

ADVENT

A presentation given to the SCJ community in Pinellas Park
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When Brother Ben telephoned to invite me to lead this retreat, my immediate reaction was to say “yes.” Then he also suggested that one of the topics which might be appropriate during this time of year would be on the theme of “Advent,” and I also agreed to that. But no sooner had I hung up, than I regretted saying yes to the topic of Advent.

I have a confession to make: I have never been a big fan of Advent, and there are two reasons for this. My first criticism of Advent focused on the way it was usually explained: it seemed like a big game of make-believe, when for the four weeks prior to Christmas we are told we should identify with all those people who existed before the birth of Christ and we pretend that, like them, we are eagerly waiting for the coming of our Savior. Well, the fact of the matter is, our Savior arrived here 2,000 years ago, and it strikes me as just plain silly and pointlessly off the mark to pretend otherwise.

And so I was heartened when I came across a sermon preached over 40 years ago by young Fr. Joseph Ratzinger in which he addressed these very same concerns about Advent. But young Fr. Ratzinger’s sermon didn’t simply confirm my critical, negative point of view on this matter, he also pointed out a way to retrieve the meaning of Advent, so that it can make sense for us in our present, real-life circumstances.

In the past, Father Ratzinger said, Advent was treated like a sacred liturgical game which gave us a vivid picture of the way things once were, and the purpose of this was so that we might more joyfully and happily celebrate the salvation that is at hand for us today. The Advent wreath with its four candles symbolized the biblical 4,000 years between the sin of our first parents and the coming of the Savior. Each week, with another candle lit, symbolized the gradual enlightenment of human beings, until Christ the Light of the world burst forth in all his splendor at midnight Mass on Christmas.

But, he emphasized, we should have to admit that Advent is not just a matter of remembrance and playing at what is past. Advent is our present and the Church is referring us to something that *also* represents a reality in our current Christian life. It is

through the meaning of the season of Advent that the Church revives our awareness of this. The Church makes us face these facts, makes us admit that there *are* aspects of our lives that are untouched by Christ, and therefore, as yet, they are unredeemed. And this is something that we are reluctant to admit, or even look at.

We all run the risk of not wanting to see these things. We live, as it were, with the shades pulled down over the window of our soul because we are afraid that our faith could not withstand the full, glaring light of the facts. So we shield ourselves against this and push these inconvenient truths out of our consciousness in order to avoid falling flat on our face. But a faith that will not account for half of the facts of our life, or even more, is not faith but a refusal of faith and a rejection of grace. This is really an attitude that refuses to believe that Christ has the power to redeem and make holy and whole all that is twisted, selfish, and self-indulgent in our behavior and our character.ⁱ

So the liturgical season of Advent invites us to consider that time before the coming of Christ, the time before the outpouring of the Spirit, not as an exercise in nostalgia or make believe, but as a spur and an incentive to consider ourselves as we really are, and to face up to the unredeemed attitudes and habits that are part of who we really are. It's not as if we are keeping these unsavory traits of ours from God's knowledge, or are we even keeping them from other people's awareness. We are only keeping them from ourselves, from honestly facing up to them.

We should talk to God about them, the way Job talked to him about all the burdens and problems in his life. And we have no need to fear God because of our faults and our failings. Saint Augustine, who had a long, shameful personal history, reminds us that Christ who is our judge is also our advocate.ⁱⁱ And, as Leo Dehon said, the One who is our Judge is also the One who loves us.

Although Father Ratzinger did not mention it in his reflections, this idea of the "three times" of Advent originated with St. Bernard of Clairvaux. In a sermon delivered before his monastic community Bernard noted that between the two comings—the two Advents—of Christ, which are well known to all Christians, the first being his birth in Bethlehem, the other when he will definitively establish his Kingdom, there is a third Advent. This Advent is an intermediate Advent where Jesus is with us now "in Spirit and

power,” to be our comfort, leading us to make progress from the first Advent to the final one when he will come in glory.

When Christ first came to earth, he fully accomplished the work of redemption; that was done perfectly, there is nothing to be added to it. But what was accomplished in Christ was done so that it may be communicated to every human being. The risen Christ is communicating this new life to all God’s people. He is the Head, but his Body is still being formed. This is the divine drama that is unfolding in the present time. This is the time during which everything that was acquired in Christ must communicate itself and be freely accepted by his entire human family so that indeed he “will be all in all.”ⁱⁱⁱ This is the work of our lifetime.

So my first misunderstanding of Advent was overcome with the help of St. Bernard and Father Ratzinger. My second objection was perhaps even more serious. Advent is a time when our hymns are filled with “tidings of comfort and joy,” but we are living in times when the overwhelming majority of people are experiencing suffering and sickness. It seems insensitive and even heartless to invite them to express joy for all that is taking place. But once again it was an old sermon of young Fr. Ratzinger that rescued me from this dilemma.^{iv}

With a faith that is as realistic as it is hopeful, he noted, that for those who are sick, there are many factors that make it difficult to feel the quiet joy of this season. The burden of sickness is preventing them from sharing in the joy others are feeling. But he suggested that perhaps Advent can become a medicine of the soul that makes it easier to bear up under the imposed isolation and pain of illness. He even suggested that perhaps Advent can help us discover a hidden grace which can be found in the very fact of being sick.

Just like great joy, so likewise sickness and suffering can become a very personal Advent of our own—a visit by God who enters our lives and who wants to encounter each of us personally. Even when it is most difficult, we should at least try to understand our days of illness in this way: perhaps the Lord has interrupted our activity at this time in order to allow us to be still. In their daily lives many people have little time for God, or even themselves.

From morning till evening they are so involved in all the things they have to do that they are unaware of what they are doing to themselves. They do not know how to be alone with themselves, and as a result their work possesses them; their “social obligations” possess them; various kinds of entertainment distract and possess them; and in the end they do not possess themselves.

But with the arrival—the uninvited gift—of suffering and sickness, God draws us out of all this. Now we are obliged to be still, to wait; we are obliged to reflect on ourselves and to bear the solitude of being alone; we are obliged to bear the pain and the burden of who we are and what we have become. And all of this is hard to endure. We are “earthen vessels,” made of clay; but as St. Paul says, “we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair . . . struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our bodies” (2 Cor 4:7-10).

So it may be the case that God is waiting for us in this stillness, in this apparently unproductive emptiness; it may be the case that he is doing here what Jesus says in the parable of the vine: “Every branch that does not produce fruit he prunes, so that it may produce more fruit” (Jn 15:2). If we learn to accept ourselves in these unproductive days of stillness, if we accept the pain because the Lord is using it to purify us—does this not make us even richer? Has not something happened to us that is more lasting and fruitful than all those things that we accomplished with the work of our hands?

A visit by the Lord—perhaps illness can present itself in a new light when we see it as part of Advent. For when we rebel against it, this is not only because it is painful or because it is hard to be still and alone: we rebel against it because there are so many important things we think we ought to be doing, and because illness seems meaningless. But this can be a moment in our life that belongs to God, a time when we are open to him and thus learn to rediscover our own selves.

When he was dying from cancer, Trappist Fr. Francis Kline wrote these words: “This much I know, that in the mystery of suffering [we] come against [our] limits on many fronts. But [we] also can open the door to a communion with [the divine] . . . The pain, of whatever kind, is the key to opening the door. It makes us need God, who

wants to be needed. It momentarily reveals to us our dependency on our Creator, who wants only too much to grow in intimacy with us through our need of him.”^v

In this spirit, I invite you to recall the final scene in the Gospel of John, just after Jesus elicits the threefold affirmation of Simon Peter’s love for him. Then Jesus tells him, “Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” After this he said to him, “Follow me” (Jn 21:18-19).

I would like to conclude with a similar story, but one that comes from a different place and time. It’s a true story, about someone whose life was impacted by events that were as unexpected as they were unfortunate, yet someone, despite great disappointment and loss, was able to find unhoped-for serenity.

Andre Dubus was a fiction writer who lived in New England. About twenty years ago he stopped to help an accident victim on the side of the road—the police report said he saved the woman’s life by pushing her out of the way of an oncoming car—but in the process he was seriously injured. He lost a leg and he was paralyzed from the waist down. Prior to the accident Dubus had been robust and active, a real man’s man; now he was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

Initially, he went through great physical pain and fell into a deep depression. But with time he was able to write these words: “Living in the world as a cripple allows you to see more clearly the crippled hearts of some people whose bodies are whole and sound. All of us, from time to time, suffer this crippling. Some suffer it daily and nightly; and while most of us have compassion and love in our hearts, we cannot or will not see these barely visible wounds in other human beings, and so cannot or will not pick up the telephone . . . or make some other seemingly trifling gesture to give to someone what only we, and God, can give: an hour’s respite, or a day’s or a night’s; and sometimes more than a respite: sometimes joy.” “My crippling,” he continued, “is a daily and living sculpture of certain truths: we receive and we lose, and we must try to achieve gratitude, and with gratitude to embrace with whole hearts whatever of life remains after the losses.”^{vi}

That is the attitude and the message of Jesus, who described the works of the Messiah as: to be a comfort to those in pain, a support to those in time of loss, and to be a good word to those too poor to hope. It's not what we might have expected of God when he came among us; it certainly wasn't what John the Baptist had anticipated. But now we know that if we are to be people who live up to the name of Christian, these are the works of Christ that we must do. Only then will they learn, in the midst of their pain and brokenness, of the gentle power of God's love for them. For the truth of the matter is this: "We receive and we lose, and we must try to achieve gratitude, and with that gratitude to embrace with whole hearts whatever of life remains after the loses."

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Cf., Joseph Ratzinger, *What It Means to Be a Christian*. (Tr., Henry Taylor). San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2005, pp. 18-20.

ⁱⁱ "Just imagine how overjoyed you would be, because the one who a short while before had been your advocate could now himself be your judge. And now he is praying for us himself, he himself is interceding for us. We have him as our advocate, and are we to fear him as judge? On the contrary, because we have sent him ahead as our advocate, we can hope without qualm for his coming back as judge." *Essential Sermons*. Sermon 213, 6. (Tr., Edmund Hill, O.P.) Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007, p. 268.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bernard of Clairvaux. *Sermons for Advent and the Christmas Season*. (Ed., John Leinenweber). Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2007, "On the Lord's Advent. Sermon Five." Cf., Emery, Pierre-Yves, *15 Days of Prayer with Saint Bernard*. (Tr., Victoria Hébert and Denis Sabourin). Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2000, pp. 19-20. Daniélou, Jean, *Prayer: The Mission of the Church*. (Tr., David Louis Schindler, Jr.). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996, pp. 67-75.

^{iv} Joseph Ratzinger, *The Blessing of Christmas*. (Tr., Brian McNeil). San Francisco: CA: Ignatius Press, 2005, pp. 15-21.

^v Francis Kline, OCSO, *Four Ways of Holiness for the Universal Church. Drawn from the Monastic Tradition*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2007, p. 61.

^{vi} Andre Dubus, *Broken Vessels*. Boston, MA: David R. Godine, Publisher, 1991, pp. 143, 194.