

Unless the Lord Comes to Us: Advent Reflections

By Virginia Nieuwsma

“Unless the Lord comes to us, we are completely helpless.”
--St. Maximos, Greek ascetic, the 4th Century

It is November 16 as I write this. My mailbox is now brimming every day with glossy catalogs proclaiming the virtues of the triumphant, capitalistic existence of comfort and indulgence that we have all imbibed to one degree or another.

Yet on this second day of the Orthodox Advent season, I am acutely aware of my spiritual poverty. I have charged through my days heedless, as the mellowed northern California fall sun has illumined a fiery display of gold and magenta, flaming orange and russet red. Glory to God! the colors have shouted, but most of the time I have been too busy to stop and notice. My cell phone rings, my car needs gas, my errand list is a mile long, my work beckons, and my children need rides or tutoring or food. Squeezing in morning prayers here and there and attending church on Sunday, I nod to God before getting back to the “real” business at hand.

Sometimes I am running from Him, burying myself with my busyness because I don’t want to be alone with Him. I’m avoiding the silence of prayer and time spent before our icons, because it is there that I confront myself stripped away of any false pretense of piety. This confrontation with my sin and hard heartedness is painful; indeed, trying to practice the disciplines of the Church in the midst of Christmas season is definitely an uphill climb! I don’t want to think about fasting, or almsgiving, or being more consistent in prayer. When I first turned over my calendar this year and saw the November 15 date, my first thought was that I simply didn’t have the strength or the desire to enter into the fast this year.

Yet mercifully, the longing for God’s presence regularly surfaces despite the noise and distractions. Oftentimes I am acutely aware of the void within, as was the Psalmist when he plaintively penned, “As a deer pants for the water brooks, So pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God,” (Ps. 42).

It always seems that, just when I need it, the holy season of Advent arrives. Rather than being burdensome, the spiritual habits and proscriptions given to us in the Church are a lifeline. Certainly, there have been times when I have struggled to understand why we approach Christmas with such sobriety. This is a season for parties! For gifts! For happy celebrations! For family! What’s this fasting in the midst, this remembrance of His death, these extra services that mirror the somber services of Holy Week?

Father Thomas Hopko explains in his book, [*The Winter Pascha*](#):

“The Lord’s birth and baptism are directly connected to His dying and rising. He was born in order to die...the harmony between the events is overwhelming...Jesus lay as an infant in the cavern in the reign of Caesar Augustus that He might lay in the tomb under Pontius Pilate. He was hounded by Herod that He might be caught by Caiaphas...He was worshipped by wise men that the whole of creation might adore Him in His triumph over death.”

Christ comes to us, then, and we do rejoice, for we are indeed helpless and have no life apart from Him. But the shadow of a cross falls over the tender and peaceful scene at the stable. His suffering life, His sacrifice, the weight of the world's sins; all are implicit in, and present at, His birth. So our Advent celebrations should be tempered by this reality; in a sense, the bright Lenten sadness is there at the manger, too.

Some years, I have had no trouble entering into sober Advent reflection during the 40 days of preparation prior to the Nativity Feast. The year my father died, for instance, the quiet, reflective spirit of Orthodox Advent was a comfort. Anyone who has suffered a deep loss or sorrow through illness or death knows about the "bright sadness" that accompanies Christmas, and the shadow of the cross is indeed long for those grieving hearts.

Yet even in my most sanguine years, I must prepare my heart if I hope to receive "the King of All," and this inner struggle is my cross which is present at the manger. Somehow I must find ways to screen out the sentimental, saccharine messages daily delivered via TV, radio, Internet, social gatherings, the printed page, and the billboard. Just as the waning winter light bids me flee the cold and light a fire in the sanctuary of my home, Advent is a time for me to enter into the sanctuary of my soul, stoking the fires of my heart through repentance, cleaning out the cobwebs in preparation for the birth of God in the center of my being.

How can we prepare for Christ's arrival?

***By increasing our prayer.** Says Fr. Anthony Coniaris, "The two great movements of the soul have always been withdrawal and return...withdrawal into God's presence through prayer for strength...without prayer, the quality of our service deteriorates. Without prayer we forget the world; with prayer we remember." Advent is a time to remember that in God, we move and breathe and have our being, and we must be *with* Him and consciously *in* Him before we can have authentic love and relationship with others.

***By giving alms.** There is something almost poetic about giving money and perhaps even more important in these busy times, our time, to others who are in need at Christmas time. We can battle our self indulgence with self sacrifice, by giving freely, with joy and gratitude to God for His good gifts to us. St. John Chrysostom writes, "It is not enough to help the poor. We must help them with generosity and without grumbling. And it is not enough to help them without grumbling. We must help them gladly and happily. When the poor are helped there ought to be these two conditions: generosity and joy."

***By going to Church more often.** The Advent season provides extra opportunities to be in the atmosphere of worship. Isn't it true that when we walk into the doors of our parishes, and those doors swing shut behind us, the flickering candles and the sights and smells of icons and incense before us, aid us in our seasonal preparations? Sometimes it is so hard to get there and so many things crowd our calendars but the rewards are always great. As Fr. Alexander Schmemmann writes, "There is no need to preach constantly on 'sin,' to judge and condemn. It is when a man is challenged with the real contents of the Gospel, with its Divine depth and wisdom, beauty and all embracing meaning, that he becomes 'capable of repentance,' for true repentance is precisely the discovery by the man of the abyss that separates him from God and from His real offer to man. It is when the man sees the bridal chamber adorned that he realizes that he has no garment for entering it."

***By remembering some of the unique and remarkable saints of the Advent season,** reading about their lives and celebrating their days of remembrance. Of course, we remember St. Nicholas (December 6) as he is commonly honored at this time of year, but what about some of the others? St. Herman of Alaska (December 13) exemplified the spirit of this time of year to perfection, and he belongs to us here in

America, so let's not let the day go by without reading about him and recalling his sacrificial life with the people of Alaska. St. Stephen the protomartyr is remembered on December 26, immediately following the Nativity service, and he too can be venerated for his godly example. On New Year's Day, we can speak of the brilliant St. Basil, who spoke with erudition and intelligence to the issues of his day in a manner which transformed the Church.

***By going to confession.** If there is any act out of step with the vain and glib holiday atmosphere presented to us by the spirit of this age, it is act of the repentant Christian confessing his or her sins. Said Dorothy Day, "Going to confession is hard, hard when you have sins to confess, hard when you haven't, and you wrack your brain for even the beginnings of sins against charity, chastity, sins of distraction, sloth or gluttony. You do not want to make too much of your constant imperfections and venial sins, but you want to drag them out to the light of day as the first step in getting rid of them....I have sinned. These are my sins. That is all you are supposed to tell; not the sins of others, or your own virtues, but only your ugly, gray, drab, monotonous sins." Blessed are those who mourn, for it is precisely in this mourning that we receive comfort. These are the tidings of comfort and joy that the Christmas carol songwriter celebrates—redemption from guilt and the weight of sin!

***By incorporating the Church's traditions** in ways that make sense for us here and now. Though we are not perfect fasters by any means, our family eats more simply in the season of Advent. We decorate our tree just before Christmas and then leave it up through Theophany. We celebrate St. Nicholas' Feast Day by putting out shoes on the night of December 5th so that "St. Nicholas" can fill them with gold coins while the children sleep. We read about his life, marveling at his overflowing love and goodness. We listening to Orthodox Christmas music via the Internet (try Ancient Faith Radio) or CD's, and we keep an Advent wreath and calendar for six Sundays instead of four. We have invented our own traditional Christmas Eve dinner that is a variation of old country traditions. In other words, we have adapted, albeit imperfectly, our own cultural traditions to incorporate the spirit of Orthodox worship and emphasis at this time of year.

Author Matthew Gallatin has said that we in America have traditionally celebrated the Christmas season in backwards fashion. "Just as the guest of honor walks through the door, it's all over," he notes. This year, may we embrace the Orthodox vision of holy preparation, so that when December 25th dawns, we will be ready to receive Christ in the feast, the "Winter Pascha" of Nativity!

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