

The Advent Fast

BY THOMAS TURNER

As we recover and creatively appropriate the tradition of fasting during Advent, we identify with and proclaim God's narrative of love in a counter-cultural way. We resist the instant gratification, materialism, and gluttony that increasingly characterize cultural holiday celebrations.

The earliest celebrations of Advent, from the fourth century, involved some form of fasting. The season of Advent is a sacred moment in the journey of the Church through the liturgical year; marking this time with fasting is entirely appropriate, for as Scot McKnight observes, fasting is "a person's whole-body, natural response to life's sacred moments."¹

As the season of spiritual preparation for Christ's coming, Advent began as a time to get ready for the great feasts to come – the Christmas celebration of Jesus' birth that follows it in the church year, and the heavenly banquet that Christ promised. In this way Advent is a counterpart to Lent, the season when Christians fast in preparation for the feast of Easter. Because Advent falls during the tenth month ("December" in Latin means the tenth month), the early Christians connected it to the subscribed time of fasting during the tenth month in the Jewish tradition (Zechariah 8:19). The Advent fast is carried on to this day by Eastern Orthodox traditions.²

In many congregations in the West, however, Advent has become almost synonymous with the celebration of Christmas; rather than a time of preparation, it is more like a "little-Christmas." It is no longer a prelude to a holy banquet, but a foretaste – like lavish appetizers – of a grand secular meal. Lost is any sense of getting ready for the coming of the Lord, a preparation that should be equal to the Lenten preparation for Christ's death and resurrection. Instead, the seasons of Advent and Christmas have become perpetual feasts not only on food but on material goods as well.

This trend in churches has been greatly influenced by the secular holiday season running from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day – a festival of overeating

and gadget purchasing. Kicking off with gluttonous bingeing on turkey and all the trimmings followed by queuing at retail stores for the purchase of electronics and clothing at severely reduced prices, this mass-marketed celebration of material wealth is characterized as much by “holiday weight gain” and credit card debt as by nostalgia and gift giving. Seasonal commercials lure us to purchase for ourselves expensive cars wrapped in red ribbons and to satisfy the voracious appetites of our children with the most expensive and exotic presents.

Too often we have modeled our Advent and Christmas celebrations on this secular festival of material wealth and pleasure. This can only disorient us from the true meaning of these seasons. The wisdom of the Church is simple: the gravity of Christ’s Incarnation beckons us to feast and rejoice, but only after a period of preparation that includes fasting. Just as a wedding feast requires the bride and groom and their families to devote months of sacrificial effort to carefully planning and preparing for the celebration, so we are called to prepare ourselves for the joy of Christ’s coming through a time of sacrificial fasting.

Fortunately, many congregations are making renewed efforts to mark the season of Advent in ways that are grounded in the Christian tradition. They have an increased interest in liturgy and liturgical traditions. They are creating organizations like Advent Conspiracy to rethink our involvement in secular holiday celebrations.

Fasting is one of the historic Advent traditions these congregations are recovering and creatively appropriating. Fasting helps us proclaim God’s story—a narrative of love that requires watchful preparation of our hearts and minds, and patient waiting for God’s faithful completion of divine promises—in a counter-cultural way. While the surrounding culture is being consumed by a perpetual feast beginning at Thanksgiving, we can present the gospel by returning to the Advent fast. As we will see below, this can be a prophetic, redemptive rejection of the personal instant gratification, materialism, and gluttony exhibited in cultural holiday celebrations.

REJECTING PERSONAL INSTANT GRATIFICATION

Advent is a corporate pilgrimage to encounter Christ—in his birth and his second coming. When the Apostle Paul describes the disciples being “caught up in the clouds...to meet the Lord in the air” when Christ returns (1 Thessalonians 4:17), he is thinking it will be like going on a pilgrimage with fellow citizens to greet a royal delegation outside the city and to journey back home with the noble person. In our Advent preparation for Christ’s birth and hopeful anticipation of his glorious return, we go with fellow disciples to welcome our coming king.

Israel’s yearning through the centuries for the coming of the Messiah is a model for our corporate pilgrimage to encounter Christ during Advent. The Gospel of Luke highlights two remarkable instances of Israel’s patient

longing: Simeon and Anna traveled to the Temple to await “the Lord’s Messiah” who would be “the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25-26). When Mary and Joseph arrive at the Temple to present Jesus for his dedication, Simeon praises God for the “salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples” (2:30-31). Likewise the prophetess Anna, who “worshiped there [in the Temple] with fasting and prayer night and day” in preparation for Christ, “began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:37-38). During Advent we learn to journey with righteous men and women like these who joined together to hope for God’s redemption of Israel and to prepare themselves for Christ’s coming.

Note that fasting from food was an important part of Anna’s preparation and hopeful waiting for Christ. Fasting pulls us into the drama of God’s cosmic liturgy and away from instant gratification. “In the face of strong messages from our culture that say we should satisfy every desire as soon as we feel it, fasting teaches us something counter-cultural and deeply significant for our life of faith,” Lynne Baab notes.³ Our desire to be instantly gratified leads us to skip the hardship of preparation and hopeful waiting and have our Christmas feast now, which is like eating all the chocolates from an Advent calendar at once. Fasting teaches us to push back against this desire through setting aside something important in our lives and filling that sacrificed time with reflection and prayer – orienting our bodies and souls toward dependency on God.

However we practice an Advent fast within a Christian community – whether we cut back on food or material possessions, and however much and often – we pause our busy grasping in a concrete way in order to welcome our reliance upon God and learn to give more of our life to God. Together with other disciples, we take a small step to greet the Christ who is graciously coming to us and (this is the mystery) has been drawing us to himself. The spiritual effects of fasting are like those of lighting the Advent wreath: we do not accomplish much on our own – consuming a bit less food or other stuff, or brightening the room just a bit more – but we open our hearts to God’s presence in the world.

REJECTING MATERIALISM

Eastern Orthodox Christians generally fast from meats, dairy, oil, and wine during Advent in order to identify with the simple fare that Adam and Eve shared before their sin. God had supplied their nutrition in the Garden of Eden without the consumption of animals (cf. Genesis 1:29 and 9:3). This fast also reminds them of the privilege they enjoy in consuming costly foods throughout the year. Since meat, dairy, oil, and alcohol are the most expensive items on our grocery lists, fasting from them is a reminder that God generously provides these items of great worth to us and they are much more than we need.

Using the Advent fast to open a window to the beginning not only resists personal over-consumption of expensive and unnecessary foods, but also measures our corporate over-consumption. God gave humankind “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (Genesis 1:26b). The Advent fast can

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teach us how our culture, often with the willful participation of Christians, has twisted dominion over God’s world into careless exploitation of its limited resources. We forget how our material possessions grow from the fragile earth, are extracted out of dangerous mines, or depend on ever-shallower wells. (We would be wise to reflect on how much oil and heavy

metals go into the production and shipment of our Christmas gifts.) The cultural deception of endless supply meets stiff resistance with the Advent fast, as we are reminded that the only thing we have in endless supply is the love of Christ. Everything else, including all we consume, will run out if we are not careful.

“The primary aim of fasting,” Bishop Kallistos Ware observes, “is to make us conscious of our dependence upon God.”⁴ This insight can extend to fasting from other good things that, when we improperly desire or carelessly use them, can distort our relationship to God. In our culture, that would certainly include our material possessions. Thus, fasting from possessions during Advent would allow us to step back from what most threatens to control us – the deluge of advertising, hype of the latest technological gadgetry, and incessant hustle and bustle of shopping – in order to reclaim the season as a time of spiritual attunement and discipleship.

We would notice how even our gift giving, which has a proper and wonderful role in the Christmas celebration, can become distorted by the culture’s consumerist mantra of “more is better.” We purchase new things we do not need and we upgrade older things that are perfectly usable. Happiness, we are told, is buying the latest iPhone model or dining on an expensive gourmet entrée. We measure the gifts we give and receive not by the joy of relationship they express and bring about, but by their price tags and luxury. The mantra tempts us to consume in order to find delight, but an Advent fast reminds us that our delight is found only in the coming king and the furthering of his kingdom.

A hopeful sign of resistance by Christians to this holiday consumerism is the Advent Conspiracy movement, started in 2006 to “make Christmas a revolutionary event by encouraging their faith communities to Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More and Love All.”⁵ When Cornerstone Christian Church in Wyckoff, NJ—located in an affluent part of the New York City metro area—joined the “conspiracy” in 2009, each member purchased one less gift and donated the money they saved toward building a well, medical center, and community center in Gulu, Uganda. The success of Advent Conspiracy has helped the church build a year-round partnership with a ministry in Uganda. Cornerstone’s experience illustrates what a modest Advent fast from material possessions can do.

REJECTING GLUTTONY

Traditionally, the Advent fast focused on abstaining from certain foods for a period as a physical and spiritual act that nourishes prayer. By fasting during this season we also can bear witness to the gluttony which is in our society generally, but especially on display during holiday celebrations.

While most of us are wasting an exorbitant amount of food, many people in our society suffer from hunger or food insecurity. The facts are shocking. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that twenty-seven percent of all food in America is going to waste.⁶ Meanwhile the organization Feeding America provided food to one in eight Americans in 2009, an increase of forty-six percent since 2006.⁷ Further, our eating habits are woefully careless: only Washington, DC, and Colorado have obesity rates under twenty percent.⁸

Fasting during Advent can be a counter-cultural witness that we will fight hunger, resist waste, and eat mindfully so that those who are less fortunate can partake of the bounty of healthy food that is available. This was one of its earliest functions: in “On the Fast of the Tenth Month,” Pope Leo the Great (d. 461) reminded parishioners that the Advent fast was instituted so that “when all the ingathering of the crops was complete, we might dedicate to God our reasonable service of abstinence, and each might remember so to use his abundance as to be more abstinent in himself and more open-handed towards the poor.”⁹ Using the food or other resources that we do not consume to help the poor makes the Advent fast a communal and missional act, one that takes seriously God’s charge:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke...?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry...?

Isaiah 58:6a, 7a

The point is not to flaunt the abundance of our own lives, but to become more fully engaged in the continuing story of God’s redemption of the world

through Christ by working to correct the imbalance of hunger and poverty. The Advent fast calls us to join with all God's people in hopeful waiting for the Lord and to stand in solidarity with them by resisting the unjust patterns of this world.

NOTES

1 Scot McKnight, *Fasting, The Ancient Practices* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), xiv.

2 The Eastern Orthodox tradition usually refers to the fasting season from November 15 to December 24 as the Nativity Fast (as a time of preparation to celebrate Christ's birth) or St. Philip's Fast (since the season begins after that saint's feast day on November 14). For more information, see the page on fasting at the Orthodox Church in America's Web site, www.oca.org/OCFasting.asp.

3 Lynne M. Baab, *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom beyond Our Appetites* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 45.

4 Kallistos Ware, "The Meaning of the Great Fast," an introduction to *The Lenten Triodion: The Service Books of the Orthodox Church*, translated by Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 13-68, here citing 16.

5 Larry Parsley describes the Advent Conspiracy movement in "The Advent Invitation" on pp. 79-82 of this issue. For more information, see www.adventconspiracy.org.

6 Linda Scott Kantor, Kathryn Lipton, Alden Manchester, and Victor Oliveira, *Estimating and Addressing America's Food Losses* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 1997), 2; available online at www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/FoodReview/Jan1997/Jan97a.pdf (accessed August 28, 2010).

7 James Mabli, Rhoda Cohen, Frank Potter, and Zhanyun Zhao, *Feeding America* (Chicago, IL: Feeding America, 2010), 1; available online at <http://feedingamerica.org/faces-of-hunger/hunger-in-america-2010/hunger-report-2010.aspx> (accessed August 28, 2010).

8 "U.S. Obesity Trends" (Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010); available online at www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/trends.html#State (accessed August 28, 2010).

9 Leo the Great, "Sermon XVI: On the Fast of the Tenth Month," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, II, 12, edited by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 124. Available online at www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf212 (accessed August 28, 2010).



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