

ADVENT – CHRIST COMES

Advent is the liturgical season that the Church has designated as a period of preparation for the solemn feast of Christmas. The term “Advent” is derived from the Latin word that is translated as “coming.” This is a four-week period that focuses on the significance of God becoming visibly present to humanity in the person of the Anointed One – Jesus Christ!!

Church writings from the 5th century describe the early practices of the faithful who waited in hope for the celebration of Christ’s birth. You may ask why Christians waited until the 5th century to set aside a period of preparation for the celebration of Christmas. It arises from the fact that the Church took four centuries of discussion before it finally decided, after much debate, that the birth of Jesus would be celebrated specifically on December 25th.

These special practices, begun in Spain, were then transported to Gaul (France) where they were somewhat modified by Irish monks to be more penitential in nature. There was no specific time-period for their length. It was only later in France that the period of four weeks was fixed by King Pepin and then spread to other countries for what the Church began to call Advent. Why Pepin chose four weeks is for another article. Yet, even today, there is some variation in its length; for example, the archdiocese of Milan, Italy still maintains a period of six weeks for Advent.

Whether or not the season was/is a penitential one has varied across the centuries and nations. This was reflected to some degree in the liturgy of the period, for example by wearing purple liturgical vestments and by dropping the Gloria, both of which are the practice today. Still the Church, since the early 20th century, does not identify Advent as a penitential season with practices such as fasting and abstinence.

Like the final week of Lent, the final and fourth week of Advent has a distinctive characteristic. During this week, the Church sings the great hymn to Mary, known as the “*Magnificat*.” This great hymn is preceded each day by one of what are known as the seven “O” antiphons. These are special psalms sung, one in each of the final seven days that foretell the coming of Christ. Each psalm has an identifying characteristic descriptive of “He who comes.” These are: *Wisdom*, *Leader*, *Flower of Jesse*, *Key of David*, *Radiant Dawn*, *King of Nations*, and *Emmanuel*. These attributes were of such magnitude and distinction that in the ancient Advent manuscripts the initial character of the word was elaborately decorated.

Finally, it should be noted that the season of Advent also marks the beginning of the Church’s liturgical year, distinguished by the change in the gospel evangelist to be read during the year.

Deacon Bartholomew J. Merella, M.T.S.

References: Adam, Adolf, *The Liturgical Year*; Whalen, Michael, *Seasons and Feasts of the Liturgical Year*; Martimort, A.G., *The Church at Prayer: Liturgy and Time*