

# LITURGICAL FEASTS AND SEASONS

## Part I

Conferences Given in the Choir Novitiate  
Abbey of Gethsemani

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## FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

The liturgy is the expression of the Church's love for God. Hence it is a school of love. It forms our hearts, minds, wills, sensibilities and taste. But this formation is not merely psychological. We are formed by the objective reality of God's love for us, acting upon us in and through the liturgy. This formation gives us a "mind" and "heart" greater than our own. It takes us above and beyond ourselves. We rise to the level of the liturgy, and this makes us greater than we were before. The liturgy elevates us; it broadens our horizons, makes us capable of greater things. Jesus Himself forms our souls as we pray and sing with the liturgy.

The action of the liturgy on our hearts is meant to be to a great extent felt and sensible, not in the sense that the liturgy should be expected to produce sentimental effects—emotion for its own sake—but it certainly works upon and forms our sensibilities. This is quite evident in the various liturgical seasons—the joy of Easter, for instance, or the compunction and attentive devotion of Lent. Here in Advent, the Church's love for the Redeemer expresses itself mostly in terms of *desire*. The liturgy of Advent forms our minds, hearts and wills with loving, humble desire, a desire which has in past ages burned in the hearts of all the saints. It is a desire which is found in the Heart of God Himself—His love as our Father and Redeemer.

The hymn *Conditor alme siderum*<sup>1</sup> sets the tone for Advent (both words and melody). Its character is *simple, sober and sincere*. It is objective—focused upon the power, compassion and love of the Redeemer. It sees Him as Creator and as Judge—as King of all ages—as the Holy One—but always as the One Who has pity on our infirmities and comes from afar to save us from complete destruction—the creatures of His own hands. The *humility, reverence {and} confidence* in the hymn are most striking. Where, in what individual composition, could we find something that would be capable of raising the hearts of all men universally to so high a level with such simplicity?

*Darkness and light* {is} a prominent theme in the Advent and Christmas liturgy. {In} the Incarnation, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness comprehends it not.<sup>2</sup> In the vesper hymn, Jesus is "*Aeterna lux*

1. "Dear Creator of the stars" (vespers hymn: Saturday before the First Sunday of Advent, etc.) (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Pars Hiemalis*, 175).

2. John 1:5.

*credentium.*”<sup>3</sup> In the hymn of vigils, the Word comes to save the world: “*Cursu declivi temporis*”<sup>4</sup> (note the suggestion of the world’s nightfall); we pray: “*Illumina nunc pectora, Tuoque amore concrema.*”<sup>5</sup> Love burns like a vigil light in the darkness. In the epistle, The night is past, day has arrived—Let us put away the works of darkness,<sup>6</sup> etc.

{In} *the Mass*, {we pray in the} *introit: Ad te levavi*<sup>7</sup>—lifting up our soul to God. What does this mean?—confidence, expectation, hope, in the face of trial and darkness, and the desire to learn His ways—*Vias tuas Domine demonstra mihi.*<sup>8</sup> With what humility we should learn to utter these words. How reverently and with what a spirit of supplication we should beg to learn His will, and appreciate His ways. This implies gratitude for what He has shown us of His will so far, sorrow for having appreciated His graces less, resolve to make better use of grace in the future. The introit implies a new resolve, a plan to live an entirely new life, with the new Church year. We are able with confidence to put away our tepidity and negligence and renew our vigilant love, because once again we contemplate the mercy and the promises of our long-suffering Redeemer.

*Three Dimensions of Prophecy:* in Advent we share in a special way in the longing and the hope of the patriarchs and prophets. Just as there are three Advents,<sup>9</sup> so there are three dimensions of prophecy:

1. *The First Advent*—Jesus came fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament on one level—the historical level. The promised Redeemer comes in time.

2. *The Second Advent* continues to fulfill the prophecies on another level, moral and spiritual. The Redeemer comes to us as individuals. The same promises made regarding His historical coming apply to His

3. “Eternal light of believers” (l. 2) (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis, 175*).

4. “in the course of declining time” (“*Verbum Supernum Prodiens*,” l. 4) (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis, 176*).

5. “Now illuminate our hearts; set them on fire with your love” (l. 5) (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis, 176*).

6. Rom 13:12 (epistle: First Sunday of Advent) (*Missale Romanum, 2; Missale Cisterciense, 2*).

7. “To You [O Lord] I have lifted [up my soul]” (Ps 24[25]:1) (*Missale Romanum, 1; Missale Cisterciense, 1*).

8. “Show me your ways, Lord” (Ps 24[25]:4) (*Missale Romanum, 1; Missale Cisterciense, 1*).

9. Merton draws here particularly on St. Bernard’s Advent sermons: see Merton, *Seasons of Celebration*, 75–83, and the Introduction above, page lvi.

spiritual coming to our souls in grace. These are the most important from the point of view of *personal devotion*. What are some of them? (Use them as subjects of meditation and as ejaculatory prayers—to get {the} Advent spirit). “*Ecce ego venio et habitabo in medio tui*”<sup>10</sup> (*Benedictus*—first Tuesday); “*Lux mundi Dominus cum potentia venit*”<sup>11</sup> (*Magnificat*—first Tuesday); “*Veni Domine visitare nos in pace, ut laetemur coram te corde perfecto*”<sup>12</sup> (*Magnificat*—first Saturday); “*Salvabo te et liberabo te, noli timere*”<sup>13</sup> (Saturday—*Benedictus*); “*Noli timere, ecce Deus tuus veniet*”<sup>14</sup> (first responsory—second Sunday); “*Doluit Dominus super te et auferet a te omnem tribulationem*”<sup>15</sup> (fourth responsory—first Sunday).

3. *The Third Advent*—with the grace of the second Advent, we join the prophets, our eyes are illuminated with their faith and their hope, and all together we look forward to the Third Advent, the final coming. This is most important from the point of view of the whole Church—{the} ardent desire for God’s Kingdom finally to be established. He must reign! Our desire really helps to bring that day closer! *Alieni non transibunt per Jerusalem amplius*<sup>16</sup> (tenth responsory—first Sunday). The enemies of God will no longer defile His Church, but Christ shall reign in peace and His elect will praise Him in perfect joy.

ADVENT LITURGY—Some Practical Notes (Saturday before the First Sunday of Advent):

1) *Advent* {is} the season of *desire*—for the presence of God, for salvation; of *vocation*—our desire for Him and His desire for us; of

10. “Behold, I shall come and dwell in your midst” (Zech 2:14) (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis*, 190).

11. “The Lord, the Light of the world, comes with power” (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis*, 190).

12. “Come Lord, visit us in peace, that we may rejoice before you with a perfect heart” (actually lauds antiphon: first Saturday of Advent) (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis*, 192).

13. “I will save you and set you free; do not fear” (actually part of the first responsory for the first nocturn: second Sunday of Advent) (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis*, 193).

14. “Do not fear; behold your God will come” (actually *Magnificat* antiphon: first Saturday of Advent) (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis*, 192).

15. “The Lord grieves for you, and will take away from you all your tribulation” (actually fourth responsory for the first nocturn: second Saturday of Advent) (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis*, 194).

16. “Foreigners will not pass through Jerusalem any longer” (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis*, 183).

*expectation and vigilance*—waiting for what? Christmas? for *Jesus*—He comes as a thief in the night.<sup>17</sup> The fruit of His coming in Advent will be known at Christmas; {of} “*penance*,” in the sense of removing obstacles to grace. Put aside everything that can keep us from responding, all that impedes desire. Let Him act in our souls.

2) *Vespers* (note the picture in the breviary<sup>18</sup>): {the} *capitulum* {is} Awake from sleep<sup>19</sup>—our salvation is nearer. Distinguish the liturgy from the mere seasonal cycle: in {the} dead of winter, near {the} solstice, we think of the coming of life and light. {It is even} deeper than that—He is present. {In the} *responsorium*—“*Missus est*”<sup>20</sup>—God comes unexpectedly to Mary (“*Expavescit Virgo de lumine*”<sup>21</sup>)—God comes to *reign*—(“. . . of His kingdom there shall be no end”<sup>22</sup>—words which always thrilled St. Teresa of Avila<sup>23</sup>)—*Love reigns*. {In} *the hymn* {we pray}, Christ, the Creator of the stars and the eternal light of the believers, the Redeemer of all, hear our prayers. You have had pity on the sick world and hast brought us a remedy to save us from death. As the evening of the world descended, You came forth as a bridegroom from the pure womb of Mary. All beings, in heaven and on earth, shall kneel in subjection to Your great power. We pray You, holy One, Thou Who wilt come as Judge of the world, preserve

17. 1 Thes 5:2.

18. The full-page drawing opposite the beginning of the text for the Saturday before the First Sunday of Advent (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis*, 174) features an enthroned Christ flanked by a crowned Virgin Mary and John the Baptist, with smaller inset drawings above and below; the quarter-page drawing immediately above the text is of Isaiah being cleansed on his lips with a coal by one of the seraphim, with the text “*Et volavit ad me unus de seraphim. Is. 6.6*” below it (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis*, 175).

19. “*de somno surgere*” (Rom. 13:11) (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis*, 175).

20. “[The Angel Gabriel] was sent” (Luke 1:26) (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis*, 175).

21. “the Virgin was terrified by the light” (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis*, 175).

22. Luke 1:33.

23. This may refer to the famous passage in the first chapter of the *Life* in which the child Teresa and her brother decide to go off to be martyred by the Moors “to attain as quickly as possible to the fruition of the great blessings which, as I read, were laid up in Heaven. . . . It used to cause us great astonishment when we were told that both pain and glory would last for ever. We would spend long periods talking about this and we liked to repeat again and again, ‘For ever—ever—ever!’ Through our frequent repetition of these words, it pleased the Lord that in my earliest years I should receive a lasting impression of the way of truth” (Peers, ed. and trans., *Saint Teresa*, 1.11).

us in time from the arrows of the treacherous enemy.<sup>24</sup> {The} *Magnificat antiphon* {is}: “*Ecce nomen Domini venit de longinquo*.”<sup>25</sup> This is taken up again in more solemnity in the long first responsory, “*Aspiciens a longe*”: I see the power of God coming from afar and mist covers the whole earth. Go out to Him and say: tell us if thou be He who is to reign over the people of Israel?<sup>26</sup>

3) *The Vigils: the invitatory* {is}: “*Ecce venit Rex*”<sup>27</sup>—Let us run forth to meet Him. These things mean less in our day when the arrival of a king is nothing. Modern society has lost the power to furnish symbols of the City of God. *Lessons of {the} first nocturn*—Read Isaias 1:<sup>28</sup> Israel has not

24. “*Conditor alme siderum, / Aeterna lux credentium, / Christe Redemptor omnium, / Exaudi preces supplicum. // Qui condolens interitu / Mortis perire saeculum, / Salvasti mundum languidum, / Donans reis remedium, // Vergente mundi vespere, / Uti sponsus de thalamo / Egressus honestissima / Virginis Matris clausula. // Cuius forti potentiae / Genu curvantur omnia, / Coelestia, terrestria, / Nutu fatentur subdita. // Te, deprecamur agie, / Venture Iudex saeculi, / Conserva nos in tempore / Hostis a telo perfidi*” (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis, 175–76*).

25. “Behold the Name of the Lord comes from afar” (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis, 176*).

26. “*Aspiciens a longe, ecce video Dei potentiam venientem, et nebulam totam terram tegentem. Ite obviam ei, et dicite: Nuntia nobis, si tu es ipse Qui regnatus es in populo Israel*” (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis, 177*).

27. “Behold the King is coming” (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis, 176*).

28. “The vision of Isaias the son of Amos, which he saw concerning Juda and Jerusalem in the days of Ozias, Joathan, Achaz, and Ezechias, kings of Juda. Hear, O ye heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord hath spoken. I have brought up children, and exalted them: but they have despised me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel hath not known me, and my people hath not understood. Woe to the sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a wicked seed, ungracious children: they have forsaken the Lord, they have blasphemed the Holy One of Israel, they are gone away backwards. For what shall I strike you any more, you that increase transgression? the whole head is sick, and the whole heart is sad. From the sole of the foot unto the top of the head, there is no soundness therein: wounds and bruises and swelling sores: they are not bound up, nor dressed, nor fomented with oil. Your land is desolate, your cities are burnt with fire: your country strangers devour before your face, and it shall be desolate as when wasted by enemies. And the daughter of Sion shall be left as a covert in a vineyard, and as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, and as a city that is laid waste. Except the Lord of hosts had left us seed, we had been as Sodom, and we should have been like to Gomorrha. Hear the word of the Lord, ye rulers of Sodom, give ear to the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrha. To what purpose do you offer me the multitude of your victims, saith the Lord? I am full, I desire not holocausts of rams, and fat of fatlings, and blood of calves, and lambs, and buck goats” (Isa 1:1–11) (*Breviarium Cisterciense, Hiemalis, 177–78*; first lesson: vv. 1–3; second lesson: vv. 4–6; third lesson: vv. 7–9; fourth lesson: vv. 10–11).



known. Woe to the sinful people. Where shall I strike you? The daughter of Sion shall be left deserted. The princes of Sion are the princes of Sodom. Sacrifices are of no use. Unless the Lord has left us a seed (Christ, the promised Messiah), we had been as cities to be destroyed utterly. Read on to verse 18 of *Isaias* 1:<sup>29</sup> “if your sins be as scarlet they shall be made as white as snow.” {Here we find} compunction, love, desire, faith in Christ Who is present, Whose presence is judgement.

ADVENT—SECOND AND THIRD SUNDAYS—SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST:

1. The liturgical texts are full of joy and hope:

a) *Second Sunday*: {the} *introit* {is} “*Ecce Dominus veniet ad salvandas gentes . . . auditam faciet gloriam vocis suae.*”<sup>30</sup> {The point is to} awaken attention, {to} *realize*. {Note} the glory of His voice, unlike any other voice; His words are not our words, His thoughts not our thoughts. {He is} the Almighty—His voice arouses at once fear and confidence; {He is} the Holy One: {the} *glory* of His voice suggests that glory is produced in us by hearing Him, {bringing a} likeness to Him, {a} splendor; He speaks in the liturgy. {The} “*Alleluia*” {is}: “I rejoiced in the things that were said to me, we shall go into the house of the Lord.”<sup>31</sup> {In the} *offertory* {we pray}: “*Deus tu conversus vivificabis nos et plebs tua laetabitur in te.*”<sup>32</sup> {In the} *communio* {we say}: “Arise O Jerusalem, and stand on high and behold the joy that cometh to thee from God.”<sup>33</sup> {The} joy that cometh from God {is the}

29. “When you came to appear before me, who required these things at your hands, that you should walk in my courts? Offer sacrifice no more in vain: incense is an abomination to me. The new moons, and the sabbaths, and other festivals I will not abide, your assemblies are wicked. My soul hateth your new moons, and your solemnities: they are become troublesome to me, I am weary of bearing them. And when you stretch forth your hands, I will turn away my eyes from you: and when you multiply prayer, I will not hear: for your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, be clean, take away the evil of your devices from my eyes: cease to do perversely, Learn to do well: seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge for the fatherless, defend the widow. And then come, and accuse me, saith the Lord: if your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow: and if they be red as crimson, they shall be white as wool”

30. “Behold, the Lord will come to save the nations, . . . He will make the glory of his voice heard” (Isa 30:30) (*Missale Romanum*, 4; *Missale Cisterciense*, 4).

31. “*Laetatus sum in his, quae dicta sunt mihi: in domum Domini ibimus*” (*Missale Romanum*, 4; *Missale Cisterciense*, 4).

32. “Having turned, God, You will give us life, and Your people will rejoice in You” (Ps 84[85]:7) (*Missale Romanum*, 5; *Missale Cisterciense*, 5).

33. “*Jerusalem surge, et sta in excelso, et vide jucundatem, quae veniet tibi a Deo*