

ADVENT, THE TWOFOLD ASPECTS OF JESUS CHRIST
(J.F.M.H. 8.12.2016)

The word Advent comes from the Latin "Adventus " meaning arrival. There are two arrivals of Our Lord being remembered: the first which took place nearly 2000 years ago, and the second which has not yet happened, but has been promised. Historically although it was celebrated earlier it is not thought that the feast of Christmas existed as a feast much before the end of the 4th Century, so the regulations for the preparations for it i.e. Advent, could hardly have come before that. Possibly the first written evidence of such a preparation comes from a Synod at Saragossa (Spain) in 380, whose 4th Canon said that from the 17th December to the Feast of the Epiphany no one should be permitted to absent himself from church. More directly related evidence for the existence of Advent, and the churches desire to have it celebrated fittingly, appear in the next few hundred years in various sermons, synods and papal writings. In the 8th Century we find it observed not so much as a liturgical celebration but as a period of fast and abstinence from 15 November to the Nativity. Eventually rules as to its length of time were made and these were later amended from five Sundays to the present four by Pope St. Gregory VII (1073-85).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraphs 522-524 tells us about Advent. "The coming of God's Son to earth is an event of such immensity that God willed to prepare for it over centuries. He makes everything converge on Christ: all the rituals and sacrifices, figures and symbols of the 'First Covenant'. He announces Him through the mouths of the prophets who succeeded one another in Israel. Moreover, He awakens in the hearts of the pagans a dim expectation of this coming 523. St. John the Baptist is the Lord's immediate precursor and forerunner, sent to prepare the way. 'Prophet of the Most High', John surpasses all the prophets, of whom he is the last. He inaugurates the Gospel, already from his mother's womb welcoming the coming of Christ, and rejoices in being 'the friend of the bridegroom, whom he points out as 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world'. Going before Jesus 'in the spirit and power of Elijah', John bears witness to Christ in his preaching, by his Baptism of conversion, and through his martyrdom." And the Catechism of the Catholic Church adds at paragraph 524."When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Saviour's first coming, the faithful renew their desire for his second coming. By celebrating the precursor's birth and martyrdom, the Church unites herself to his desire: 'He must increase, but I must decrease."

The two comings of Christ were written about by St Cyril of Jerusalem (315 - 386). The Church draws our attention to these on the first day of advent. In the Divine Office for the First Sunday of Advent, there is a work of St. Cyril which sheds a light on the way we live our vocation of victim souls. "We preach not one coming only of Christ, but a second one as well. The second one is far more glorious than the first. The first revealed the meaning of His patient endurance; the second brings with it the crown of the divine kingdom. Generally speaking, everything that concerns our Lord Jesus Christ is twofold. His birth is twofold: one, of God before time began; the other, of the Virgin in the fullness of time. His descent is twofold: one, unperceived, like dew falling on the fleece: the other, before the eyes of all, is yet to happen. In his first coming he was wrapped in swaddling clothes and put in a manger. In his second coming he is clothed with light as with a garment. In his first coming he bore the cross despising its shame; he will come a second time in glory accompanied by the host of angels. It is not enough for us; then, to be content with his first coming; we must wait in hope of his second coming. What was said at his first coming, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" we shall repeat at his last coming. Running out with the angels to meet the Master we shall cry out in adoration, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." The Saviour will come not to be judged again but to call to judgement those who called him to judgement. He

who was silent when he was first judged, will indict the malefactors who dared to perpetrate the outrage of the cross, and say, 'These things you did and I was silent.' He first came in the order of divine providence to teach men by gentle persuasion; but when he comes again they will, whether they wish it or not, be subjected to his kingship.

The prophet Malachi has something to say about each of these comings. 'The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.' That is the first coming. Again of the second coming he says, 'And the angel of the covenant whom you seek. Behold, the Lord almighty will come: but who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap; he will sit like a refiner and a purifier.' St. Paul pointed to the two comings when he wrote to Titus, 'The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ.' You see how he has spoken of the first coming, for which he gives thanks, and of the second to which we look forward. Hence it is that by the faith we profess, which has just been handed on to you, we believe in him 'who ascended into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead; and his kingdom will have no end.' Our Lord Jesus Christ will, then, come from heaven. He will come in glory at the end of the last day. Then will be an end to this world, and this created world will be made new."

While St. Cyril points us to the twofold things that concern Our Lord, the Catechism points out that God willed everything to converge on Christ. One might expect to see the same thing occurring with Christ's mystical body, the Church. Through the Sacraments, we receive Sanctifying Grace, and have a share in divine life. We operate on two levels at once when this occurs. Christ in his glorified body is impassable, that is, he can't suffer physically, however we can, and so are able to offer that suffering for others. We are, as the Catechism puts it, "associated with his suffering as the body with its head" (793). Dom Hubert Van Zeller O.S.B., (late of Downside) states it this way, "One of the greatest glories of the Christian is that his sufferings and Christ's are bound up together." Knowledge of this share in the Passion can turn a human sorrow into the highest supernatural Sacrifice. Think of the great sacrifice of the Mass, in it we have Christ's sacrifice reproduced for us. We are invited to share with Christ not only his sacramental body but his sacrificial act. As members of the mystical body of Christ, we are even allowed to have a share in the reparation for sin. As it is not our individual reparation but the reparation of the whole Christ (head and members), this reparation is effective world wide.

St. Paul makes this point when writing to the Colossians "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's affliction for the sake of his body, that is the Church." (Col. 1.24) Though St. Paul uses the personal pronoun "I", he is but one member of Christ's mystical body, we are other members and **together with Christ our head, make up the whole Christ continuing his saving sacrifice.** The quotation from St. Paul often brings up the query 'what could be lacking in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross?' If you think of the crucifixion as lasting a period of time, some three hours, and then think of it only part way through, at that point, and every other point, Our Lord's sacrifice was sufficient for saving all of mankind, yet as it was not complete in terms of his infinite love he continued the sacrifice. In his Mystical Body he continues it today and will continue until the second coming. It seems that the twofold dimension operates in the Mystical Body on earth and in heaven at the same time. In Advent, by getting us to prepare for the anniversary of the First Coming, the Church prepares us for the Second. As St. Cyril reminds us we will join the angels and saints shouting out "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." It is what the Church says at every Mass and in doing so echoes the joyful crowd welcoming the arrival of Our Lord, into Jerusalem.