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Advent marks the beginning of the liturgical year. While it expresses the deep longing of all humanity for God, it celebrates the three-fold coming of the Lord: remembering the events that surrounded the Lord's coming long ago, celebrating his coming among us today, and looking forward to his final coming in glory.

Advent is a season of devout and joyful expectation. Its four Sundays (with its actual length determined by the weekday of Christmas) highlight our desire and longing for peace, justice and unity.

The first part of Advent looks forward to the *parousia*, the Lord's glorious return at the end of time and reflects on his presence among us today.

The second part - from December 17th to 24th - is a direct preparation for Christmas the yearly commemoration of Jesus' coming among us in human flesh.

Although the length of Advent once extended back to November 11th and was generally celebrated as a season of penance (St. Martin's Lent), its character today is expressed in terms of anticipation, longing and incompleteness. Enlivened and united in the Spirit, we journey through Advent toward the consummation of human history and prepare for the Christmas feast. Advent is a period of quiet and moderation; a time inspired by anticipation rather than penance; a season that acknowledges our incompleteness.

*Lord, make us turn to you;
let us see your face
and we shall be saved.*

ASPECTS OF THE SEASON

Violet vestments. Rather than penance, the use of violet in Advent reflects longing and anticipation. Some parishes use a blue-toned purple (the royal purple) to express the season. Blue vestments are not used in Canada. Rose vestments may be used on the third (

Gaudete

) Sunday to signal the mid-point of the season.

The ***Glory to God*** is not sung and the organ and other musical instruments are used in moderation, not as a sign of penance, but to allow us to anticipate the full joy of the 25th. These will be taken up again at Christmas. Flowers too may be used, but in moderation so as to leave a sense of abundance for the Nativity.

Alleluia continues to be sung in the Gospel Acclamation and in other songs. This is the clearest indication that Advent is a season of expectation rather than of penance.

Advent Wreath. Although originally used in home prayer, the wreath has found a place in the Advent decoration of the church building. Its evergreen circle and four candles reflect the passage of the Advent season. It is often blessed at the beginning of Mass on the First Sunday.

Reconciliation. Although not a season of penance, reconciliation (through penance services and personal celebration of the sacrament) finds a special place in the season. The sacrament is celebrated as we prepare a welcome for the Lord and seek to approach his coming with hearts free of sin and filled with praise.

Waiting. Advent is a time of longing and waiting for the Lord to come. Premature decoration of the church building and early use of Christmas songs at liturgy compromise the spirit of expectation. Do "Christmas" parties limit our appreciation of the coming season?

ADVENT FEASTS

The first part of Advent allows for the celebration of feasts of the saints; from December 17th until Christmas, the liturgy and readings of the day have priority.

Mary plays a prominent role in Advent; it is the season in which she finds a special place as the one who gives herself to the service of the Word.

December 8th: celebrates Mary's own sinless conception (which is not to be identified with the virgin birth of Jesus); this is fulfilled in the commemoration of her birth on September 8th. Mary is the perfect Advent model of what the Church is called to be.

December 12th: Our Lady of Guadalupe (commemorating the apparitions to Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin in Mexico in 1531) has particular significance in North America in which she is celebrated as patroness. In Canada, it is a National Day of Prayer for Aboriginal People.

Many countries had a tradition called the *Rorate* Masses: special celebrations in honour of Mary during Advent. Older calendars included a number of reflective feasts (for example, her Betrothal to Joseph and her Waiting (Expectation) for the Birth). Although these celebrations are not included in the current liturgical books, Mary's role is clearly expressed, especially in the days directly before Christmas.

Joseph's role in the mystery is the particular focus of the Fourth Sunday (Year C) and of the weekdays before Christmas. His response to the angel's message must be mirrored in the response of each Christian to the call to service of the Word.

ADVENT SUNDAYS

Each Advent Sunday takes on a particular character as suggested by the Gospel reading.

I The Lord's coming in glory at the end of time (the *parousia*)

II and III John the Baptist and his message of reparation and repentance

IV Events that immediately prepared for the Lord's birth

The Old Testament readings are prophecies about the coming of the Lord and the promise of messianic fulfilment. The writings of the prophet Isaiah are especially prominent during Advent.

The selections from the writing of the Apostles offer instructions and exhortations on the different themes and ideas of the season.

ADVENT WEEKDAYS

The readings of the first part of Advent centre on a semi-continuous reading of the prophet Isaiah, with gospel passages that reflect a sense of fulfilment of the reading.

During the second week, the gospel readings introduce us to John the Baptist as the one who prepares us for the coming of the Lord (at Christmas and at the end of time) through his message of repentance.

Finally, beginning on December 17th, the gospel readings from Matthew and Luke recount the events that prepared for the Lord's birth. The first readings present important messianic passages that relate to the gospel text.

THE PROPHETS

The writings of the prophets (especially Isaiah) and the images they use in their books find a

special place in Advent. However, it is important to remember that we read the prophets not because they somehow detail specific details of the coming of Jesus, but because of the intimate relation between the longing that they express and the fulfilment that Jesus brings. The plan and pattern of the Old Testament directs us to the coming of Christ and to the messianic kingdom that he inaugurates. In the works of the prophets, the Church finds the language and symbols that helps it express the mystery of the coming of the Saviour.

“O” ANTIPHONS

In the week before Christmas, a series of antiphons are found for the Cantic of Mary (*Magnificat* at Evening Prayer. These are the “O Antiphons”, so-called because each one of them begins with the interjection “O”. They have been a part of the Advent liturgy since the Middle Ages. Each one acclaims a title of the coming Lord and then invites him to act in accord with that title. Although historically a part of the Office, they are today also found at Mass where they are sung as the verses for the Gospel Acclamation. These verses reflect the cry of the Church in the last days of Advent: Come, Lord Jesus!

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