them; for He spoke of all when He said these words: 'Behold I stand at the gate and knock: if any man shall hear My voice and open to Me the door, I will come in unto him.'  
(Apocalypse 3:20)