

Advent, The Coming of the Lord

by Phyllis Meshel Onest, M.Div.

Even though we are just getting our children off to school, the countdown to Christmas will begin before we know it. While retailers and the world around us seek to pull us into the materialism of Christmas, the Church is there to keep us on track. We are provided with the "Christmas Fast," also called "St. Philip's Fast" since it begins the day after St. Philip's feast [November 14]. Like the Paschal Lent, the Christmas Fast lasts forty days, but does not involve the same liturgical restrictions and the same strictness in fasting.

Why Advent?

The focus of Advent is the 'coming of the Lord.' Although Christ is near us and in us all the time, during Advent "he makes Himself known as wanting to be with us, and as if adapting us better to His intimacy." [The Year of Grace of the Lord, p.45] What would it be like if, instead of each day wondering what we can check off on our Christmas checklist, we could get excited about 'His Coming?' We could not help but become more aware of His presence in us. That sense would become stronger than the sense of urgency and lack of time that often overcome us at this time of year. Take note of the gospel readings during Advent. What do they call us to do? What is Jesus telling us? On November 21 we celebrate the Entrance of the Theotokos to the Temple. Check out the readings for Vespers; they foretell the 'coming of the Lord.'

The Saints Point the Way to His Coming

A number of saints are remembered during Advent - the Apostles Matthew & Andrew, St. John of Damascus, Ss. Katherine, Barbara, and Anastasia the Great Martyrs, many of the Old Testament Prophets, St. Spyridon the Wonderworker - all of whom point the way of Christ's 'coming.' Probably the most popular saint and "model of charity" is St. Nicholas the Wonderworker [December 6]. Many Orthodox seek the help of St. Nicholas who is a healer of the sick, the liberator of captives, the treasure of the poor, consoler of the afflicted, and guide to travelers. [On a side note: Not long after the overthrow of communism in the former Soviet Union, the icons of St. Nicholas were returned to the bus and train stations.]

As a living symbol of the Christ's mercy and love towards humanity, St. Nicholas stands in the midst of Advent to "bring us a message of 'practical Christianity' and of hope in divine goodness." [The Year of Grace of the Lord, p. 55] Make a point of remembering St. Nicholas in your home by placing his icon near the dinner table, including his troparion at the prayer before the meal, doing an act of charity in his name.

Children in the countries of eastern Europe receive treats/gifts on St. Nicholas day, rather than at Christmas. In years past these included oranges, nuts, apples and gold-foil chocolate coins, which are common for us today, but were hard to get then. In light of this, my husband and I attempted to play down Christmas as the gift-giving day and to transfer gift-giving to St. Nicholas, the real Santa Claus. In so doing, we gave birth to a family tradition. Our daughters received one of their

"Christmas gifts" on St. Nicholas Day. Some families have gone so far as to give all their "Christmas gifts" on St. Nicholas Day. Consider starting a St. Nicholas tradition in your family; the gold-foiled chocolates are a good place to begin.

Activities To Do at Home

If the pre-Christmas season brings you to the point where you are ready to say "stop the world, I want to get off," it is time to regroup and refocus on the true meaning of Christmas.

- Let Advent bring you to "the reason for the season." Start by placing an icon of the Nativity in a focal point in your home so that you have a visual reminder.
- Use an Advent Calendar to keep track of the days before Christmas. The store-bought ones are just for the month of December, western Advent, but they are a good place to begin. The following three resources can be purchased from Light & Life Publishing / 4818 Park Glen Rd./ Minneapolis, MN 55416/ (612) 925-3888 / FAX (612) 925-3918. S/H: \$4.50 for purchases up to \$25; \$6.50 for \$25.01-\$65.00.
- To make an Orthodox Advent Calendar with peek-a-boo windows refer to *The Season of Christmas* by Constance Tarasar [\$9.95, Order No. SEAS100]. It also contains activities for older children and adults, directions for banners, a crèche, ornaments, Christmas cards and more.
- *How About ADVENT! An Advent Program for the Orthodox Christian Family* by Fr. Kurt Speier and Dn. John Finley, edited by John Boojamra [\$9.95, Order No. HOWA500] offers a "Family Advent Calendar" that integrates the scriptures, hymns, the Sundays of Advent, and feast days. Directions for making an Orthodox Advent Wreath and an Advent Chain are included.
- *The Biggest Birthday Party* by John Boojamra [\$4.95, Order No. BIGG100] provides an icon of the Nativity to be assembled during the twelve days preceding Christmas. Scripture references and a narrative related to each section of the icon are included.
- During the years that the girls were in elementary school, we would pull out the "Advent Alphabet" [Church Teacher, Sept/Oct, 1982] and a Bible. Each day they would take turns reading the clue and Scripture verse in order to find the word beginning with that day's letter. As the days progressed we would recite the letters of the alphabet and the corresponding words by memory. It was fun and kept us focused.
- Another means of keeping focused is to read the daily assigned Scripture readings. These can be found on parish calendars or in parish bulletins. Check with your parish priest, if necessary.

Fasting and Thanksgiving - Keeping It Orthodox

Although the fasting guideline during the Advent season is not as stringent as during the Paschal

Lent, it is a fasting period. There are many more "fish, wine & oil" days, and the fast intensifies after St. Spyridon's on December 12.

The problem arises on Thanksgiving, an American tradition. What do we do when everyone around us is eating turkey, stuffing, gravy and lots of goodies? Under the guidance of my spiritual father, and in concurrence with Bishop Maximos of the Greek Orthodox Diocese of Pittsburgh, the following is done in my own home: the turkey is prepared and eaten on Thanksgiving and the leftovers, including side dishes containing meat, are frozen until after Christmas. Since no fasting is permitted from Christmas to January 5, the eve of Theophany, the leftovers are put to good use. Leftovers without meat are eaten.

If your family does not keep the weekly fast days of Wednesday and Friday, this would be a good time to begin. If those fast days are in place, add one or more days. Speak with your parish priest for guidance. Each fasting season permits us to increase our fasting discipline. Keep in mind that it's not "old-fashioned" or "old Country" or "monastic" to "keep the fast." It's Orthodox!

I am often asked, "When should my children begin to fast?" It was very natural in our home to fast, so the girls got an early start. As Pre-schoolers they abstained from meat on Wednesdays and Fridays. As elementary-age students, they abstained from meat during the four Lenten periods and dairy products were withdrawn on certain days. In Middle School, more dairy-less days were added. My family is not the exception, other families with younger children seek to "keep the fast." They take on the challenge and meet it with creativity.

As we enjoy our turkey and all the fixings on Thanksgiving Day, let us remember that these are all a gift from our God.

Acts of Charity

Whenever there is a period of fasting, prayer and almsgiving are included. Advent is no exception. As much as we want to share the food from our Thanksgiving table with those less fortunate, we usually cannot. But, we can reach out in various ways. On the local level, we can donate money and/or time at a soup kitchen. On the international level, we can get involved with IOCC - International Orthodox Christian Charities - the pan-Orthodox international humanitarian aid agency under the auspices of SCOBA.

For the past three years IOCC has sponsored the THANKSGIVING "NON-LUNCHEON" as a means to collect funds for food and nutritional supplements wherever there is need. IOCC assists soup kitchens, refugee camps, collection centers, orphanages, mental institutions, homes for the elderly, and so on. Although clients need not be Orthodox Christians, all the work is done in the name of the Orthodox Church.

During the month of November we are invited to set aside several family meals at which no meat or dessert are served, and remember those less fortunate in our prayers of thanksgiving. On Thanksgiving Day, we are to set an extra place at our tables in remembrance of the hungry people of the world. A card that tells about the THANKSGIVING "NON-LUNCHEON" program and includes a prayer to be read at the Thanksgiving meal is placed on the empty dish. This card is

provided by IOCC for a donation of \$19.96. By participating in the THANKSGIVING "NON-LUNCHEON" we not only help IOCC touch the lives of thousands of needy people, we perform an act of charity during this lenten season, and we become part of a pan-Orthodox effort. Make this part of your family's Advent/Thanksgiving.

To help IOCC feed the hungry and participate in the THANKSGIVING "NON-LUNCHEON" send a check/money order for \$19.96 to: IOCC, P.O. Box 630225, Baltimore, MD 21263-0225. To learn more about IOCC, write to: 711 W. 40th St. Suite 306 Baltimore, MD 21211 / 410-243-9820 / FAX 410-243-9824.

The Reason for the Season

Let us approach the Advent season with a greater awareness of what it is about, what we can do, and how it will benefit us. Although Advent is not as well-defined as the Paschal Lent, let us strive to "live it" as best we can. In so doing, we provide our families with another piece of the mosaic that defines what it means to be an Orthodox Christian living in an Orthodox family. "Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it." (Proverbs 22:6)

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