

MYSTIC LIGHT

Advent

ADVENT IS THE TIME of preparation for the holiest event of the year. As Isaiah declaims (40:3) and John the Baptist echoes (Matt. 3:3): “Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” In our lives we are constantly in the process of preparing for different events and eventualities, all of which, for the Christian, ultimately relate to the esoteric event of the birth of the Christ within.

From Latin *adventus*, meaning *coming*, the Advent season begins as near as possible to the feast of St. Andrew and lasts for the four weeks that are concluded by Christmas. In the ninth century the first Sunday of Advent was designated as the beginning of the church liturgical year in Roman rite. A collect for Advent Sunday begins with the words, “Stir up, we beseech Thee, O Lord, the wills of Thy faithful people, that they plenteously bring forth the fruit of good works.”

Because Advent is so closely related to Christmas, it can scarcely be understood apart from that feast. For it was not until the birthday of Jesus was celebrated throughout the church that Advent came into existence, and the season’s very name is derived from the ancient name for the feast.

Adventus and *Natale* are both synonyms for the Incarnation as well as for the feast which commemorates and celebrates the Incarnation. Like-



Master of the Louvre Nativity, active second half of the fifteenth century, Louvre, Paris

The Nativity

wise do Christmas and Epiphany not simply commemorate the birth of Jesus as an historical event, but, more importantly, they celebrate the coming of God in the flesh as a saving event that makes possible the coming of Christ into men’s souls.

The term Advent originally applied to the feast itself and only gradually came to designate the time before Christmas. The oration for the second Sunday is a survival of this usage: “Stir us up, Lord. Make us ready for your only begotten Son. May we be able to serve you with purity of soul through the coming of Him Who lives and reigns.”

In this passage the word *coming* refers to the feast of Christmas. Furthermore, the ancient Introit for the Epiphany begins with the words, "Behold, the Lord, the Ruler, is come." Advent, then, is first of all, a comprehensive name for the Incarnation and all that the Incarnation accomplishes. Relevant to this correspondence between the church calendar and seasonal rhythms is Max Heindel's observation that "there is a mystic reason for many of the rituals of the church—they come from hoary antiquity."

The prototype of Advent is to be found in the Gallican custom of providing for a time of preparation for the feast of Epiphany, which was a baptismal feast in that part of the West (now primarily France), and thus corresponded to the Lenten preparation which took the form of a period of fasting and prayer that originally lasted three weeks, but in time was lengthened to forty days in obvious imitation of Lent, and became known as St. Martin's Lent because it began on that saint's feastday (November 11). The main point to remember is that Advent was an ascetical rather than a liturgical season.

Gregory the First shortened the season from six to four weeks, composed prayers, responses, and antiphons for the season, and also arranged the Lectionary for the Mass and the Office. When the Roman rite was introduced into Gaul in the 9th century, Gregory's Advent went along with it, to be enriched there with Gallican prayers and rites. It was the Gallicans who did most to bring about the emphasis upon the Second Coming which is so striking an element of the present Advent liturgy.

The fusion of the Roman and the Gallican Advent found its way back to Rome in the tenth century, giving the church the rich Advent liturgy it has today. Whatever the object of the original Roman Advent may have been, its scope has been widened to include not only a preparation for the anniversary of the coming of Christ, but also the expectation of His Second Coming in power and majesty. Neither aspect can be excluded if one is to be faithful to the texts actually in use. Too exclusive an insistence upon either point of view fails to take into account the important fact that Advent is a liturgical season and is therefore a mystery in the ancient sense of the word, a sense that has been

strikingly recovered in the 20th century; that is to say, it is a present reality as it deepens and strengthens the awareness of Christ's presence in His church and in its members. It is not only a preparation for Christmas and a rekindling of the expectation of the Second Coming, it also implicitly carries the content of the mystery of the incarnation in the light of its full and final achievement.

The word *Advent* must therefore be taken in its fullest possible sense as referring to past, present, and future. This understanding is the basis for speaking of the three comings of Christ. Since the time of St. Bernard, Christian spirituality has maintained this way of regarding Advent, an approach that finds its best justification in the liturgy itself, for between the first and the Second Coming of Christ the present coming of grace is constantly being fulfilled: "Lo! I am with you always!"

Although we prepare for the four weeks of Advent, our whole life is a working toward that goal, that coming, that Presence of the Christ in and among us. The fulfillment of the fourth week of Advent prefigures the fulfillment of the entire Earth Period, the fourth in the septenary of Earth's manifestations. Four is a dominant motif characterizing our current development as one of the four life waves in visible creation affected by the four seasons of the solar year. The densest member of our fourfold body (signified by the letters INRI above the four-armed cross), is composed of four "elements," which on a figurative level designate the four ethers that constitute the vital body, and on the emotional level describe four human temperaments.

At the Autumn Equinox conditions are most propitious for passing from the physical to the etheric realm. As people everywhere prepare for the holiday observances, in whatever manner they choose, the celebrations enforce a deeper impression upon the collective human consciousness. Something of a spiritual nature is accomplished, for all work is God's, even the most material aspect of the preparations.

Pertinent information relevant to Advent in Corinne Heline's *The Mystery of the Christos* warrants an extended quotation:

"Advent usually begins with the last Sunday

in November and culminates in the golden glory of the Winter Solstice. For an esoteric Christian it embraces three steps or Degrees which reach their fruition at midnight on Holy Night. This period of preparation and advancement refer not only to the weeks of Advent, but also to definite stages of spiritual unfoldment correlated to those four weeks.

“During the week following the first Sunday of Advent the work is that of the First or Preparatory Degree. This is also designated as the Degree of the Annunciation. The Blessed Virgin Mary was the first of our humanity to attain the power invested by this Degree in any who merit it—a fact understood by those of the early Christian Church, which is one reason why Mary occupies such an important place in meditations and ceremonials related to Advent.

“The Degree of Annunciation is related primarily to the cultivation of purity. Average students have but slight realization of the significance of this quality as one of the most important aspects of spiritual development. They do not recognize that purity, far from being a static condition, is a dynamic power in the life of an aspirant. The Lord Christ made this emphatically clear when He said “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Initiates of the ancient Mystery Schools were given long probationary periods in which to cultivate purity of mind, soul, and body—for it must condition the whole of man’s being, embracing his every thought, word and deed.

“The foregoing explains why the Degree of Annunciation is likewise termed the Degree of Purity.

“One of the initial steps in the purification of man’s physical and desire bodies has to do with food. No sincere aspirant can condone the sacrifice of younger brothers of the animal kingdom to gratify his bodily appetites and comfort. With the elimination of flesh food comes sensitization of the physical vehicle. This results in greater receptivity to soul impressions and spiritual ideation. Hence there comes a time when aspirants on the Path will



Fra Angelico, c. 1400-1455, Diocesan Museum, Cortona, Italy

The Annunciation

The first of the three degrees of Advent, Annunciation is devoted to the long probationary period that prepares for the birth of the indwelling Christ by cultivating purity of mind, soul, and body. “The Virgin Mary was the first of our humanity to attain the power invested by this Degree.”

nourish their bodies on the fruits of the earth only, such as nature has provided in abundance.”

Now is the interval when there is a closer interplay between celestial and earthly forces than at any other time of the year. The turning point of this season marks a rhythmic period in the cycle of the soul when its powers can become specially charged with forces promoting its unfoldment. Now devout aspirants can most effectually fuse and transfuse their devotion and will to enter more fully into the redemptive work of the Christ.

We are endeavoring to build up the Life Spirit, the spirit of love and unity, and Advent marks the time when humans collectively are more clearly and voluntarily children of our Father in Heaven. There is no better time than now, during this holy season, to reflect on the fact that each of us, like

Jesus before us, is striving to prepare a body suitable for the Christ to dwell in and use. During the time of preparation which is Advent let us meditate on the fulfillment in our lives—we have embarked on a long period of preparation which precedes ultimate realization of the fully awakened Christ within. May we continue steadfast and true to the consummation of our endeavors.

Since the time of its inauguration in the first century, the feast of Advent has perhaps never been as emphasized as in recent years. In harmony with cosmic law, Advent occurs when the Hierarchy of Sagittarius is sending its radiations upon earth, since these foster high idealism and a strengthening of spiritual aspirations.

The festive lights and the joyous music combine here on the outer plane to reflect and re-echo the sublime beauty, the intense activity, and the glory of color and music which flood the inner worlds. Angels come closest to earth at this time of the year as preparations for the annual Nativity are joyfully attended to.

The season and its progress may be heightened by various articles. Traditionally, the Advent wreath, composed of interwoven evergreens, is suspended from the ceiling or placed on a table, usually in front of the family shrine. Four candles are fastened to the wreath to represent the four weeks of Advent. At an appointed time each day, usually in the evening, the family gathers together for a short religious exercise. Each Sunday of Advent one more candle is lit, until all four candles shed their cheerful light to announce the approaching birthday of the Lord.

The Advent calendar originated in Germany and is now popular in most Christian countries. It may contain a picture of a house with windows that can be opened to display a picture of a typical Christmas scene or snowscape with perforated areas which can be removed or opened to reveal pictures behind. Typically, there is one window flap for each day of Advent, or for each day of December. Children in larger families take turns in opening the windows. These simple rituals and observances are subtly but deeply affecting for children in their formative years, and their memory endures as a lifelong blessing.



Bartolomé Estéban Murillo (1617-1682), Louvre, Paris

The Immaculate Conception

Frequently envisioned in conjunction with the Annunciation as being spiritually fertilized by a divine ray from the Father through the agency of the Holy Spirit, depicted as a dove, here, the Immaculate Conception involves raising the entire person of the Virgin in a literal ecstasy into the soul world where a mystical union centered in her heart is realized.

The earnest aspirant may devote as much time as possible to preparing himself by fasting and prayer thereby more completely attuning himself with the spirit of the Christmas Feast. Beginning with the Autumn Equinox, the golden radiation of the Christ is being poured upon the earth. It gradually penetrates the atmospheric layers and then the earth globe itself, so that by Winter Solstice it has entered into the planet's very heart.

The great miracle of nature occurs. There is a white magic—a breathless hush—and a tender reverence permeating the earth. Then nature

angels, together with loftier celestial beings, combine their forces and reverse the cosmic currents and the tremendous surge of this power propels all life on the upward arc. Those who have made sufficient preparation also will experience this mighty power within themselves and its concomitant state of true illumination.

The sum of work accomplished during the Advent season consists of three degrees—the Annunciation, the Immaculate Conception, and the Holy Birth. These mysteries are beautiful and tender, their work is centered in the heart. The work of Christmas is to guide man along the path that leads to Christ consciousness and dedication of his life to the service of his fellow man.

Advent season extends through the month of December and is heralded as a Feast of Light. The spiritual impulses of the season prepare mankind for a downpouring of the heavenly forces accompanying the annual birth of the Christ into our earthly sphere. The penultimate Winter Solstice culminates in the Christmas Feast on December 25, whereupon we are again confirmed on a path of peace and goodwill and a hope of treasures in heaven, which are the fruits of self-sacrifice.

The ecclesiastical year is like a majestic symphony that ends with the powerful and triumphant strain of a final victory—not yet attained by all, but assured and certain for all who will remain faithful. Advent formalizes and recommits our spiritual preparation for the glorious coming of the Lord, securing us in the faith that it will be consoling and joyful, just as were His coming and manifestation in the first Christmas and the first Epiphany in Bethlehem.

During the time of preparation which is Advent, and the time of fulfillment which is Christmas, let us meditate upon preparation and fulfillment in our own lives. As aspirants, we have embarked upon the long period of preparation which must precede the ultimate fulfillment of the fully awakened Christ within. We must discover what each of us can do to bring about that day of fulfillment in our own souls. Human limitations will have no place in the life of the child immaculately conceived.

Of this time and event it has been written: “It was a humble birthplace, but O how much God



Ulrich Aytzler, *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1455/60-1532, Louvre, Paris

The Adoration of the Magi

Though not part of Advent proper, the Epiphany marks the confirmation of Advent's purpose: preparation for the birth of the Christ Child. The Wise Men have discerned this event in the heavens and followed the Star to its incarnation.

gave to us that day from a manger bed. What a path was spread for a perfect Holy Way. Hallelujah! O how the angels sang. Hallelujah! How it rang. And the sky was bright with a holy light. It was the birthday of a King.”

Christmas must remain an external observance until the Christ is born within. Only then can we participate in the high spiritual ecstasy of this most holy season. Surely then we will prove we have made a Holy Preparation. The path we have followed unwaveringly to the end leads to the light of the Christmas Star—Christ, the Light of the world. □

—Caroline Lederman