



The Church

Advent

ADVENT is the New Year of the Church. The Church begins her calendar on the First Sunday of Advent while the secular year is dated from January 1st. The reason that the two calendars do not coincide is because the Church Year is divided, not by the cycle of months as is the secular one, but rather by the progress of the great drama of Redemption.

It is this basis of computation that makes the Church commence its year with a period of preparation for so important an event — Christmas — the birthday of our Lord. That is what Advent is: a period of preparation; a getting ready for the coming of the Redeemer. The word itself signifies a "coming to." This season always contains four Sundays but the actual number of days included in it may vary from 22 to 28. This is due to the method of determining the First Sunday of Advent. It is always the one nearest to November 30th, the feast of St. Andrew, the Apostle. This year November 30th falls on a Sunday, hence that day is the first Sunday of the Ecclesiastical Year and thus this year Advent has 25 days.

Advent, it appears, has been observed in the Church since the early days, but the length of the season varied somewhat during the first Christian centuries. However, the present arrangement of four Sundays is over a thousand years old. These four Sundays may be considered as symbolical of the 4000 years during which the world waited for the coming of Christ; yet this feature is not emphasized by the Church in her prayers during this season.

The principal idea of the Church in establishing Advent is to set aside a time for the fitting preparation of Christ's coming. It is, therefore, a penitential season, similar in spirit to that of Lent. One may wonder why such a joyful event as Christmas is preceded by penance. It is because the real spirit of Christmas is one of love; of spiritual love.

On the material side we have many things to occupy our time and attention during the period preceding Christmas. We are engaged in buying presents, planning family reunions, mailing parcels, preparing for the big Christmas dinner, doing a thousand things to add to the happiness of others. The Church knows that these external preparations will bring us full joy only in so far as we catch the true spirit of Christmas—that internal union with the Christ-Child of love.

In order that we may acquire the proper inner disposition necessary for this supreme event the Church recommends recollection and prayer; a withdrawal from the usual distractions of the world and our social life. The Church realizes that if we would properly greet Jesus on Christmas morning we must purge ourselves of all unworthiness. Hence, the penitential spirit of the season of Advent. The Church, therefore, places before our minds three things: the coming of Christ into the world; His coming into our souls in Holy Communion and His final coming when we shall all be judged.

While the Church does not insist during Advent on the same rigorous observance that she specifies for Lent, yet she would have us make it a period of worthy preparation. In the earlier ages the law of fast was as strict as that of Lent, but this strictness has gradually relaxed until now the Fridays of Advent and the Ember Days are the only ones that bind under the law of fasting and even on the Ember Days certain dispensations are made for working people and their families.

Thus while physical mortifications are not insisted on, yet in order that our preparation may be worthy the Church recommends that worldly pleasures and amusements be given up during this period; that more attention be given to divine and spiritual things; and that we become more recollected and fervent in our prayers. By these means she would have us do everything possible to offer a fitting welcome to Jesus on Christmas morning. She knows that our real happiness will be measured by our inner dispositions and these she would purge during Advent.