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Praying the Advent season: Putting the Coming of Christ into Christmas Life

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Abstract

It is now nearly a decade since a revision of the *Roman Missal* was predicted and now five and a half years since the Missal appeared in Latin. The process of translating the 1377 pages is an immense project. After all the turmoil within ICEL's structures, the work is going ahead. With Advent, the focus of new translations is in expressing fully the biblical references to the future Messiah in the orations. In the *Roman Missal*³, a new policy is set making the tri-fold form of Solemn Blessing a unique fixture of Advent. As Pope Benedict is asking, the sense of mission and not just dismissal is a challenge to live the spirit of the Advent season. This article challenges readers to enter into the spirit of the shortest liturgical season at the time of the greatest commercial distractions of Christmas sales and to ensure that the prayers are articulated with the confidence of the season.

Introduction

In the Apostolic Exhortation (*Sacramentum Caritatis*) Benedict XVI draws specific attention to *The dismissal*: “*Ite, missa est*” (§51). The Pope highlights that in antiquity *Missa* originally meant ‘dismissal’ but it gradually developed a deeper meaning to imply ‘a mission’. He goes on to affirm “...the People of God might be helped to understand more clearly this essential dimension of the Church’s life taking the dismissal as a starting point”. Knowing what our direction and challenges are focuses our attitudes to what is the season and the particular dimension we are living. The Pope concludes by saying “...in this context, it might also be helpful to provide new texts, duly approved, for the *Prayer over the People* and the *Solemn Blessing* in order to make this connection clear”. As yet, there has been no indication what format this may take but it is an interesting insight into how all ritual actions and words have specific functions and power.

Advent in the new Roman Missal

One of the distinctive features of the *Roman Missal* is shown in the decision made about the form of *Solemn Blessing* to conclude the Mass. In the 1970 *Roman Missal* in both Advent and Lent it seemed to be a deliberate structural arrangement to start the season with the three-fold *Solemn Blessing* under the invitation: *Bow your heads and pray for God’s blessing*, after which the people responded *Amen* to each invocation, and concluded with the invocative form of the Trinitarian Blessing. This was repeated on the Third Sunday of Advent.

The alternative structure was built around the Second and Fourth Sundays where the final dismissal was preceded by a *Prayer over the People*, likewise initiated by the invitation: *Bow your heads and pray for God’s blessing*. The phrasing of the oration used is in the Collect Style, invoking a participation in the everlasting life God prepares for us. Again the preparation for the dismissal is completed with the invocative form of blessing.

In a similar way, the Season of Lent is divided in such a way that the First, Third and Fifth (Passion/Palm Sunday) Sundays have the three-fold *Solemn Blessing*, while the Second and Fourth Sundays have the *Prayer over the People* structure.

What is unique in the new *Roman Missal*³ is the allocation of the three-fold *Solemn Blessing* to every Sunday in Advent and the allocation of the *Prayer over the People* to every Sunday in Lent. This emphasis may help shed further light on the different penitential perspectives of Advent and Lent. In a similar vein an effort to have distinguishable shades of purple could help differentiate the vestments used for Advent and Lent. In the Church we have liturgical colours, not liturgical shades. Some parishes go back to the tradition of the Salisbury Cathedral and the use of royal purple as the Sarum Blue of the Sarum Rite in Advent.

The ICEL translation of orations

Bishop Arthur Roche, the Bishop of Leeds and the new Chairman of the restructured International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) wrote a letter to all of the participant Conferences of Bishops who share the work of ICEL in a similar way to the Mixed Commissions in other languages.¹ In inviting feedback on the draft texts from the Bishops and their consultors he draws attention to “...a few matters that I should like to point out regarding these draft texts”. The guiding principles of ICEL’s drafts are:

- All texts of the Proper of the Seasons follow their Latin originals in that they consist of a single syntactic unit [a single sentence].

- The prayers are punctuated according to the pattern of the Latin Missal, where the body of the prayer ends with a full stop (period) and the conclusion begins with a capital letter.
- ...the conventions of Latin liturgical punctuation are strongly influenced by musical considerations, where the body of the prayer ends and the conclusion is introduced with different inflection of voice.
- Conclusions in English... do not [always] match the Latin original... because the English word – order requires that Christ be named at the very end of the body of the prayer, making the conclusion *who lives and reigns* more appropriate

In addition, the text of the new translations read in such a way that the oration is not immediately directed to God in the first line. Rather, the divine title can appear in the second or third lines (as in the original Latin texts). This structural change alone will put more responsibility on the presider to proclaim the text as a true prayer and not just another reading to get through.

Advent in the liturgical documents

Elsewhere in this issue (p15) this writer has referred to his participation at the Roman Press Conference announcing the release of the first book of the Vatican II authorised reform of the Roman Rite. Thus, *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar* [GNLYC] became the source for theological and pastoral reflections on the spirit of the Liturgical Year in a very different way than the rubrical emphasis of previous eras.² This new dimension is amply illustrated in the paragraphs about Advent:

§39.

Advent has a twofold character:

as a season to prepare for Christmas when Christ's First Coming to us is remembered;

as a season when that remembrance directs the mind and heart to await Christ's Second Coming at the end of time.

Advent is thus a period for devout and joyful expectation.

§40.

Advent begins with Evening Prayer I of the Sunday falling on or closest to November 30th and ends before Evening Prayer I of Christmas.

§41.

The Sundays of this season are named the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Sundays of Advent.

The weekdays from December 17th to December 24th inclusive serve to prepare more directly for the Lord's birth.

Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy

The release in April 2002 of this *Directory* was a notable step forward in efforts to bridge the gap between the liturgy of the Church and popular piety according to the principle established by Vatican II (CSL §13). What is unique about this *Directory* is the provision of a chapter dealing with the historical development within the life of the Church of liturgy and popular piety. In practice this means that any text or custom needs to be seen in the context of its origin and the spirituality of the era. This is similar to the necessary caution about biblical texts – any text without a context is a pretext.

The *Directory* describes Advent as:

§96.

Advent is a time of waiting, conversion and of hope:

- *waiting-memory of the first, humble coming of the Lord in our mortal flesh; waiting-supplication for his final, glorious coming as Lord of History and universal Judge;*
- *conversion, to which the Liturgy at this time often refers quoting the prophets, especially John the Baptist, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 3:2);*
- *joyful hope that the salvation already accomplished by Christ (cf. Rm 8:24-25) and the reality of grace in the world, will mature and reach their fullness, thereby granting us what is promised by faith, and "we shall become like him for we shall see him as he really is" (John 3:2).*

The *Directory* also draws attention to the relative importance of the seasons of Advent and Christmastide. In many periods of history there has been conflict between the expectations and hopes at the grass roots level compared to the expectations of the elites, whether by economic status or rigid position on the social scale of that time. Today the gap between the scales of the commercialisation of Christmas and the difficulty of emphasising the true spirit of Advent makes for a very difficult role in giving due importance to Advent.

§97.

Popular piety is particularly sensitive to Advent, especially when seen as the memory of the preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The Christian people are deeply conscious of the long period of

expectation that preceded the birth of our Saviour. The faithful know that God sustained Israel's hope in the coming of the Messiah by the prophets.

Popular piety is not unaware of this extraordinary event. Indeed, it is awestruck at the prospect of the God of glory taking flesh in the womb of the humble and lowly Virgin Mary. The faithful are particularly sensitive to the difficulties faced by the Virgin Mary during her pregnancy, and are deeply moved by the fact that there was no room at the inn for Joseph and Mary, just as she was about to give birth to the Christ child (cf. Lk 2:7). Various expressions of popular piety connected with Advent have emerged throughout the centuries. These have sustained the faith of the people, and from one generation to the next, they have conserved many valuable aspects of the liturgical season of Advent.

This last reference is epitomised in the impact of St Francis of Assisi who went beyond the monasteries and the cities, preaching in the vernacular. His hymn, Brother Sun, Sister Moon, is the oldest Italian text extant. His genius in providing the medium of the crib gave the people a chance of imaginative connection with the Christmas narratives in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, still so powerful in every culture after 800 years.

The Advent Wreath

§98.

Placing four candles on green fronds has become a symbol of Advent in many Christian homes, especially in the Germanic countries and in North America. The Advent wreath, with the progressive lighting of its four candles, Sunday after Sunday, until the Solemnity of Christmas, is a recollection of the various stages of salvation history prior to Christ's coming and a symbol of the prophetic light gradually illuminating the long night prior to the rising of the Sun of justice (cf. Mt 3:20; Lk 1:78).

Uniqueness of the Advent season

The *Introduction for the Lectionary of the Mass* gives strong direction in explaining the unique structure of the choice of the readings for the Sundays of Advent :

§93.

Each gospel reading has a distinctive theme:

the Lord's coming at the end of time (First Sunday of Advent),

John the Baptist (Second and Third Sunday),

and the events that prepared immediately for the Lord's birth (Fourth Sunday).

The Old Testament in particular is noteworthy for the role given to the prophet Isaiah in being used seven times out of the twelve Old Testament readings in Advent. In fact, it could be said that Isaiah becomes the source of the readings during Advent, rather than the normal presumption that the Gospels provide the main insight into the choice of the readings of any given day. The prominence of Isaiah is shown by the way that Jeremiah, Baruch, Zephaniah, and Micah are all used only once in Cycle C.

From Christ the King to Advent

Another perspective from which to view the Advent Readings comes from the connection of the Solemnity of Christ the King in concluding the previous Liturgical Year. The Gospel text of Christ the King foreshadows an extended reflection of how the Gospel Cycle of the next Liturgical Year shapes the proclamation of the Kingdom according to the demographic of each evangelist's community for whom it was written.

In finishing Ordinary Time of Cycle C, the Gospel vision from Luke (Lk 23:35-43) gives the scene on Calvary with the jeering of the leaders "...he saved others, let him save himself if he is the Christ, the chosen one" and the dialogue with the criminals crucified with Jesus, and finally the promise given to the good thief in Jesus' words "this day you will be with me in paradise". The diversity of the reception of Jesus portrayed in the scene of the reactions at Calvary is transfigured by the Gospel vision of Matthew, whom we read in Cycle A. He presents Jesus as the one who fulfils the promises of the prophets, because Matthew is writing mainly for an audience of Jewish converts.

In a similar flow at the end of Year A, Matthew's Gospel for Christ the King is the scene of the last judgement in Matthew (Mt 25:31-46). This vision of the role of Jesus who will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, is linked up with the next year's readings from Mark's Gospel, whereby his continual revelation of the Messianic secret is to draw attention to how the Son of God is revealed in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth with all the richness of his humanity, even when rejected by other elites.

Likewise, at the end of Cycle B once again Mark's Gospel is filled out with a reading from John (Jn 18:33-37) in the dialogue between the Pilate and Jesus. When Pilate claims it is "your own people and the chief priests who have handed you over to me: What have you done?" Jesus clarifies the two sides of the Messianic secret in which he is a King and for this he came into the world, to bear witness to the truth, and those who are on the side of truth will listen to his voice.

When we move into Luke's Gospel through Cycle C we now have the powerful stories and the engagement with the Gentile Christians who fulfil Jesus' promise that those who listen to his voice will become his followers.

The mini seasons within Advent

Another distinctive character of the Advent season is the division into two segments to allow for a particular form of novena leading to the actual feast of Christ's manifestation in his birth at Bethlehem.

In the days from the beginning of Advent until December 16th, the first two Sundays of Advent draw attention to the future coming of the Messiah, especially as foretold in the various Old Testament epochs of the prophet Isaiah, and then the Gospel texts which refer to the Second Coming of Christ in Judgement (First Sunday) and of the Coming of John the Baptist (Second Sunday). With this emphasis from the scriptural texts, we can see the strong urging in the invitation to the Opening Prayer of the First Sunday of Advent. The present English text urges us "that we may take Christ's coming seriously". Even if that invitation does not survive the revised translation texts for the new missal, the spirit of that invitation is still strong and clear.

In the days from December 16th-25th the focus moves from the historic insight of the history of salvation in the Hebrew Scriptures to the immediate events prior to and surrounding Christ's birth. This is spectacularly obvious in the Lukan Advent Cycle, where the Gospel of the Third Sunday deals with the clarification of the role of John the Baptist and his declaration that "I baptise you with water, but the one who is more powerful than I am will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire!" (Lk 3:10-18). The Fourth Sunday is then the scene of the Visitation to Elizabeth in Mary's journey to her home in the hill country of Judah. Elizabeth expresses the faith and hope of all believers to acclaim "blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled" (Lk 1:44).

Maranatha

This division of Advent into two obvious sections, is prominent in the prayers of the *Roman Missal*. This is most obvious when the Prefaces are categorised by their titles. The Preface of Advent I is set for the time from the First Sunday of Advent until the December 16th. Its key concept is in the movement beyond simply seeing the Advent of Christ in his human incarnation:

When he humbled himself to come among us as a man he fulfilled the plan you formed long ago and opened the way for us to salvation.

The next phrases bring in the second dimension of this movement when we are invited:

Now we watch for the day, hoping that the salvation promised us will be ours when Christ our Lord will come again in his glory.

In the earliest generations of the Christian community the acute awareness of the close proximity of the Second Coming of Christ as Messiah was a very strong reality in the life of the church. St Paul was forced to admonish the community at Thessalonica for the negative attitudes some showed by refusing to do any real work and hanging loose in the expectation that the Day of the Lord's Coming was imminent. Scholars claim that St Paul actually wrote four letters to the Thessalonians of which only two are recorded for us as his first and second letters to the Church of Thessalonica. This expectation of the return became a prominent part of early Christian attitudes and was expressed in the individual prayers at certain places within the eucharistic collection of prayers.

Another example of the Aramaic roots of our liturgical concepts still continue with as shown by St Paul in closing his first letter to the Corinthians with the words:

Maranatha, the Grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love to you all in Christ Jesus (I Cor 16:23-24 NAB).

While the footnotes in biblical texts refer to a past tense in the Aramaic grammar to mean *our Lord has come*, they also draw attention to a future tense when the phrasing is *Maranatha* in the phrase *Come, Lord Jesus*.³

In contemporary times there has been a notable drop in the awareness of facing life's end and death and judgement. The irony is that the major events like the Great Jubilee Year of 2000 and other similar millenary influences bring out all sorts of fundamentalist rhetoric that tends to bring the religious dimension into disfavour rather than anything of confidence. This is all the more reason for a rational but profound emphasis on the three-fold dimensions of Christ's comings in past, present and future.

Eucharistic Acclamations

One way to draw attention to this is in the very prayers and acclamations of our liturgical tradition. Even though over forty years we have become used to the phrases *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again*, Rome continues to assert how problematic this text is when it is not part of the three Latin acclamations in the *Roman Missal*. When the objection is raised that custom can also generate a level of acceptance in Canon

Law, the response seems to be that forty years does not create a custom when the presumption is it needs a century. Maybe that is the reason why in Ireland one of the eucharistic acclamations that is approved is the traditional *My Lord and my God* being said by the people which is not part of the Latin original. A closer study of the other three eucharistic acclamations show that they all express the same dimension in linking the past in Christ's actions with our memorial action in the power of his Spirit, until he comes again in glory.

The Solemn Blessing

The emphasis on past, present, and future is further expressed in the actual Solemn Blessing assigned for the First and Third Sundays of Advent. Each one of the litany phrases refers to a separate dimension of three-fold sense of Christ's being with us.

The Embolism

Another liturgical source for reflection on the aspect of the *parousia* and Christ coming again in glory is found in the embolism after the Lord's Prayer. Many people will resonate with the type of language that says:

*Deliver us Lord from every evil
and grant us peace in our day.*

Not everyone will find it so easy to move to the next verses of the prayer in saying:

In your mercy keep us free from sin.

Many would have memories of the fearsome preaching of the missionaries who built their reputations on the preoccupation with sin. Ironically, there is nowhere near the same emphasis today that might:

protect us from all anxiety.

What would be the ideal Christmas perspective, nurtured by an insightful celebration of Advent and rejoicing in the several ways of the coming of the Lord, would be the expectation that we can truly and faithfully acknowledge that now is the acceptable time:

as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our saviour Jesus Christ.

Truly Christmas can be a profound sense of rejoicing in Christ's Mass. Just as our best wishes and Christmas greetings should go beyond Christmas into the whole New Year, so too in this awareness from the Advent vision of the ways Christ manifests his presence to us, we can be carried along and supported by the seasons of the Liturgical Year as we consciously seek to live the reality of the coming of Christ among us in all its dimensions, covering the past in his incarnation, the present in his sacramental presence in the ministry of the Church in the power of the Spirit, and in his future coming to judge the living and the dead.

Praying and living Advent

One of the earliest contemporary monograph-studies of the season of Advent was by the Anglican author, Patrick Crowley, whose focus was on the true meaning of the Church's season of Advent. He adverted to the discrepancy that:

"...the Advent season is not taken very seriously by the ordinary Church person, and certainly nothing like so seriously as the season of Lent... Advent has been regarded as the beginning of the Church's year, and, accordingly it is thought to lead into the Christmas feast..."

It comes as a considerable shock to people when they are reminded that not always has Advent been regarded as the beginning of the Church's new year, and that its real meaning and liturgical significance are concerned with the end of the Church's year, even to the end of all time...

If properly understood, the Advent season is the very opposite of being mournful; it is full of Christian cheer and hope when it is liturgically appreciated. Yet it must be admitted that, in order to regain its true significance, some former thinking about this season must be put aside, and that is no light task after very many years of partial misunderstanding or confusion.⁴

References

¹ Letter dated 1st March, 2006 written in the name of Bishop Arthur Roche, Bishop of Leeds and Chairman of ICEL, and distributed with the Green Book Draft English Translation of *The Proper of Seasons* © 2006 ICEL, Inc.

² General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar in *The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource Third Edition* Elizabeth Hoffman (Ed) Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications (1991).

³ Thomas J Talley. *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*. New York: Pueblo Publishing Company (1986) p79

⁴ Patrick Crowley *Advent in its Liturgical Significance*. London: The Faith Press: Alcuin Club Collections No. 40 (1960) p9.