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## The Gift of Advent: *Daily Reflections for Waiting*

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### FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

#### SUNDAY: THE RHYTHM OF LOVE

In *The Living Flame of Love*, St. John of the Cross compares our pre-Advent selves to green logs thrown into the fire of love. Green logs don't immediately burst into flames; being young and full of moisture, they sizzle until they reach kindling temperature. Then they take on the fire around them. Similar is the rhythm of love: Only the mature can burst into flame within community.

The spirituality of Advent is about waiting without premature resolution to help facilitate the change and experience the fullness of love's rhythm. Giving birth to what's divine requires the patience of gestation. The sublime has to be waited for. In short, that's Advent.

#### MONDAY: THE FIRE INSIDE

We all ache for someone or something that we haven't yet known. We ache in a way that leaves us restless. God is the hand behind this "intolerable shirt of flame," as T.S. Eliot puts it. God made us to crave the infinite and be dissatisfied with everything else until that love is consummated.

Advent celebrates human longing. It asks us to enter into and deepen our longings until we undergo metamorphosis. Longing leads us to the manger of

Bethlehem and carves out a trough within our soul into which God can be born.

#### TUESDAY: HEALTHY CHASTITY

American educator and author Allan Bloom suggests that lack of chastity is the leading cause of unhappiness among young people. He states: "Young people have experienced everything. But they've never had anything sublime in their lives because sublimity depends upon waiting, and waiting depends upon chastity."

Today in Western culture, chastity is often denigrated. But healthy chastity is more about reverence and respect than about sex. Advent celebrates the virtues of waiting and chastity, both by pointing desire toward its adequate object and by teaching us to wait.

#### WEDNESDAY: LONELINESS, LONGING

In her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison writes: "There is a loneliness that can be rocked....Then there is a loneliness that roams."

We all experience the latter. What's to be gleaned from our wandering? We learn that we are more—more than any one moment in our life, more than the limits of our bodies or relationships. Longing lets us touch, through desire, God's deep design for us. Ultimately our longings are about consummation, harmony, and justice. Advent is about getting in touch with our longing and letting it teach us

that we are more than the limits of our present.

#### THURSDAY: THE ALGEBRA OF ADVENT

In the best-selling book that was turned into a popular movie, *The Bridges of Madison County*, a photographer travels to the county, where he gets lost and stops at a farmhouse to ask for directions. As chance would have it, the wife of the house is home alone. She and the photographer sense a deep connection; a love affair is triggered. Both are left sacramentally scarred. It's implied that something truly sublime has happened. Is this possible? Can anyone paint a masterpiece or compose a symphony in a couple of hours? Can sex with someone you just met be sublime?

First, to be sublime requires sublimation. Fasting is the necessary prelude to genuine feasting. Greatness of soul is contingent on carrying tension nobly. That's the algebra of Advent.

#### FRIDAY: THE POWER OF A CANDLE

In South Africa, prior to the abolition of apartheid, people lit candles and placed them in their windows as a sign of hope. But what is hope? Many mistake wishing for hope. Wishing is fantasy; one can wish to win a million dollars but that wish isn't connected to reality. Hope is based upon a promise: God's promise that—human sin and power notwithstanding—justice,



peace, love, and harmony will, eventually, become reality. To light a candle, then, is to say that gentleness and graciousness are ultimately more powerful than torture and violence. A lit candle is a powerful statement of hope.

#### **SATURDAY: WAITING IN JOYFUL HOPE**

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a true visionary of hope, staunchly believed that ultimately all of history, cosmic and human, would come together in Christ into one community of life and love. Those who held a less hopeful view challenged his ideology: "Suppose we blow up the world in a nuclear war? What happens to your schema of things then?" His response: "It will be a great tragedy because it will set things back millions of years. But history will still culminate one day in a kingdom of peace and love—not because my theory says so, but because God promised it."

We, like Teilhard, should live in great patience for God to fulfill his promise.

### SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

#### **SUNDAY: ADVENT YEARNINGS**

All living things possess a pressure to grow. I recall a friend's effort to kill a bamboo plant in his driveway. He cut it down, chopped deep into the earth to destroy the roots, and poured poison on its remains. Finally, he dumped several feet of gravel on it and paved it over with cement. Years later, the cement heaved as the plant pushed upward. Life is similar. It pushes outward, reaches, yearns. We can see this in our greed for insatiability.

Scripture says longing and yearning are the Spirit of God groaning and praying through us (Romans 8:26). All life and energy yearn for charity, joy, peace, fidelity, and union. Advent is the season to touch these longings and to let them touch us.

#### **MONDAY: SOUL-BUILDING STRENGTH**

The sublime depends upon sublimation: Great satisfaction is the yield of great effort; great peace, the yield of great struggle; and great love, the yield of great chastity.

Novels that build on great tension are powerful. We've forgotten the importance of living the sublime fire of tension. Carlo Carretto, a superb spiritual writer, spent

time living as a hermit, praying in the Sahara desert. When someone asked what God said in all the silence, Carretto replied: "God is telling us: Learn to wait, wait, wait for God! Wait for love, be patient with everything. Everything that is worthwhile must be waited for!"

#### **TUESDAY: THE NOONDAY DEVIL**

Originally, the sin of sadness was considered a deadly sin. The Desert Fathers spoke of *acedia*, "the noonday devil." Unlike the devil who strikes at a time of darkness or crisis, the noonday devil hits in broad daylight, when there's seemingly no reason to be sad. While sadness itself isn't the sin, it can tempt us toward sin. We can luxuriate unhealthily in sadness so as to rationalize making any effort to build up anything.

After giving the noonday devil his due, the child of the kingdom picks up her duties, hopes, and prayers, continuing—in joy—to build up the kingdom.

#### **WEDNESDAY: THE SURRENDERED LIFE**

All of Jesus' teachings—everything on belief, morality, and piety—can be boiled down to a single precept, one word: surrender. But surrender to what? The Gospels ask us to surrender all things that keep us standing alone and apart. Sadly, this surrender isn't commonplace, even in religious life. We continue to claim more private space for ourselves. We need to ask: Is it healthy to want such an unshared life? It's a tragedy that, for many, the comfort of being alone outweighs the reward of living in community.

Socrates warned that the unexamined life is not worth living. The gospel warns that a life not surrendered isn't biblical.

#### **THURSDAY: QUEST FOR SINCERITY**

A friend new to fatherhood reminded me that although we all long to be sincere, sincerity is elusive. "Now that I have a child," he said, "I want to grow up; to know what I really believe and stand for." He struggled with false layers and pretenses. What does it mean to be sincere? Some attribute its origin to the Latin *sine* ("without") and *caries* ("decay"). Here it means to be "without corruption." Others suggest its root is *sine* ("without") and *cero* ("to coat with wax"). Here it means to have a certain nakedness of soul.

Both interpretations shed light on its meaning. To be sincere is to be uncorrupted in mind, heart, and soul. My friend correctly identified it with "growing up." Sincerity is about maturity—about truly facing one another, God, and ourselves.

#### **FRIDAY: PASSION AND PURITY**

It's been said that the Church doesn't understand passion while the world doesn't understand purity. While a rather simplistic generalization, it contains some truth. Often the Church's concern for purity blocks it from properly appropriating passion. Similarly, the world's unbridled romance with passion blinds it to the importance of purity.

Living and loving are messy businesses. To be excessively given over to purity is to be a prude. However, the world's lack of understanding toward the place of purity and chastity often results in emotional chaos and raging restlessness. Purity and passion make sense only when they are linked and take their deeper meaning from each other.

#### **SATURDAY: THE GREAT CELEBRATION**

Many feel that Christmas has become too secular and commercial. The season of waiting to celebrate—Advent—is now a marathon of Christmas parties and shopping. Where is Christ in all of this?

Most agree these excesses should be toned down if we are to put Christ back in Christmas. But some feel it's necessary to eliminate all secular representations. I agree with John Shea: "A Christmas spirit that walks around naked will never be noticed. It needs a sprig of holly for allure."

Ultimately the secular spirit of Christmas helps to highlight the essential truth that God enters into our physical world and makes everything here holy and good.

### THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

#### **SUNDAY: WEEPING WITH A WALLEYE**

In an experiment with a walleye pike, researchers placed the fish in an aquarium and fed it regularly. After a time they inserted a glass plate into the tank and placed its food on the other side. When the fish tried to eat, it bumped against the



glass and came away hungry. Eventually it stopped trying. Once the obstruction was removed the fish swam up to the food but at the last second turned away, unaware he could eat freely. Surrounded by food, the walleye died of malnutrition.

Many are in danger of dying from a similar malnutrition—lack of love. Those eager to be loved surround us, yet we don't reach out to one another. This story isn't meant to be explained but to be felt. The parable of the walleye helps us name our sorrow.

### MONDAY: BECOMING MILD

Saint John of the Cross defined solitude as "bringing the mild into harmony with the mild." He said we would remember the primordial touch of God when, through solitude, we empty our hearts of all that is not mild: namely, noise, anger, bitterness, and jealousy. Inside each of us there is a sanctuary not made by human hands. Inside, we have privileged access to God because that is where God has already touched us.

The memory of that touch is a brand—warm, dark, gentle. To enter that memory is to lean on the breast of Jesus. From that place, with our ear on the heart of Jesus, we have the truest perspective on our world.

### TUESDAY: A HUMBLER HEART

In *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri Nouwen suggests that to reach conversion and purity of heart, we must move from being a judge to being a repentant sinner. We never see ourselves as sitting in judgment of others but as honest, compassionate, and humble. Yet others, especially those closest to us, often see us in moral smugness. Strange how we clearly see the judgmental attitude in others and yet neglect to see it in ourselves. Conversion begins when we stop standing as judge in order to kneel as sinner.

### WEDNESDAY: LIFE'S INTERRUPTIONS

In a biography of C.S. Lewis, author A.N. Wilson describes how Lewis' agenda during his productive years was often interrupted by the demands of his adoptive mother.

Some felt that, minus these interruptions, Lewis' life could have been much more prolific. However, Lewis himself advocates that it was precisely these demands that kept him in touch with life. These interruptions

were credited with keeping Lewis grounded, giving him empathic insights into the human condition.

God uses his hand of interruption to guide and shepherd us. C.S. Lewis once said that we'd spend most of eternity thanking God for unanswered prayers. I suspect we'll also spend time thanking God for those interruptions that derailed our plans.

### THURSDAY: PERFECTION

In the Greek ideal of perfection, to be perfect is to be completely whole, true, and beautiful. The Hebrew mindset says to be perfect means to be in God's divine presence, despite our flaws. The Greek ideal shapes our Western concept. Holiness is understood as a question of measuring up to a certain benchmark.

This view has merit in that we are constantly called to something higher. But when perfection means measuring up, we tend to carry around a lot of discouragement, guilt, and lack of forgiveness. God asks that we bring our imperfection to him. He understands we will fall short at times. He simply calls us to share our lives with him and be open to his succor.

### FRIDAY: THE PRESENCE OF GOD

At a presentation titled "God's Presence in Today's World," Daniel Berrigan referred to the time he spent at the bedside of a boy who was totally incapacitated, physically and mentally. The boy lay mute and helpless, by all appearances cut off from communication. Berrigan related this young man's position in the world, silent and helpless, to the way God lies in our world. This image helps us understand how God's power doesn't overpower with muscle, attractiveness, brilliance, or grace, but is manifested in this world as more muted, shamed, and marginalized. It lies at a deeper level. In the end, it will gently have the final say.

### SATURDAY: REVEALING WEAKNESSES

An admirer of St. Thérèse of Lisieux confessed to her his fear that she would see him as "an object of horror" if he unveiled his moral failures. Thérèse's response is noteworthy: "You don't know me well at all if you are afraid that a detailed account of your faults would lessen the tenderness that I feel for your soul."

Many experience this recurrent fear in their relationship with God. Think of those who pull away from the Church because something is wrong in their life. Their sentiment is, "Given how I'm living, I would be a hypocrite if I went to church!" While that may sound noble and humble, if we fear coming into God's presence replete with all our weaknesses as well as strengths, it betrays a false understanding of God. Nothing can lessen God's tenderness toward us.

## FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

### SUNDAY: GOD OF SMALL THINGS

You could say that if you are looking for God, or a piece of God, you should be looking down. Looking for God these days requires the willingness to investigate the small, to look down. Christmas, too, invites us to descend. That is what God did in the Incarnation. He emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave. He became small, a helpless baby. Usually when we look for God we look toward the sky. We investigate the powerful. We try to ascend. But Christmas invites us to investigate our experience of powerlessness.

### MONDAY: CHRISTMAS PREPARATION

The symbolism of Jesus being born in a manger, a place where brute animals come to feed, shows us what Jesus later tells us: His life and body are food for the life of the world. We are challenged as church communities and individuals to not become self-absorbed. The Church exists for the sake of the world, not the other way around. When we feel like we are drowning in the demands of life, we can gain strength from meditating on the image of Jesus lying in a manger and imitate his sacrifice.

During Advent my mother used to set out a little manger and ask us kids to place a piece of straw in it every time we made a small sacrifice "to make a bed for the Baby Jesus." That's not bad piety; it's good theology!

### TUESDAY: THE HOUR OF OUR DEATH

Paulo Freire once suggested that we pray the Hail Mary by saying "and let me not miss the hour of my death" in place of "now and at the hour of our death." I'm



reminded of Dom Christian de Chergé, a Trappist monk killed in Algeria. He sent a letter to his family in premonition of his execution. It said:

"I would like you to associate this death with so many other equally violent ones, which are allowed to fall into the indifference of anonymity. My life has no more value than any other. Nor any less.

"If God wills it, I shall immerse my gaze in that of the Father and to contemplate with him his children of Islam as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, fruit of his passion, filled with the gift of the Spirit."

This letter is a true testament of faith and forgiveness. Dom Christian de Chergé did not miss the hour of his death.

### WEDNESDAY: THE BREATH OF GOD

The ancients believed God's breath was the soul in everything. It held everything together and gave it meaning. For them, the physical and spiritual worlds were not set against one other.

We should apply a similar understanding to the Holy Spirit and allow the Spirit to fully animate our lives.

Thus our lives should not embody pleasure absent of conscience, or achievement absent of fidelity. Our lives especially should not be about a good for us in the absence of justice for all. Conversely, we should question the presence of morality without passion. One Spirit is the author of all these things—equal attention must be paid to each.

### THURSDAY: GOD IS WITH US ALWAYS

God hasn't promised us a life free of struggle. However, in the Incarnation God did promise he will always be with us. Thus our Savior's name is Emmanuel, meaning "God with us."

Avery Cardinal Dulles aptly put it this way: "Jesus enables us to believe that human life, despite its contradictions, is where God is preeminently found. The Incarnation gives us strength to face the harsh realities of a fragmented world, to feel and transmit the touch of God's reconciling love. It doesn't provide us with a ladder by which to escape from the ambiguities of this life." To have faith in God is to have faith that God is with us.

### FRIDAY: HEAVENLY FANTASIES

Many are shocked by sexual imagery when applied to heaven. However, this imagery dominates the way Christian mystics, like Sts. John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila, describe heaven. The vision is one of wholeness, consummation, and limitless love. We are seldom taught that we can intuit the meaning of salvation through our fantasies and dreams.

Saint Thomas Aquinas distinguished between union through possession and union through desire. In our fantasies—most often those that are so sensual, narcissistic, and private that we are ashamed of them—we are given a privileged opportunity to understand what salvation looks and feels like.

### DECEMBER 24, CHRISTMAS EVE: THE MANGERS IN OUR WORLD TODAY

In preparation for Christmas, let's examine how God enters into a world void of room for him. Thomas Merton once said, "Into this world, in which there is absolutely no room for him, Christ has come uninvited. But because he must be in it, his place is with others for whom there is no room."

That's a message our culture needs to hear. Often the *outsider* more readily makes room for God in his life. Similar to the first Christmas, the Christ Child today must be

born outside our cities. Hence, to find him we must let ourselves be led by the poor, the children, or by some other guiding star to the manglers of today's world.

### DECEMBER 25, CHRISTMAS DAY: BORN INTO THE ORDINARY

After Christ's birth, we needn't look to the extraordinary to find God. When Jesus was on earth, virtually no one believed he was the Messiah precisely because he was so ordinary. They expected a king, someone who would turn the world upside down.

Things haven't changed much. We, like his contemporaries, constantly look beyond the ordinary—beyond the traveling stranger—to find a miraculous Christ. We fly to Fatima or Lourdes to see a spot where the Blessed Virgin might have cried, but we fail to see the significance of tears shed at our own tables. We pray for visions but seldom watch a sunset. We neglect to look for Christ in the place where the Incarnation took place: our flesh. Love is a thing that happens in the ordinary. Through the Incarnation, God crawls into the ordinary life and invites us to meet him there.

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