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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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THE ADVENT OF CHRIST

Elastic is one way to describe the season of Advent. It can be longer or shorter depending on the calendar. At its longest, when Christmas falls on a Sunday, it is four full weeks; and at its shortest, as it is this year when Christmas is on a Monday, it is only three weeks. This is a problem. Getting into the spirit of a season that lasts only three weeks hardly seems worth the effort. Besides, commerce and the media have been directing our attention beyond Advent to Christmas since Halloween, so it would take a real effort to put on the brakes, bring things to a halt, and pause for the last few weeks before Christmas to compose ourselves for a season of waiting and anticipation. Thus while most of us have no difficulty taking seriously the Lent that leads to Easter, we have a lot of trouble giving due attention to the Advent that leads to Christmas. And since it is so hard, we wonder if we really need to do it, and we ask if Advent matters all that much.

These are not new questions. To those of us old enough to remember when the starting gun of the pre-Christmas shopping season was heard on the day after Thanksgiving, things seem to be much worse now that the season begins earlier and is so much the busier. And yet the tendency to hurry by Advent did not show up only in the past five or ten years. John Henry Newman, a man whose life spanned nearly the whole of the nineteenth century, noticed it in his day as well. Newman believed that our reluctance to settle into the Advent season told a great deal more about us than just that December tends to be a

busy month. Although that may be true, it is also true that the central proclamation of the season – the coming of Christ – is one that makes us profoundly uncomfortable. For if the great acclamation heard in the liturgy of the season, the cry of “Come, Lord Jesus!” means anything at all, it must refer not simply to Christ’s coming at his birth in Bethlehem, but to his coming in glory at the end of days. We may be willing enough (if we can find the time) to prepare for the memorial of his coming that is a past event, but we are not at all eager to prepare for his future coming or to even think seriously about it. Such a preparation, such a meditation, calls into question the ultimate worth of our current activities and concerns. It forces us to admit almost in spite of ourselves, that we are not full and happy in our lives as they are now, and that we are looking for more than we have or are ever likely to have. We may not be so sure that we want Christ to come again in glory, but we are pretty sure, if we are honest, that we want more than what the world has on offer. In the late 1830’s Newman preached a number of Advent sermons that go to the heart of what the season is and what it demands of us. What follows is taken from the first of these sermons.

Newman begins with a long passage that is worth quoting in full, for it reminds us why, even as a very young Anglican clergyman, he enjoyed the reputation of being the best preacher in the country, and this in spite of the fact that he spoke so softly in the pulpit that he

could scarcely be heard:

Year after year, as it passes, brings us the same warnings again and again, and none perhaps more impressive than those with which it comes to us at this season. The very frost and cold, rain and gloom, which now befall us, forebode the last dreary days of the world, and in religious hearts raise the thought of them. The year is worn out; spring, summer, autumn, each in turn, have brought their gifts and done their utmost; but they are over, and the end is come. All is past and gone, all has failed, all has sated; we are tired of the past; we would not have the seasons longer; and the austere weather which succeeds, though ungrateful to the body, is in tone with our feelings, and acceptable. Such is the frame of mind which befits the end of the year; and such the frame of mind which comes alike on good and bad at the end of life. The days have come in which they have no pleasure; yet they would hardly be young again, could they be so by wishing it. Life is well enough in its way; but it does not satisfy. Thus the soul is cast forward upon the future, and in proportion as its conscience is clear and its perception keen and true, does it rejoice solemnly that "the night is far spent, the day is at hand," that there are "new heavens and a new earth" to come, though the former are failing; nay, rather that, because they are failing, it will "soon see the King in his beauty," and "behold the land which is very far off." These are feelings for holy men in winter and in age, waiting, in some dejection perhaps, but with comfort on the whole, and calmly though earnestly, for the Advent of Christ.

Christ's coming is presented in the New Testament under various aspects, but Newman is quite sure that the image of judgment dominates. He gives a whole page's worth of Scripture citations to this effect, capping them all



with the parable in Matthew 25 in which the Son of Man divides humanity into two groups, one on his right and the other on his left, and pronounces a judgment based on the law of love. The essence of judgment, according to Newman, is not the handing out of rewards and punishments. That will happen, but if it were the only thing that is going to happen, it could be done "by a mere general provision or course of nature," an impersonal application of some algorithm within a system of

divine justice that rewards some behaviors and punishes others. The essence of judgment, however, as it is presented in the Bible, is that it is *personal*. We are brought into the presence of our Maker, and in that first, decisive face-to-face encounter we will be judged. *We have to stand before His righteous Presence, and that one by one. One by one we shall have to endure His holy and*

searching eye. At present we are in a world of shadows. What we see is not substantial. Suddenly it will be rent in twain and vanish away, and our Maker will appear. And then, I say, that first appearance will be nothing less than a personal intercourse between the Creator and every creature. He will look on us, while we look on Him.

God is with us now, of course, in the Spirit, in the Church, in word and sacrament, and in the love we bear for one another. These encounters with God are real and powerful, but they are very much mediated through and in the created world, which hides him at least as much as it reveals him. *A thick black veil is spread between this world and the next. We mortal men range up and down it, to and fro, and see nothing. There is no access through it into the next world. In the Gospel this veil is not removed; it remains, but every now and then marvelous disclosures are made to us of what is behind it. At times we seem to catch a glimpse of a Form*

which we shall hereafter see face to face. The “marvelous disclosures” are nothing less than the revelation of God’s salvation, which is expressed in and through the sacraments and the institutions of the Church. These sustain us on our pilgrim way, but every pilgrimage must have its end, and the end of our journey is God himself. Judgment by God, our personal encounter with him, our standing before him in all nakedness and truth, this is our destiny as human beings.

Since this is our future and our goal, how can we best prepare ourselves for this judgment? Newman considers, and then rejects, the possibility that the answer is obedience, pure and simple. Obeying God, doing his will, might be enough if our eternal reward or punishment were to follow in the mere way of nature, as they do in this world. But, when we come steadily to consider the matter, appearing before God, and dwelling in His presence, is a very different thing from being merely subjected to a system of moral laws, and would seem to require another preparation, a special preparation of thought and affection, such as will enable us to endure His countenance, and to hold communion with Him as we ought.

This “special preparation,” Newman says, is one of the main reasons that Christ instituted the Gospel covenant. *It is intended, among its other purposes, to prepare us for this future glorious and wonderful destiny, the sight of God,—a destiny which, if not most glorious, will be most terrible. And in the worship and service of Almighty God, which Christ and His Apostles have left to us, we are vouchsafed means, both moral and mystical, of approaching God, and gradually learning to bear the sight of Him.*

In this sermon, Newman does not much focus on the “moral means” provided to us by which we grow accustomed to the presence and vision of God, but we know what they are, for earlier Newman had alluded to Matthew 25 and the parable of the last judgment. Providing food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, meeting the needs of the stranger and the alien,

all of this constitutes the ordinary moral means of seeing and approaching God. As Jesus says twice in the parable, whatever we do to the least of his brethren that we do unto him.

The “mystical means” of acclimating ourselves to God’s presence are given to us in and through the worship of the Church, and it is these that Newman emphasizes in the rest of the sermon. Religion matters, and the practice of the religion matters. Going to church, attending on certain rites and ceremonies, prayer, fasting and meditation are necessary. They are not optional “extras” which may or may not be superadded to the moral and ethical requirements of the gospel at the personal choice of the individual believer. Sacraments have been instituted, and people must participate in them. Why? *I answer, they must do so, first of all and especially, because God tells them to do so. But besides this, I observe that we see this plain reason why, that they are one day to change their state of being. They are not to be here for ever. Direct intercourse with God on their part now, prayer and the like, may be necessary to their meeting Him suitably hereafter: and direct intercourse on His part with them, or what we call sacramental communion, may be necessary in some incomprehensible way, even for preparing their very nature to bear the sight of Him.*

Among the mystical, sacramental means given to us in the Church so that we may grow used to the presence of God are Holy Seasons, and it is here that we see both the importance of Advent and the reason why we tend to be so reluctant to enter into its spirit. All such special seasons are invitations to grace and times of purification, but Advent’s special character lies precisely in its relentless direction of our attention to the future coming of Christ. We memorialize his birth at Bethlehem to increase our longing for his return in glory, and we make our own the final cry of the Book of Revelation: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” Our lives and our universe are in the nature of a story, and day by day both are moving towards their appointed end, the final judgment, a personal encounter with the living God that is beatitude for the ready and the eager, and torment for the lost and the self-

absorbed. We would rather not think about any of this, and so this briefest of seasons, this Advent, has a bit of an edge to it, the feel of a

harsh mercy. It is a needful thing.

—Fr. Bob Spivott, O.F.M.

All the friars and all the staff here at St. Peter's extend to you and your loved ones our deepest wishes for the best of holiday seasons: A Merry and a Blessed Christmas and a Happy and Healthy New Year!



We thank you for your support in 2006. May the Lord bless you for your generosity and give you his kindness and peace!



A Blessed Christmas

APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

To be lit in honor of: _____
 Living _____ Deceased _____

Requested by: _____

Date candle is to be lit: Immediately _____ Specific Date _____

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.

APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

Please Enroll: _____
 as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter's Friars Legion.
 Living _____ Deceased _____

Your Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip Code: _____

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 _____ Family, \$100.00 _____ (Immediate family, parents and children)