

Advent: Phase One of a Rich Season

PART I

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If we are going to celebrate Advent truly well, we are going to have to slow down a bit and see what it's all about. The liturgical season, and it is a single season of Advent and Christmas, challenges us to something quite different from our current experience of that time of year.

Words like "Advent," "Christmas" and "Epiphany" must be broken down to make their original meanings burst forth and be manifested. Otherwise, we are likely to succumb to vague and incomplete understandings of their meanings without grasping their deeper significance.

"Advent" is originally taken from a Latin word ("adventus") used for the coming of the emperor when visiting a town or region of his empire. It implies such joyful ideas as feasts, cheers and celebrations. Advent celebrates the "coming" of Jesus as the king of the universe: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited his people" (Luke 1:68). A reading that was once used for the First Sunday of Advent is the messianic entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

Even now the feast of Christ the King immediately precedes the First Sunday of Advent. Advent is deeply connected with the "end of times", to be conceived less as the destruction of all material beings than as the transition to "a

new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1). Advent, together with Christmas and Epiphany, should conclude, and not open, the liturgical year.

Formerly, the liturgical year opened with the old Septuagesima Sunday. Advent is thus an eschatological moment in the liturgical cycle, a period of looking forward with expectant hope. It should be the advance celebration of Christ's final victory instead of a preparation for the "birthday" of Jesus.

"Christmas" seems to refer to "Christ's Mass," which involves a purely liturgical and rather subjective interpretation. Languages more connected with Latin, such as French or Italian, call it "Noel" or "Natale." These words have their origin in the Latin word "natalis" which was specifically used in the expression "natalis soli invicti," that is, "the birth of the unconquered sun." This expression, for the pagans of the Roman Empire, designated a religious feast celebrating the progressive lengthening of the sunny hours of the day after the winter solstice (the shortest day of the year, around Dec. 21). Pagans believed that there was a cosmic fight between light and darkness and, they thought, until the winter solstice, that the sun was about to lose the battle. Seeing the revival of the sun, they used to celebrate it as "unconquered." With the fall of the Roman Empire, Christians adapted the feast, changing its original meaning by celebrating on that day the birth of the "sun of righteousness" (Malachi 3:20).

of the Messiah. Jesus preaches of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Paul writes of the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus in glory. The element common to all is that of coming.

In the past the thought of our Lord's Second Coming cast a penitential gloom over Advent. This mood was not really intended. Christians should look forward to the coming of Christ with joyful anticipation. For Advent is a time of joyful celebration of hope.

Three great figures dominate the Advent Liturgy: Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Our Lady. Isaiah proclaims that the Lord is coming. John the Baptist urges us to prepare the way. And Our Lady teaches us to be joyful in our preparation.

The keyword of the Advent season is: "Watch!" That our Lord will come is certain. The precise moment when He will come is uncertain. Nothing is so certain as the uncertainty of His coming. The obvious conclusion, therefore, is to be on guard; to watch!

Watchfulness does not consist in idle speculation as to the time of our Lord's advent, nor in presumptuous setting of dates which God has never revealed, nor in the neglect of duty.

"To watch" means to be absolutely faithful to one's daily tasks. We are like servants whose master has gone to another country, but has given each one his work. God has given to each of us a plot of soil to till. All He desires is that we till it.

We, therefore, must so live that it does not much matter when our Lord does come. Each day must be lived in such a way that we are ready at any moment to meet Him face to face.

There is a Persian proverb which says: "Today well-lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope." For whoever so lives each day, the Coming of the Lord will not be terror, but eternal joy.

As St. Augustine said: "Let us not resist the first coming so that we may not dread the second."

INSIGHTS On Pastoral Liturgy

Again, this is a perspective that looks into the future with expectant hope. Christmas is not a birthday but a liturgical expression of the Christian hope that, one day, the "sun of righteousness" who rose and reigns with the Father, will shine with all his splendor as the eternal zenith. In fact, Christians of the first centuries strongly resisted the idea of celebrating Jesus' birth. It appeared to them a purely pagan celebration, as if Christ were a mortal king.

"Epiphany" comes from the Greek word meaning "manifestation." The

corresponding Greek verb "epiphanein" means "to make known, to show clearly." We have impoverished Epiphany by limiting it to the adoration by the wise men. Their journey is the journey of the whole of humanity toward the glorious coming of Christ.

Also, the fact that it was originally the alternate day for Baptism (in addition to the Easter Vigil) points out the overtones of new creation and new age that we have already seen reflected here.

These remarks lead us to one

obvious conclusion: from the beginning of Advent to the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, our eyes should be turned toward the future. This does not mean that we should seek to escape the world however. Our hope in the future is supported by the events of the past, mainly the resurrection, and has concrete consequences in the present. The Church would become a merely nostalgic society instead of a community of hope if she forgot to live Advent and Christmas looking into the future.


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Fr.
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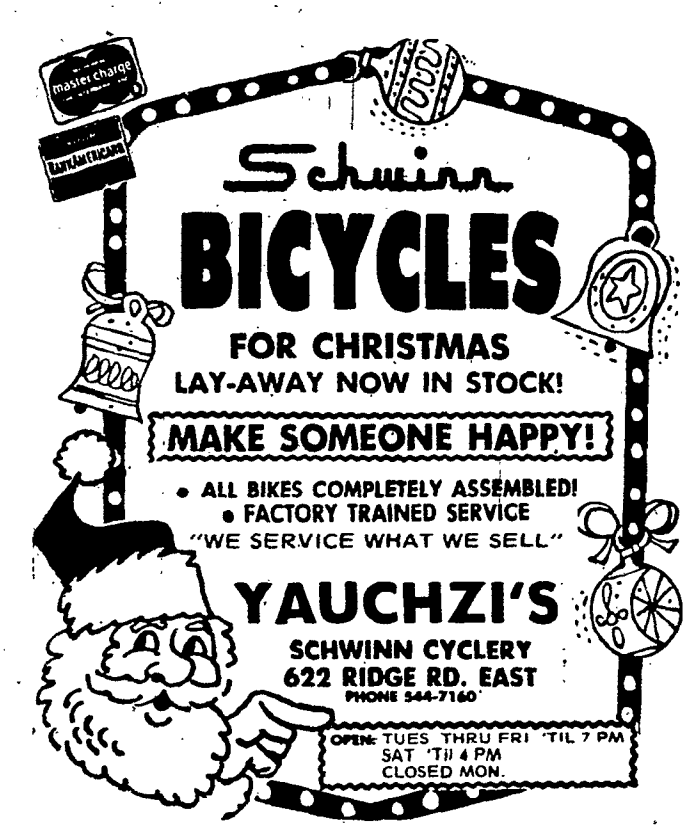
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mk. 13:33-37. (R1) Is. 63:16-17, 19; 64:2-7. (R2) 1 Cor. 1:3-9.

The Sunday nearest Nov. 30 is always the First Sunday of Advent — the beginning of the Church Year.

As you know, the Sunday Readings follow a three-year cycle. The years are designated either as Year A or Year B or Year C. The Gospel readings in Year A are primarily from Matthew; in Year B, from Mark; and in Year C, from Luke. John is scattered throughout Years A, B, and C. Devoting a whole year to just one evangelist makes it possible to get the feel of the author's peculiar style and the specific thrust of his writing.

To determine which year is A or B or C, one need only know that the calendar year divisible by three is always the Year C. One can work from that point: the year before C is Year B and the year after C is the Year A. The figure 1974 is divisible by three, hence 1974 was Year C. The Gospel readings of that year were taken chiefly from St. Luke. The year 1975, which we have just finished, would consequently be Year A, with most of the Gospel readings from St. Matthew. The Church Year 1976 (which begins with the First Sunday of Advent) is the Year B. The Gospel readings for this year, therefore, will be chiefly from St. Mark.

Advent marks the coming of Christ. The Advent Liturgy is rather confusing. It projects one image on top of another. The impression one gets is rather psychedelic. The prophets speak of the coming of the Lord. John the Baptist speaks of the coming



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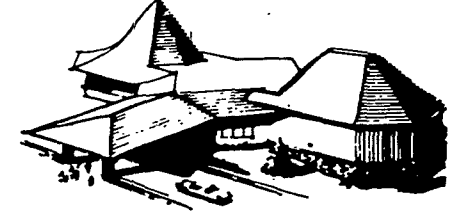
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