

# The Three Advents

BY FR. JAMES CONNER, OCSO

**For Bernard of Clairvaux and his modern interpreter, Thomas Merton, the season of Advent is a “sacrament” of the presence of God in his world, in the mystery of Christ at work through his Church, preparing in a hidden, obscure way for the final manifestation of his kingdom.**

---

**A**ll too often, Advent is seen simply as a preparation for Christmas and the birth of Christ. However, the Liturgy and the Fathers of the Church see it in a much broader scope. For them, Advent is the beginning of the liturgical year, and this in turn is our way of entering into the great mystery of Christ in the world: “God has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:9-10, RSV).<sup>1</sup>

This plan is envisaged not as a future prospect but as a present fact. The kingdom of God is thus already present and realized in a hidden manner. But the mystery can only be known by those who enter into it, who find their place in the mystical Body of Christ, the Church, and therefore find the mystery of Christ realized and fulfilled in themselves.

Just as the Gospels convey to us the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the Acts of the Apostles show us that same life of Christ now continued in and through the life of the Church, so the liturgical year brings us the life of Christ from his birth at Christmas to his death, resurrection, and bestowal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and continues for the remaining weeks of the year to show us the life of the faithful in and through that gift of the Holy Spirit.

Advent is seen as the introduction to this whole mystery. St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) sees it as the “sacrament” of the presence of God in his world, in the mystery of Christ at work through his Church, preparing in a hidden, obscure way for the final manifestation of his kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) developed the thought of Bernard in his book *Seasons of Celebration*.<sup>3</sup> Merton tells us that the twelfth century Cistercians placed a special emphasis on the coming of Christ by his Holy Spirit to the Christian person. They contemplate his hidden birth in our lives, his advent here and now in the mystery of prayer and providence. "This is the special presence of God in the world that fascinates them and draws them to Him in meditation upon the Bible, where He is present in His Word and in the light generated by that Word in the heart of the Believer."<sup>4</sup>

### THE "SACRAMENT OF ADVENT"

Merton says that those who pay no attention to the coming of the Savior fail to admit that they need a Savior. They feel self-sufficient. But in this they abide in a state of illusion. One will recognize their need for a Savior only to the extent that they face their own inner sense of emptiness, aware of their dependence on God, living as "little ones," the children of the Church. God comes to us hidden in the "Sacrament of Advent."

Bernard shows the danger of seeing Advent merely as a preparation for Christmas. It runs the risk of keeping us centered on our present reality in the flesh, failing to recognize the call that God's plan reveals—the call for our inner transformation into Christ. He warns:

...the remembrance of this condescension is turned into pretext for the flesh. During those days you may see them preparing splendid clothes and special foods with utmost care—as if Christ at his birth would be seeking these and other such things and would be more worthily welcomed where they are more elaborately offered! Listen to [Christ] as he says... "Why do you so ambitiously prepare clothes for my birthday? Far from embracing pride, I detest it. Why do you so assiduously store up quantities of food for this season? Far from accepting pleasures of the flesh, I condemn them. As you celebrate my coming, you honor me with your lips, but your heart is far from me.... Unhappy is the person who worships pleasure of the body and the emptiness of worldly glory; but happy the people whose God is the Lord."<sup>5</sup>

God comes among us precisely in order to bring us salvation. But we are slow to recognize our true and profound need. Bernard tells us that Adam and Eve tried to steal what belongs to the Son of God. Satan told them that they would "be like God" (Genesis 3:5). We have all sinned in Adam and Eve and have received a sentence of condemnation. To this the Son responds,

"Therefore, so that they may know that I love the Father, let those whom he seems somehow to have lost on my account be restored to him through me....

"They all envied me. I am coming and I am showing myself to be such that anyone who chooses to be envious, who aches to imitate me, may do so, and this emulation may become a good thing."<sup>6</sup>

Humanity had been overthrown by malice from without, so love from without can benefit them.

Bernard points out that it would seem more fitting that we go to Christ. We were the ones in need. But he says that there was a twofold obstacle.

Our eyes were darkened, yet he dwells in light inaccessible; and lying paralyzed on our mats we could not reach the divine height. That is why our most gracious Savior and Healer of souls both descended from his lofty height and dimmed his brilliance for our weak eyes.<sup>7</sup>

Bernard says that there are three reasons for our misery and helplessness: we are easily deceived in our judgments of good and evil; we are weak in our attempt to do good; and we are slow in resisting evil. The presence of Christ in us overcomes these obstacles. By faith he dwells in our hearts and shows us how to judge between good and evil. By fortitude he strengthens our weakness, so that we can do all things in him. And finally, he resists evil within us. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31, NIV).<sup>8</sup> The secret is to abandon ourselves to Christ, the power of God, and then he will deliver us from forces that we could not resist by ourselves. "Divine mercy is most evident," Merton observes, "in the tenderness with which the infinite God tempers the strength of His light to the weakness of our eyes and becomes a Man like the rest of us."<sup>9</sup>

We do not have to travel far to find Christ. He is within us. Paul has already told us "Do not say who will scale heaven for us? (as if we had to bring Christ down to earth)" (Romans 10:6, Knox).<sup>10</sup> This is the mystery of Advent: God's descent to our lowliness out of pure love, not for any merit of our own. Conversion, then, is more a coming of God to us than of our turning to God. Through charity, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts "with a power that reaches your innermost being" (Ephesians 3:16, Knox). The final effect is to transform us entirely in God. Bernard says: "If you wish to meet God, go as far as your own heart."<sup>11</sup>

To find the Word in our heart we must enter into ourselves not so much by introspection as by compunction. We must go to meet the transforming action of the Holy Spirit within our souls. This spiritual encounter is an advent in which God comes to our inmost self and we find ourselves in him. Bernard conceives this as liberation, a breaking from the prison of "selfhood." It is liberation from the miserable preoccupation with our own being. It is the coming of God into our being, from which we have previously gone out.

O humankind, you need not sail across the seas or pierce the clouds or cross the Alps! No grand way is being shown to you. Run to your own self to meet your God! *The Word is near you, on your lips and in your heart!* [Romans 10:8] Run to compunction of heart and confession of lips to escape at least the dunghill of a wretched conscience, for there the author of purity cannot appropriately enter.<sup>12</sup>

Merton says that it is easy for God to come to us because he comes to us in mercy, not in justice.

He comes as a physician to heal the wounds of sin. He comes as a little one lest we be terrified.... [H]is Advent is less a *coming* than a *manifestation* of His presence.... It is not that He comes Who was absent, but He appears Who was hidden.<sup>13</sup>

## THE THREE ADVENTS

Bernard speaks of three Advents. "We know His threefold coming: *to* humankind, *into* humankind and *against* humankind. *To* all He comes without distinction, but not so *into* all or *against* all."<sup>14</sup> The first is that in which God comes to seek and save that which was lost. The second is that Advent by which Christ is present in our souls now. This is taking place at every moment of our life. Christ is passing by and we are judged by our awareness of his passing. The third Advent is when he comes to take us to himself at the end of time. Meditation on the mystery of the first and third Advents will be made fruitful by works of charity and will lead to our complete transformation in Christ.

Meditation on the first Advent gives us hope of the promise offered. The remembrance of the third reminds us to fear lest by our fault we fail to receive the fulfillment of that promise. However, if we face this third mystery of Advent with humility and sincerity of heart, we have nothing to fear. Bernard, echoing the Apostle Paul's promise in 1 Corinthians 11:31, writes:

"If we judge ourselves, we shall not be judged."<sup>15</sup> The second Advent is set in between these two terms. It is necessarily a time of anguish, a time of conflict between fear and joy: fear lest we fail to recognize the coming of the Lord at every moment and joy at recognizing his presence and his call to us in love. But in this second Advent, God comes to us and works mysteriously

within us in spirit and in truth in order that the fruit of his work may be made manifest in the third Advent when he comes in glory and majesty.

"Evidently, the work of Christ in us as 'Lord of virtues' is to produce in us His own virtues, to transform us into Himself as we contemplate Him in the Mystery of Advent, imitating His humble, hidden and sacrificial life," Merton writes. "First of all, then, we must unite ourselves with His truth by

---

**To find the Word in our heart we must enter into ourselves not so much by introspection as by compunction. This spiritual encounter is an Advent, in which God comes to our inmost self and we find ourselves in him.**

---

our *humility*.... The first thing God asks of us is to judge ourselves, to recognize our nothingness, to keep ourselves convinced that we can do nothing without Him and that therefore must receive all from Him."<sup>16</sup>

Paul reminds us: "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (1 Corinthians 4:7). Just as Jesus Christ was conscious that he received all from the Father,

---

**"In this way, keep God's Word," Bernard of Clairvaux counsels. "Let it enter into the bowels of your soul. Let it pass into your feelings and into your routines."**

---

so the heart of his disciple must be conformed to the humiliation of his heart. That is why he told us: "Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart" (Matthew 11:29). Because of our fallen state, because of our sinfulness, the heart is deeply ambivalent. The heart is the place where we are brought face to face with

the power of evil and sin within us. Yet the heart is also the place where we encounter God. It is the locus of divine indwelling, as Paul says: "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:6).

The heart is both the center of the human person and the point of meeting between the human and God. It is both the place of self-knowledge, where we see ourselves as we truly are, and the place of self-transcendence, where we understand our nature as a temple of the Holy Spirit. It is here that the mystery of Advent is realized. It is here that life and prayer become one. And it is here that we discover our profound oneness with all the rest of creation.

Bernard sums up the three Advents by noting that in the first Advent, Christ "was seen on earth and lived among human beings," who either accepted or rejected him. But in the third Advent "*all flesh will see the salvation of our God* [Isaiah 40:5]." We live in a moment between those two Advents that is an opportunity to welcome Christ, the Word of God. Bernard explains,

The intermediate coming is a kind of path by which we travel from the first to the final. In the first Christ was our redemption. In the final he shall appear as our life. In this one...he is our rest and consolation.

...*Anyone who loves me will keep my words, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him* [John 14:23].... Where then are [God's words] to be kept? Doubtless, in the heart.... Is it enough to keep them in the memory alone? The Apostle will tell anyone who keeps them in this way that *knowledge puffs up* [1 Corinthians 8:1]. Then, too, forgetfulness easily wipes out memory.

...In this way, keep God's Word: *Blessed are those who [hear the word of God] and keep it [Luke 11:28].* Let it enter into the bowels of your soul. Let it pass into your feelings and into your routines....

If you keep God's word like this, you will surely be kept by him.<sup>17</sup>

When we keep the Word of God, God himself dwells in us. To eat the Word of God is first to absorb it into the depths of our own being by obedient and loving faith; then to let the power of the Word (the Holy Spirit) express itself in our works of love and good habits. It is this divine action within us, enlightening us to receive him in his revealed Word, which is the heart of the "sacrament of Advent."

If we fully and actively receive this Word of God into our heart and life, then we have nothing to fear from the third Advent of the Lord. He himself has told us this in Matthew 25:31-40: "Whatever you did to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me." All three Advents are dependent on him who comes: first as a little child and a Man like us in all things but sin; then as the hidden One coming within our hearts but also in every person we encounter and every event of our life; and finally in the glorious Lord, for "God has put all things in subjection under his feet.... And when that subjection is complete, then the Son himself will become subject to the power which made all things his subjects, so that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:27-28, Knox).

Paul tells us that "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved" (Romans 8:22-24, NIV).

In this way we see that Advent is much more than simply a preparation for Christmas or even an introduction to the liturgical year. The mystery of Advent is the mystery of God coming to us at every moment. As the poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) says: "He comes, comes, ever comes."<sup>18</sup> Our God comes to us to claim us as his own in order that we might fully share in his own divine life, and in this way to realize the purpose of our creation.

## NOTES

1 Scripture passages marked RSV are from Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

2 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons for Advent and Christmas Season*, Cistercian Fathers Series 51, translated by Irene Edmonds, Wendy Mary Beckett, and Conrad Greenia OCSO (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2007).

3 Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration: Meditations on the Cycle of Liturgical Feasts* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), 61-88.

4 *Ibid.*, 61.

5 Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon Three: "On the Seven Pillars," paragraph 2, in *Sermons*, 20-21.

6 Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon One: "On the Six Aspects of Advent," paragraph 4, in *Sermons*, 6-7.

7 Ibid., paragraph 8, in *Sermons*, 9.

8 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)

9 Merton, 68.

10 Scripture quotations marked (Knox) are taken from *The Holy Bible: A Translation from the Latin Vulgate in the Light of the Hebrew and Greek Originals*, translated by Ronald A. Knox (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956).

11 This is Merton's translation from Bernard's Sermon One, paragraph 10, in *Seasons of Celebration*, 70.

12 Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon One, paragraph 10, in *Sermons*, 11.

13 Merton, 71. The last line is my translation from Latin of Bernard's teaching quoted by Merton.

14 Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon Three, paragraph 4, in *Sermons*, 22.

15 Ibid., paragraph 7, in *Sermons*, 25.

16 Merton, 78-79.

17 Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 5: "On the Intermediate Coming and the Threefold Renewal," paragraphs 1-3, in *Sermons*, 33-34.

18 *A Tagore Reader*, edited by Amiya Chakravarty (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966), 302.

---



**FR. JAMES CONNER, OCSO**

*is a monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, Kentucky.*