

Eucharist and Advent

Leo Walsh, CSB, STD

Advent is a liturgical season celebrating patient waiting.

Advent waiting is not like waiting in a doctor's office to see the doctor. That's just putting in time. If you have forgotten to bring something to read, you can usually pick up a magazine - though you are dependent here on what the doctor or the nurses like to read and how long ago they were finished with the magazine. Every so often, a patient comes out from the inner office, and you think that you are nearer to actually seeing the doctor. This can be a true or false assumption. The waiting is necessary, to some extent anyway, but doesn't contribute anything to the ultimate goal of the visit. Nor is the waiting celebrated in Advent like waiting for a train or bus, or waiting for a friend who is habitually late for appointments.

The kind of waiting that is the waiting of Advent is found in a pregnant woman waiting for the birth of her baby. The woman is so looking forward to the child's appearing, but she is not wasting her time simply waiting. The modern mother knows about the importance of nutrition for the health of her baby, so she eats right. She knows the dangers of taking alcohol when she is pregnant, and she wouldn't dream of smoking. If this is a first child, she gets advice and reads about how to deal with a newborn. The waiting time is vital and contributes to a happy outcome.

The same kind of waiting is found in a young couple who have decided to wait till they are married before having sex. This isn't done from some motive coming from superstition. It doesn't come from fear, either of parents, church or God. Of course, at base it does recognize God's law, but not as an arbitrary law - one that God just made up. It is based on the nature of a man and a woman and the nature of marriage. The act of intercourse is a quasi sacred symbol of a love that is totally personal, involving the totality of who the persons are, a love that is given and received without condition, a love that is open to new life. An act of intercourse engaged in outside of marriage is a kind of lie, symbolizing condition and usually thwarting new life. The waiting of our chaste couple here might have an element of frustration about it. It may not

be easy. But it does contribute to the overall good of marriage. The deep symbol of their love will have kept its integrity and will have received more meaning. It will be able to bear the meaning that it is meant to have in marriage.

And so with Advent waiting. Through our useful waiting and our longing, we will be preparing ourselves for the celebration of the birth of Christ. Jesus is always knocking at the door of our hearts, but there are liturgical celebrations which bring this home to us in different ways. Advent waiting with the goal ever in sight will make our hearts ready to open to Christ's desire to enter.

Advent, too, is like a journey. We are setting out for a destination that is known to us. We see it on the horizon. It is not like the experience of wandering that the Jewish People experienced in the desert. Our guiding star is pointing us towards a definite end. The nature of our journey is determined by the destination itself. The journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem was long and wearisome, and open to unforeseen dangers. There had to have been many questions in their minds about the coming event — the birth of this special Child. The journey set up the time and circumstances of the birth, a young couple alone in a strange city and one overcrowded with visitors — necessitating the birth of the child in a stable. In hindsight, though, it was really the impending birth that determined the journey, not simply the order of Augustus. The emptying out of the Godhead begins in the humble circumstances of the birth of the Son of God — to be consummated on Calvary. The journey led to this and shared in its destination.

And so with Advent. Our destination is faith, hope and love in the birth of a Child. It is the conviction of God's immense love for us in the incarnation of His Son. It is the hope we have that all will be well in Christ. It is the love we experience for God and for his sons and daughters, especially the vulnerable and abused. Our journey will reflect all of this, the end determining the means.

Our whole life is a kind of Advent, full of anticipation and hope. It's not that we don't have hopes, expectations and desires for the journey itself. Life's journey is a huge adventure. We hope to experience love, to have family

and friends, to know security, to have health, to experience secondary joys like school or athletic or arts success - and a thousand other legitimate joys. But for us Christians, the final destination determines the nature of the journey overall and in its particulars.

How are we to relate all of what we have said to the Eucharist? Let's begin with this — that the Second Vatican Council refers to the Eucharist as the source and summit of our Christian life. Our life as Advent, then, and our 2007 liturgical Advent, both characterized as patient waiting, will be thoroughly Eucharistic. This means that we, the watchful, are enlivened and empowered, sustained and emboldened through our relationship to Jesus present in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Our relationship with the Son of God made man which is continually deepened through the Eucharist undergirds our life as those who wait.

The Eucharist as the summit of our Christian life points sacramentally to our Christian destination. The sacramental Eucharistic banquet points to the heavenly banquet, and already contains within it the essential elements of that heavenly meal, where we will be all-in-all with our God.

If it is Baptism that births us as Christians, Eucharist is the source of our continuing Christian life. It is the life-giving source of our total Advent life journey, just as it is for the mini-Advents of the liturgical season. Through our intimacy with Christ Jesus and through him with the Blessed Trinity, through our enjoying a participation of the very life of the Blessed Trinity imparted through the Blessed Eucharist, our journey is thoroughly characterized by its Christian nature.

Just a word here about the millions of people who do not share our belief in the sacramental presence of the Son of God in the Eucharist. God is offering to all people a special relationship with His Son in this sacrament. Many people do not know Jesus Christ or his sacramental presence, or do not believe in this truth — but without fault on their part. God in His love and compassion is offering these brothers and sisters, too, redemption and divine life (won by Jesus), which they will attain by following their conscience. A good conscience, even when it is erroneous, opens a person to the grace of God. For Catholics, God's offer of divine life through the Eucharist is explicit.

And so we come to Advent 2007.

We do not wait or journey in a vacuum or in some idealized conditions. The secularization of our culture continues to press upon us from every side. We have allowed ourselves to become busy people, too busy for many of the truly important things in life. We are tired. The local economy is not looking too rosy, with unemployment looking increasingly likely. Social problems present themselves in local matters of immigration. The world is held in the throes of threats of terrorist attacks. Wars continue; poverty, disease and natural disasters affect millions. The horrors of human trafficking are rampant. The very earth itself is under imminent threat. Justice and peace for all looks towards an ever distancing horizon.

Our patient journeying towards the only means of our salvation, the Incarnate Word of God, the Child of Bethlehem, is sustained by Eucharistic love, generating a hope for deliverance from all our woes, for liberation. The sea of troubles that beset us in our world will not blow away like mist in the wind. Tackling our troubles will require the wisdom, prudence, fortitude, love and compassion which come only from the Holy Spirit, and offered to those who are nourished by the Eucharist.

Father Leo Walsh, CSB, Professor Emeritus Moral Theology, USMC Faculty of Theology, is currently Pastor at St. Paul's Church, LaSalle, Ontario and is a member of the staff of the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute.

Please contact CCBI for permission to reprint all or part of *Bioethics Matters*.

416-926-2335 * bioethics.usmc@utoronto.ca

*

Our Mission

To promote and protect the dignity of the human person through interdisciplinary ethics research and education in health care and the life sciences