

Maronite Monks of Adoration

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A Christmas Reflection

The all-pervading, indefinable sense of deep peace that belongs to Christmas has come down to us through the ages. If we carefully search for the cause of this Christmas peace, we find that it lies in the unshakable calm brought forth by security. And if we search further for the cause of this security, we find it in the knowledge that God is with us.

“God With us!” We are children spoiled by twenty centuries of Christianity — spoiled because we have God with us and we do not appreciate the fact. We have had no experience of bleak paganism where in early youth our star-seeking ideals would be thrown down again and

The Second and Third Comings of Christ

On November 16th the Maronite Church began a new liturgical season, the Season of the Glorious Birth of Our Lord, and the first part of this season is made up of what are called the *Sundays of Annunciation* which would correspond to the time of Advent in the Latin Church. Whereas the time of Advent in the Latin Church lasts roughly four weeks, in the Maronite Church it lasts six weeks. On the coming Sundays we will be calling to mind the great events of biblical history which prepared for the coming of Our Lord in the flesh: the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah and the birth of John the Baptist; the announcement to Mary that she would become the Mother of God; her visitation to her cousin Elizabeth and the announcement of the angel to St. Joseph, among other things. It is a beautiful time of the year to call to mind these great interventions of God in history, full of many wonders and lessons for us.

But also, during the coming weeks in the liturgy, we will be hearing much from the prophets of the Old Testament

again as they sought to turn a rebellious nature to obey a God they were not favored to know as we know Him. We have had no experience (as had the pagans of old) of trying to drown all those ideals in an ocean of sinful pleasure, yet finding their craving for the good and pure and the noble and unselfish still unsatisfied. We cannot appreciate the pagans' despair at having no one to turn to — absolutely no one; because deep down in our hearts we know that even if all humans fail us, if we ourselves fail Jesus Christ, He can never and will never desert us.

Yes, the source of our Christmas peace is the realization that God is with us. And not merely God in heaven spiritually and invisibly at our side, but God in heaven come down to earth, clothed in flesh and bone as we are, like to us in all things, sin alone excepted. ✠

Excerpted from: *Reflections on the Life of Jesus, Mary and Joseph* by Francis L. Filas, S. J.

(particularly Isaiah) as they look forward to the coming of the Messiah and His kingdom. Not only the readings at Mass or the Divine Office, but also the prayers, will be full of expressions of longing, expectation and hope, all looking with eagerness to the coming of the Savior. The Advent liturgy *prays* for the coming of Christ, for the fulfillment of our hope.

However, if we stop and reflect, doesn't this character of yearning and expectation that we find in the Advent liturgy raise a certain practical difficulty? How can we long and pray for something that has already happened? A woman who has already married can not wait with eager longing for her wedding day. It is already past. It would seem that sentiments of appreciation and gratitude are what are called for. So also, how is it possible for us to look forward with eager expectation to the birth of our Savior in Bethlehem that took place more than 2000 years ago?

The answer to this question can be found, at least in part, in the fact that for centuries now the Church has understood the season of Advent as a time of preparation not only for the commemoration of the Birth of Christ, but also as a time in which we look to His Second Coming in glory at the end of time. The Church wants us during this season not only to look back at what God has done for us by sending His only Son for our salvation, but to look forward to that time when He will come again — and to look forward in a spirit of eagerness, yearning. He *will* come again, and can we really maintain that we love Him if we do not long to see Him as He is in glory? As things are now we only see Our Lord with the eyes of faith. It is true that we possess Him wholly and substantially in the Eucharist, but there also, it is under the veil of bread and wine. The first coming of Christ has not totally satisfied our expectation and longing; there is something more to come. And *it will come* and we will be there to witness it. When we keep this aspect of the Advent season in mind

the readings from the Prophets take on a new dimension. We can look forward together with them — for the Prophets and just men of the Old Testament longed not only for the coming of the Messiah, but for the coming of His kingdom where evil is vanquished and where goodness, righteousness and truth triumph. We can look forward together with them to that time when “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away”(Rev. 21:4). In a very ancient writing of great authority (the *Didache*) we find the early Christians praying: “Let grace come, and let this world pass away!” That is a very striking expression of the early Church's longing for the coming of Christ's Kingdom. One does not often hear people pray like that these days. It shows that the early Christians looked forward to the final and definitive realization of the Kingdom in the way a bride looks forward to her wedding day.

This aspect of the Advent season can bring greater substance, depth and maturity to our spiritual lives. It saves Advent and Christmas from degenerating into a kind of sentimental commemoration of Christ's childhood. The secular world would have us look on the manger scene in such a way as to evoke only an emotional response. For those who have the faith there is much more. As Christians we know that the Child in the manger was also God Almighty who took on our humanity that we might take on His divinity: O marvelous exchange!

And this brings us to what St. Bernard of Clairvaux calls the “Third Coming” of Christ, His coming into the individual hearts of men by grace. What does it profit us if Christ was born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago if He is not also born in our hearts? For those in whose souls Christ does not come to birth, His first coming was in vain.

St. Bernard has written beautifully of these three comings of Christ: “We know that there

are three comings of the Lord. The third lies between the other two. It is invisible, while the other two are visible. In the first coming He was seen on earth, dwelling among men; He himself testified that they saw him and hated him. In the final coming 'all flesh will see the salvation of our God' and 'they will look on Him whom they have pierced'. The intermediate coming is a hidden one; in it only the elect see the Lord within their own selves, and they are saved. In His first coming our Lord came in our flesh and in our weakness; in this middle coming He comes in spirit and in power; in the final coming He will be seen in glory and majesty.

"Because this coming lies between the other two, it is like a road on which we travel from the first coming to the last. In the first, Christ was our redemption; in the last, He will appear as our life; in this middle coming, He is our rest and consolation."

The time of Advent, then, is a special season given us by the Church to either intensify or (if need be) restore Christ's presence in our souls by grace. The singular most important question facing any baptized Christian is: What am I doing with God's life in my soul? For upon this depends our eternity, and perhaps even the eternal salvation of many others. ✠