

ADVENT

THE word "Advent" (Coming) indicates how Christians view the four-week period preceding the Nativity of our Lord. It is a time of preparation for an ever more intimate coming of the Lord to you and all of us.

When I come to visit a friend, I am present to him/her. Coming results in presence. Of course, the Lord is already present to his people. Therefore, his coming at Christmas should result in a more intimate presence. People (friends, lovers) who get to know and love one another better are becoming more intimately, more personally, present to one another. It is a question of opening up and sharing one another's personality. Our preparation for Christ's coming should consist in an ever greater opening up to him who wants to share our human condition in loving care.

By preparing for the Lord's coming time and again at Christmas, Christians prepare for his final coming, which will be decisive for you and all human beings. "When he comes again in glory and majesty and all is at last made manifest, [may] we who watch for that day . . . inherit the great promise in which now we dare to hope" (Preface I of Advent).

CHRISTMAS TIME

CHRISTMAS is not just a commemoration of our Lord's birth, but the celebration of the great "Emmanuel" (God-with-us) mystery. A wealth of symbolism is used in the prayers and Bible readings of this liturgical time to shed some light on this tremendous fact: that God wants to share our human condition. The light versus darkness theme is perhaps the most primitive one.

We have no evidence of Christmas earlier than approximately 330 A.D., and it appears to have been determined not primarily by our Lord's birth date, which is unknown, but rather by the pagan festivals of the winter solstice, when worshipers of the Sun celebrated the return of light after the shortest day. At Christmas, Christians celebrate the dawn of God's light shining upon human beings, who go through a valley of darkness.

Over the centuries, popular piety has sentimentalized Christmas into the well-known "baby Jesus" cult. This kind of piety is not reflected in the liturgical prayers and Bible readings of the Church. The four Christmas Masses, the Feast of the Holy Family, the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God, the Epiphany (Manifestation) of the Lord, and his Baptism elucidate the various aspects of God's self-disclosure in the Lord Jesus, in whom he is really "Immanuel—God-with-us." "In the mystery of the Word made flesh a new light of your glory has shone upon the eyes of our mind, so that, as we recognize in him God made visible, we may be caught up through him in love of things invisible" (Preface I of the Nativity of the Lord).

ORDINARY TIME

THE Sundays of the major liturgical times of the year are distinguished by their relationship to the Solemnities of Christmas (Advent, Christmas) and Easter (Lent, Easter). On the other hand, Ordinary Time refers to all the other Sundays of the year under the all-embracing heading of celebrations of the "Day of the Lord." These weeks number thirty-three or thirty-four according to the particular character of each year and are assigned to two parts of the liturgical year.

The first part begins with the Sunday after Epiphany (although this First Sunday is perpetually impeded by the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord) and continues until Ash Wednesday. Since the date of Easter varies each year, this part may include as few as four and as many as nine weeks.

The second part of Ordinary Time begins with the day after Pentecost and runs to the Saturday before the First Sunday of Advent. (See p. 498.)

On these "Days of the Lord," Christians continue to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus. First, they listen to what Scripture has to say about him in the Liturgy of the Word. The Gospels for this Time are a semi-continuous reading of the three Synoptic Gospels providing a presentation of each Gospel's distinctive doctrine as well as a development of the Lord's life and preaching. Those after Epiphany are concerned with the beginning of the Lord's preaching and are related to his Baptism and first manifestation.

Secondly, Christians commemorate Christ's Death and Resurrection in the signs of bread and wine. The setting for this memorial—the Lord's Passover Sacrifice—is the Eucharistic Prayer, the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving and Adoration.

LENT

ACCORDING to Biblical tradition, Moses stayed on Mount Sinai forty days to receive the Law of the Covenant. Our Lord fasted forty days in the desert before he started his mission. Christians prepare themselves to celebrate the Paschal Mystery of our Lord's Death and Resurrection by a penitential time of forty days.

Penance is part of the Christian philosophy of life. The way it is done may change. The concept itself cannot be taken out of the Christian life. Penance has to do with sin and conversion. It is the inner aversion from evil in and around us and a generous conversion in love to God that are important.

The means to achieve this inner conversion, the traditional Lenten practices of prayer, charitable works, and even fasting, should not be considered outdated. However, it is true that the importance of "works" of penance (fasting, abstinence from meat, candy, shows, etc.) during Lent may have been over-emphasized in the past. They have little value in themselves.

What you give up during Lent is a personal decision, but it should be related to that inner conversion to God. "By your gracious gift each year your faithful await the sacred paschal feasts with the joy of minds made pure, so that, more eagerly intent on prayer and on the works of charity, and participating in the mysteries by which they have been reborn, they may be led to the fullness of grace that you bestow on your sons and daughters" (Preface I of Lent).

EASTER TIME

IN Paul's first letter to the congregation of Corinth (56 or 57 A.D.) we have the oldest summary of Christian belief. Paul refers to his former preaching in Corinth in 51 A.D. and declares that he received this Gospel (Good News) as witnessed by the Apostles and Palestinian disciples: "I [Paul] handed on to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures; that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. . . . So we preach and so you believed" (1 Cor 15:3-5, 11).

Some thirty to fifty years later, the evangelists preached the same message, but often drew on local traditions that extensively elaborate on the theme of our Lord's resurrection. There are legendary details in those traditions that have nothing to do with the faith in the resurrection. Each of the Gospel traditions, as we will read them during Easter Time, centers on an all-important appearance to the Twelve in which they are commissioned for their future task, namely, to be witnesses of the Lord, who is alive and will be with us until the end of the world (Mk 28:16-20). (Cf. Jerome Commentary.) And this is the Paschal message to all Christians.

Following the example of the Bible, Christians celebrate the mystery of our Lord's Resurrection for fifty days. The Lord's Ascension and Pentecost are the final memorial days. "Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the feast" (1 Cor 5:6-8). "O God, . . . grant, we pray, that we who keep the solemnity of the Lord's Resurrection may, through the renewal brought by your Spirit, rise up in the light of life" (Collect for Easter).

ORDINARY TIME (Cont'd)

THE second part of Ordinary Time (see p. 194 for the special character and make-up of this period) begins with the day after Pentecost and runs to the Saturday before the First Sunday of Advent.

If the number of ordinary weeks is thirty-four, the week after Pentecost is the one that follows immediately the last week celebrated before Lent. The Masses of Pentecost Sunday, the Most Holy Trinity, and (in countries where the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ is not observed as a holy day of obligation and is therefore celebrated on the following Sunday) the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ replace the Sunday Masses in these weeks. If the number of ordinary weeks is thirty-three, the first week that would otherwise follow Pentecost Sunday is omitted.

The readings for these Sundays follow a carefully selected arrangement that enables the faithful to become acquainted with the most important passages of both the Old and the New Testaments. The Gospels are taken in almost continuous fashion from Matthew (A), Mark (B), and Luke (C). (The parts of John that have not been read before or after Easter are now read after Mark.)

The Old Testament readings have a specific relationship to the Gospel passages and illustrate the main themes of the Old Testament. Finally, there is also a semi-continuous reading of the Letters of Paul and James, which provides practical application of the Gospel teachings.