



NOVEMBRE 2021

Congregazione delle Monache della Passione di Gesù Cristo

## *Advent, a time of waiting*



Humankind's first advent begins at the dawn of history, after the original sin. The first ancestors, realizing that they had lost God's friendship, await a liberator promised by the Lord himself. In addressing the seducer of the first people, God states: *...Because you have done this, cursed are you among all the animals, tame or wild; On your belly you shall crawl, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; They will strike at your head, while you strike at their heel.* (Gen 3, 14. 15)

The waiting became more desperate when the human family, becoming a people, are made slaves in Egypt, and later, prisoners in Babylon. Their waiting becomes the anticipation of a Messiah, God's anointed One, who will rescue the lives of his servants. Over and over, the prophets announce his coming. *I see him, though not now; I observe him, though not near: A star shall advance from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise from Israel...* (Nm 24,17). *For your husband is your Maker; the LORD of hosts is his name, Your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, called God of all the earth* (Is 54,5).

In the fullness of time, the awaited Messiah comes from Bethlehem, as had been prophesied. It is Jesus, the Son of the Father who, by the working of the Holy Spirit, is born of the most holy Mary. He, watched over by Joseph, and instructed by Joseph in the trade of the carpenter, will overcome sin and restore peace. However, some, especially among the leaders, will not accept him, considering him a false messiah. They will condemn him and crucify him. All of this had already been foretold by Jesus, as well as his resurrection on the third day, and his glorious return at the end of time.

*When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven"* (Acts 1,9-11).

This had already been prophesied by the prophets. For example: *Let the nations rouse themselves and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; For there I will sit in judgment upon all the neighboring nations....Then you will know that I the LORD am your God, dwelling on Zion, my holy mountain; Jerusalem will be holy....* (Joel 4, 12; 17) This return of Jesus is compared to a wedding celebration.

*Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones, when taking their lamps, brought no oil with*

*them, but the wise brought flasks of oil with their lamps....At midnight, there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!...'The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ...'Go instead to the merchants and buy some for yourselves.'...the bridegroom came and those who were ready went into the wedding feast with him. Then the door was locked. Afterwards the other virgins came and said, 'Lord, Lord, open the door for us!' But he said in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, I do not know you.' Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour (Mt 25,1-4.6.8-13).*

It is, therefore, an expectation of a final coming in which the Lord will judge all nations and every individual person. The attitude which best corresponds with this coming is, therefore, a vigilance, lest one be found unprepared for this arrival. It is a coming which will decide our eternity. It will be the end of our pleas together with our definitive sentence. However, in order for the waiting not to become indifference, Jesus continually breaks into history, and into the history of each person. Our existence, therefore, should move between the poles of Christ's daily coming, and that of the final coming of Christ-judge.

That is why Advent is not yet finished, and why the Church invites us to re-enter it each year. Advent re-awakens our daily looking out for the Lord, it reminds us of the time that the Son of God came down to earth. *"And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age"* (Mt 28,20), Jesus promised us before ascending to the Father.

This intermediate Advent, as the Fathers of the Church referred to it, is as mysterious and hidden as it seems because in it Jesus does not appear fully alive, as he appeared to the disciples, nor in all His Glory as will be in the final judgment.

One has to look with the heart in order to know how to recognize him, to see him in our brothers and sisters; he is hidden within their appearances. Here, in this text from Matthew, we see how Christ will gather his faithful ones, those who have loved and aided him in this mortal life.

*... 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me. ... 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for*

*one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me''* (Mt 25, 34-36.40).

This passage is sufficiently clear to help us to re-live in this coming Advent our remembrance of the temporal birth of Christ; to prepare ourselves for his glorious coming; and to make every moment of our present existence an occasion for going out to meet Him.

How do Passionist Nuns live the Advent Season? Most of all, in the prayerful remembrance of the coming of the Word into the world, as our Founder suggests: *The sacred season of Advent is nearing, in which Holy Mother Church celebrates the memory of the Divine Espousal, which the Eternal Word made with our human nature in his Holy Incarnation. Contemplate, my daughter, this deepest mystery of infinite love and allow your soul complete liberty to be immersed in that infinite sea of every good. Ask and pray that soon the great Espousal of Love between your soul and Jesus may be accomplished...* (Paul of the Cross, letter to Agnes Grazi, November 29, 1736)



The waiting time is filled with solid virtues as, once again, Saint Paul tells us: *And since the gentle Jesus is born at our commemoration of this sweet solemnity, let us become children with him, hiding ourselves more and more in nothingness, humble, simple as babes, with exact obedience, openness, clarity of conscience, love for holy poverty, a great love of suffering, and, above everything, a childlike simplicity in the exact observance of the holy Rules and Constitutions and without daring to interpret them with a gloss or in any other way since "narrow is the way that leads to life."* Allowing ourselves to be governed and controlled by our superiors, whom the good God has placed to govern and direct this poor Congregation... (Paul of the Cross, letter to Fulgentius Pastorelli of Jesus, December 15, 1746).

Each Sister should prepare for that final moment when the Lord shall come to her as she believes best, but with special attention to what St. Paul of the Cross writes in the primitive Rule (#218): *Then at the end of every month, all the Sisters shall make a retreat to reflect on and prepare for a truly good and holy death. They shall make a particular examination of their consciences....*

What of the present waiting? Since the Lord has assured us that he will be with us always, we should cultivate a loving attention to Him who is present to us everywhere. We should welcome him, love him, and help him in our brothers and sisters as we meet them, knowing that it is precisely in them that we meet Him. If we keep this attitude of living always in His presence, we shall not fear death and judgment; they will be for us Jesus' definitive coming. We will even have that serenity which our Founder describes for us with inspired and ardent words: *"O True God, what will our hearts be like when we swim in that infinite sea of sweetness! What will it be like when up there in heaven we are all transformed by love in God, and we will be happy with that infinite goodness with which our God is happy? What will it be like, my daughter, when we will sing in eternity the divine mercies, the triumphs of the Immaculate Lamb and of Mary, our Most Holy Mother! What will it be when we sing without ceasing that eternal Trisagion, "Holy, Holy, Holy," and when with all the saints we sing Alleluia! This will always come from our hearts, our spirits. When we are united to God more than iron is united to fire, for without ceasing to be iron, it seems to be all fire; so we shall be so transformed into God that the soul will be completely divinized. Oh, when will that day come! When, when will death come to break the wall of this prison! Ah, that will be the day of our espousals, of our marriage, in which our soul in the highest fashion will espouse our dear Jesus and will be seated forever at the heavenly banquet table.* (St. Paul of the Cross, letter to Agnes Grazi, August 29, 1737)

Similarly, the conclusion of the Book of Revelation presents us with a luminous vision of our union with Christ when, finally, our waiting will come to an end, and Advent shall become the beatific vision of God.

*I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.... "Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them [as their God]. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away." The one who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." Then he said, "They are accomplished. I [am] the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give a gift from the spring of life-giving water. The victor will inherit these gifts, and I shall be his God, and he will be my son" (Rev. 21, 2-7). "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb. The city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light.... (Rev. 21,22-24)*



*The one who gives this testimony says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev. 22,20)*

Sr. M. Cecilia of the Holy Spirit – Passionist (Maria Pia Mongiardino)  
Genova Quarto Monastery (Genoa, Italy)

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Quotations from the Letters of St. Paul of the Cross are taken from: The Letters of Saint Paul of the Cross; trans. Roger Mercurio, Frederick Sucher; eds. Laurence Finn, Donald Webber; Hyde Park NY, New City Press, 2000.