

The True Spirit of Advent According to The Mind of Holy Mother Church

I. Contrition

II. Confidence

III. Charity

INTRODUCTION

Advent, beginning on the Sunday nearest November 30, whether before or after, and ending on December 24, prepares for Christmas.

There are two ways of making such a preparation. One is the worldly way; the other is the Christian way.

On the following pages these two ways will be described, compared, and evaluated.

I. CONTRITION

To the world Christmas is not a small thing. The world regards Christmas as something important, something significant. The world considers Christmas SO important and significant that it makes elaborate preparations therefore. How much time it devotes to this coming celebration, how much money it spends, how much effort it sacrifices! By the time Christmas comes around, the world makes everyone intensely conscious of it.

But the world's preparation for Christmas affects only the body. It involves the sending of cards, the buying of presents, the arranging of festivities, the displaying of decorations: things like that. The world is interested only in the material—at any time—also at Christmastime.

Now, if the world makes preparations for Christmas, how much more should The Church do that also! For, after all, Christmas belongs to The Church. Christmas is connected with the religion of Christ, whose holy name is featured in its very name. Christmas is not a pagan holiday, but a Christian holy day. Let The Church, then prepare for it even more than does the world, lest the world put The Church to sham eat Christmastime for her coldness of spirit and lack of concern.

But it stands to reason, when The Church prepares people for Christmas, she should deal exclusively with their souls.

The Church is not at all fulfilling her peculiar mission in the world when she during Advent does nothing more than trim some more Christmas trees and arrange a few more Christmas parties of her own.

The Church's preparation for Christmas should consist in conducting special Advent devotions, explaining therein the spiritual meaning of Christmas, getting people ready to welcome Christmas in the proper frame of mind and heart and soul.

In other words, The Church prepares people for Christmas properly and correctly when she promulgates the true spirit of Advent as it has come down to our modern world from early times.

What has been said thus far is meant to imply: During the weeks before Christmas The Church is tempted to do one of two things—either not to prepare for Christmas at all, or else to prepare for it in a worldly manner.

Or let it be said this way: During the weeks before Christmas either The Church does not observe Advent at all, which means that many Christian parishes are discarding their special Advent devotions; or else The Church observes Advent in an improper way, which means that many congregations use it for singing Christmas carols and giving Christmas concerts and indulging in Christmas get-togethers.

To thus ignore Advent altogether, or to use it for pre-Christmas celebrations, is not the right Advent spirit. The purpose of Advent is an altogether different one. The spirit that Advent seeks to instill in the hearts of The Faithful is a spirit of an altogether different kind.

Advent is supposed to conform to the work of John The Baptizer. As he prepared the world for the coming of Christ 2,000 years ago, so Advent is to prepare the world 2,000 years later. His message then should be the message of Advent now. The feelings he aroused in people's hearts twenty centuries ago are the sentiments which Advent should awaken in human souls now.

And how people felt when they listened to John can be gathered from what he said to them:

“Repent ye, for The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” Matthew 3:2.

Repentance! Sorrow! That is what a person needs in his heart first of all if he wants to prepare for Christmas in the right way.

Not a nauseating lot of “Silent Night, Holy Night” already during Advent; not a profusion of gaudily decorated Christmas trees; not a lot of extravagant dinners and hilarious parties. Advent is not a time for any of these things. Advent is a time for sorrow; Advent is a season for repentance. Only a heart that is contrite is ready for Christmas when it finally comes.

It needs to be clearly stated, of course, what a person during Advent should feel sorry about.

Sin is the word. Man's joy on Christmas Day is not genuine unless it is preceded by genuine sorrow over sin.

The sin that has ruined all creation. How happy God was when He made the world and saw that it was perfectly good! And how infinitely heartbroken He was when all too soon that holy creation was marred by transgression! The world has failed God.

And we have failed him. Christmas came here on earth, not only because of the evil in the world in general, but also because of the evil in our own lives in particular.

And we need to repent of the evil: to acknowledge it with burning cheek, and confess it on bended knee, and lament it with contrite heart.

So let us not sing our Christmas carols yet—during Advent. First let us take the time (the full time of Advent's four weeks) to see the utterly ugly side of Christmas: the wickedness of which we are guilty.

And let us in our Advent contemplation see, not only the ugly side, but also the shameful side. Let us also feel sorry for that: the shame that Christ had to endure in order to make Christmas a blessed reality.

When John The Baptizer declared: "THE KINGDOM of Heaven is at hand", he meant The KING of Heaven—HE is at hand; HE was born at Christmas!

The infinitely glorious Son of God, adored by all the hosts celestial—what majesty was His!

And leaving it all: to be conceived within the womb of a mere human being; to be born amid the refuse of a stable; to live in utter poverty and humiliation; and to die on the cross the most shameful of deaths!

Those are the facts of Christmas. And those facts call for sorrow in our hearts—sorrow that Christ had to go through all this for us.

Small wonder, then, that Advent is properly a closed season of The Church Year, when activities, especially of an unchurchly nature, are reduced to a minimum, and church members are urged to reflect more than usual upon this blessed fact that, though He was rich, yet for their sakes Christ became poor, that they through His poverty might be rich!

Christmas was not at all the way modern Christmas cards would have us believe it: all soft lights and pretty clothes. Christmas for Christ was something unspeakably shameful. And we should view its shame with genuine sorrow, for its shame was caused by us.

And if we need any other reason for making Advent a time of repentance, let us remember our continued sinning even now.

If The Baptizer could say to his hearers: “The Kingdom of Heaven is AT HAND”, the same can be said to us. As a rule it has been on hand since earliest childhood.

Yet how much of a salutary effect has it had upon us? How cold is yet our love for Christ, how lifeless our devotion to His cause! Plainly, we need to be ashamed of OURSELVES.

Therefore no joyful Christmas carols yet—during Advent—until we bow our stiff necks and bend our proud knees before The Lord’s throne, and say: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

Why is it a tradition to dress the altar during Advent in the color of violet? Because violet is the color of contrition. Get into the true Advent spirit by heeding the call: “Repent ye, for The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!”

II. CONFIDENCE

It needs to be emphasized again that the world’s preparation for Christmas is both elaborate and superficial. There is no need to elaborate upon the fact that it is elaborate; the world is lavish in the attention it gives to Christmas, in the time it devotes to it, in the money it spends on it. But the world makes ready for Christmas in a superficial way: it deals only with the body, altogether ignoring the soul; and so it should not be surprising to find that such a preparation for Christmas is attended by no spiritual blessings.

It needs to be said further that the world’s preparation for Christmas is not only superficial; it is also artificial.

It is superficial because it has no depth; because it does not go to the root of the matter, which is sin. Unless a person realizes that sin compelled Christmas to be, he is still far from understanding what Christmas is all about.

But just as tragic is the fact that the world’s preparation for Christmas is artificial. It is as make-believe as Santa Claus. Why is the world so happy at Christmastime anyway? What does it have to be happy about? What does it believe about Christmas that gives it a cause to be happy? When the world prepares for Christmas, it actually, for all its feverish chasing around, does not know what it is preparing for!

Christians should therefore avoid preparing for Christmas the way the world does. They should be guided in their preparation by the mind of The Church, their wise spiritual mother. She points to John The Baptizer, and tells them to follow his advice during The Season of Advent. The way he told people to get ready for the coming of Christ 2,000 years ago is the manner in which they should get ready for Him today.

First, by means of repentance, as was stressed above: by sorrow over sin. And secondly (and this is the burden of this present discussion), by means of faith, a preparation implied in The Baptizer's beautiful statement:

“Behold The Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!” John 1:29.

In this remark Blessed John calls out: “Behold! See! See Christ for what He really is! Believe in that which was accomplished through Him! Then, when you behold Him lying in the manger of Bethlehem, you will behold Him in the proper way!”

When John The Baptizer points to Christ and says: “Behold The Lamb OF God”, that means first of all the Lamb who IS God, just as “The City of Detroit” signifies that city which is Detroit.

Unless you believe that The Christchild is Immanuel: God with us, god manifest in the flesh, you are by no means ready for Christmas. Then the heart of Christmas is not yet in your heart. And whatever joy you may feel at Christmas, it is an artificial joy: a happiness without a soul.

For one thing, look at the deity of Christ from the standpoint of Joseph.

The world features him at Christmastime. But does the world understand what part he played in The Christmas Drama? There is reason to believe that it makes too much of him.

Was he the father of Jesus? Answer: No! He played no part whatever in the conception of Jesus Christ. In fact, as Scripture relates, he was surprised to find that the woman he had chosen as his wife was pregnant; he was surprised because he had never been carnally intimate with her. When Joseph is portrayed on Christmas cards as standing beside the manger, he does not stand there as the father of Him who lies within that manger.

What was he, then? Answer: He was the foster-father, the step-father, an adopted father. He was, in simple language, the guardian of Jesus, His protector, the one divinely appointed to take care of Him—all that, but only that.

Or look at the deity of Christ from the standpoint of Mary.

The world makes much of her at Christmastime, but it does not make enough of her.

It does not recognize her as The Mother of God. That is the singular honor which God The Father bestowed upon her. When the time came for His Son to assume flesh and blood, The Father chose to acquire this flesh and blood from a young woman named Mary. In some mysterious way God the Spirit came to her and, without human male instrumentality, caused her Son to be conceived within her virginal womb. After the usual length of time her Son was then born: human, it is true, but just as truly divine.

And therefore just as truly is she The Mother of God: the mother of God's little Lamb, the mother of The Lamb that was God in the form of a little child—unless you believe that, you will not recognize Him on December 25.

But when John The Baptizer calls Christ “The Lamb of God”, he does not only mean the Lamb who IS God, but also The Lamb who CAME FROM God: The Lamb who came here on earth to accomplish God's plan of salvation. And therefore The Baptizer is quick to characterize Christ as The One “which taketh away the sin of the world”.

It is important to know WHO was born at Christmastime; it is just as important to know WHY He was born. To carry out God's plan of salvation; that is why—the exact opposite of man's plan.

Man plans to save himself by his own good works. His plan revolves around the pronoun “I”: “I will live a moral life,” he says; “I will do my best; I will live by love, by The Golden Rule, by The Ten Commandments. Then I will get to Heaven.”

That is the world's plan of salvation; and because it is, the world does not at all know what Christmas is all about.

God's plan of salvation points to Christ and revolves around Him. He is The Son of God, and therefore God's sinless Lamb. He takes away the sins of the world by taking them upon Himself, and carrying them to the cross, and there eradicating them by engulfing them in His holy, precious blood. For that very reason He is called a LAMB: He was as innocent as is such a creature, and He was sacrificed as were those animals in The Old Testament. That is why He came here on earth: to seek and to save that which was lost; and He saved it by suffering and bleeding and dying.

To believe that is to see Christmas in the light streaming down from Calvary's cross, and to see it that way it is the only way.

No wonder The Season of Advent is a penitential season: a season of sadness and solemnity! At least it should be. Advent is to Christmas what Lent is to Easter. Just as a person's joy at Easter is not genuine unless he first learns what preceded it—namely, Calvary—so his joy at Christmas is artificial unless he first considers what followed it—namely, Calvary. Christmas is not an end in itself; Christmas is only the beginning of the end. The end was the cross. The cross is as much a part of Christmas as it is of Easter, and Christendom needs to remember it as much during Advent as it does during Lent.

May The Lord increase our faith during the holy days of Advent: our confidence in the conviction that Jesus Christ is God, who saved us from our sins by dying on the cross!

III. CHARITY

As lavish and intense and prolonged as is the world's preparation for Christmas, it is condemned in the foregoing in no uncertain terms. It is condemned because it is correctly characterized as both superficial and artificial. Or, to justify such condemnation from another angle, let it be said that the world's preparation revolves around neither Satan nor God.

The world's preparation for Christmas is not concerned with The Devil because it chooses to ignore sin. To the world Christmas is everything pretty, when in reality it is an ugly and a shameful thing—ugly and shameful because sin is ugly and shameful, and sin caused Christmas to be. Christmas is God's solution to the problem of sin in every human life. When the problem is minimized, the solution is likewise underrated. And thus it becomes clear that the world, for all the money it spends on Christmas and all the time it devotes to it, does not even begin to give Christmas the importance it really has, because it does not regard Christmas as the beginning of God's plan of salvation from sin.

Nor does the world's preparation for Christmas revolve around God. When The Holy Family is portrayed on Christmas cards, the Triune God is completely out of the picture. The world looks upon Joseph as the father of Him who lies there in the manger, and thus God THE FATHER is totally ignored. To the world Mary conceived her child like any other mother, and thus the work of God THE SPIRIT is disclaimed. And The Christchild to the unbeliever is just another child, and not truly God THE SON. Though the world sings in the old familiar carol:

“Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy holy face”,

let no one think for a moment that the world means what it sings. The words are there, and so the world repeats them; but it does not believe them any more than when it sings: “My bonnie lies over the ocean.”

But if the world's preparation for Christmas does not revolve around God or Satan, neither does it revolve around man.

It revolves solely and completely around self. It is, therefore, completely selfish. And that is one more reason why it gains neither God's approval, nor the approval of His Church.

When John The Baptizer prepared mankind for the coming of Christ 2,000 years ago, the first thing he stressed was sorrow: sorrow and contrition over sin. Then he emphasized faith: faith in Christ as The Son of God and The Saviour of the world. These two things, contrition and faith, The Bible sometimes combines in the one word “repentance”. And now the third thing which The Baptizer stressed” fruits—deeds—works:

“Bring forth fruits meet for repentance!” Matthew 3:8.

As The Revised Standard Version of The English Bible puts it: “Bear fruit that befits repentance.” The American Translation: “Produce fruit that will be consistent with your professed repentance.”

Now, among these good works which result from sorrow over sin and faith in Christ, special mention might be made, as far as Advent and Christmas are concerned, of the matter of giving. Giving and Christmas are synonymous.

But it is apparent that the world's giving at Christmastime is in the final analysis completely selfish, and therefore anything but a tribute to the greatest Gift of all.

In the first place, the world's giving at Christmastime is to a large extent a mere exchange: a giving of gifts to loved ones from whom gifts are received in return. There is a studied calculation behind the world's charity: "Who is going to give me something, and how much will it be worth?"

Let not that kind of charity be dignified with the word "Christian". That kind of giving has nothing to do with repentance or Christmas. That is value given for value received. That is a kind of business transaction, and nothing more.

Giving according to the Christian ideal is just the opposite: a giving to anyone, whether he is especially loved (and lovely) or not, simply because he is a neighbor, whom God wants us to love as we love ourselves; and a giving without an expecting; charity without hope of return.

That is how God gave at Christmastime. When The Father gave His Son to be born of The Blessed Virgin, that was not a gift to friends, but to enemies. And what could He hope to receive from man in return for the most precious Gift of all!

God gave to all men, freely, without price; and for us to give at Christmastime in any other way may be a matter of good public relations, but hardly a matter of religion.

But at this point you may feel constrained to protest. It is unfair, you say, to declare that the unbeliever only gives to loved ones at Christmastime, and always with hope of a gift in return. Many worldly people support charities at Christmastime without knowing who is helped by them, and without receiving compensation for their efforts. Hence it is unkind to say that the world's giving is always selfish.

At first glance it might seem so. But the opposite becomes apparent when we reflect upon the number of religions in the world. We are accustomed to thinking that there are many kinds of religions, but when all is said and done, such is not the case; there are actually only two religions in the world: the religion of grace and the religion of works.

The religion of grace is The Christian Religion when it is taught in all its truth and purity. According to it, Heaven is a gift of pure grace. Christ made every human being eligible for it by living a holy life and dying a dismal death for him. That is why He came to earth; that is why He was born at Bethlehem; that is why the angels sang: "Unto you is born this day in The City of David a Saviour"; that is why He ended His life's work with the statement: "It is finished." Simply to believe that fact gives a person eternal life.

The religion of works is just the opposite. Man does not look to Christ for salvation, but to self, to his own worth, to his own deeds—to his own charity, if you please—in order to get to Heaven.

And so the unbeliever fills Christmastime with much giving that on the surface looks very unselfish. But actually he gives in the hope that God is watching and keeping record, to the end that, when the books are opened and the accounts settled, He will say: “You’ve done enough to merit eternal life.”

Let us beware of giving in such a spirit. “By the works of The Law shall no flesh living be justified.” “By grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Our giving must result from repentance: from sorrow over the fact that what we do is sinful and from faith in the fact that Christ has done everything for us. Our giving must result from love: love for God, who so loved the world that He gave His Onlybegotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life; and love for our fellowman, who was made in God’s image.

We all have enough of the world in our hearts to be warned against the world’s charity at Christmastime. Let us give without discrimination; let us give without hoping to get; let us give out of gratitude that Heaven has been won for us through Christ. Then we will be bringing forth fruits meet for repentance.

CONCLUSION

It is distressing to see that The Church of modern times is fast losing the true spirit of Advent. Many of her parishes, without a qualm of conscience, are discarding their special devotions; many new missions are not instituting them. Wedding celebrations and secular activities are not in the least restricted. Christmas concerts and pageants in profusion dissipate the Advent atmosphere.

The true Advent spirit can be preserved in The Church only if the individual member in it is resolved to cultivate it as a voluntary discipline in his own personal life, on the one hand, by refusing to participate in functions which destroy it, on the other, by devoting himself during Advent to more public and private worship.

There is no need to add that the result of such discipline in his own spiritual life will for the conscientious Christian in itself be reward enough.