

ADVENT *and*
CHRISTMAS
—— *with* ——
THOMAS MERTON

A Redemptorist Pastoral Publication



Liguori
LIGUORI, MISSOURI

Imprimi Potest:

Richard Thibodeau, C.Ss.R.

Provincial, Denver Province

The Redemptorists

Published by Liguori Publications

Liguori, Missouri

www.liguori.org

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ISBN 978-0-7648-0843-2

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2002104777

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Printed in the United States of America

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*A*dvent is a time of waiting, of expectation, of silence. Waiting for our Lord to be born. A pregnant woman is so happy, so content. She lives in such a garment of silence, and it is as though she were listening to hear the stir of life within her. One always hears that stirring compared to the rustling of a bird in the hand. But the intentness with which one awaits such stirring is like nothing so much as a blanket of silence.

DOROTHY DAY



Introduction

THOMAS MERTON, O.C.S.O., Trappist monk, hermit, peace activist, poet, retreat leader, and spiritual writer, was one of the most charismatic religious figures of our time. He died in Bangkok, Thailand, in 1968, the result of an accidental shock from an electric fan. He was on a journey to meet with monks of the Eastern spiritual tradition, in which he was greatly interested. His pilgrimage to Thailand, India, and Sri Lanka was his first long journey outside the Abbey of Gethsemani in many years and was part of a search to learn more about those aspects of Asian spiritual traditions that could be applied to Western monasticism. Merton's interest in this area can be seen in his books *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, and *The Asian Journals of Thomas Merton*.

Born in France in 1915 to an American father and a New Zealand mother, Merton converted to Catholicism in 1938 while he was a student at Columbia University in New York City. This experience is detailed in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), an autobiographical account of his conversion and his eventual decision to enter the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani, located in Kentucky, in 1941. During his initial period at Gethsemani, he wrote *Seeds of Contemplation* and *The Waters of Siloe*.

Merton was ordained a priest in 1949. During the period after ordination, Merton wrote *The Ascent to Truth*, *Bread in the Wilderness*, *The Sign of Jonas*, *The Living Bread*, *No Man Is an*

Island, and *The Silent Life*. After being appointed Master of the Choir Novices in 1955, Merton penned such books as *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, and *Disputed Questions*. It was also during this time that he wrote essays deploring nuclear arms, the war in Vietnam, racial inequality, and violence of all kinds.

Small selections from Father Louis' books (those mentioned in the preceding paragraphs and many more) have been chosen to provide inspiration for the passage through Advent. Even these small paragraphs show Father Louis as a warm and straightforward writer who can speak plainly to his readers. As he wrote in the preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "I don't want to speak to you as an author, or a narrator, not even a philosopher, but simply as a friend. I would like to speak to you as your alternate self....If you listen you will hear things that will be said that perhaps are not written in this book. And that will be coming, not from me, but from the One who lives and speaks inside both of us." So, let us begin.



How to Use This Book

ADVENT—that period of great anticipatory joy—is a time of preparation for the celebration of Christ’s arrival in Bethlehem as a helpless infant. In the Western liturgy, Advent begins four Sundays prior to December 25—the Sunday closest to November 30 which is the feast of Saint Andrew, one of Jesus’ first disciples. The annual commemoration of Christ’s birth begins the Christmas cycle of the liturgical year—a cycle which runs from Christmas Eve to the Sunday after the feast of the Epiphany. In keeping with the unfolding of the message of the liturgical year, this book is designed to be used during the entire period from the first Sunday of Advent to the end of the Christmas cycle. The four weeks of Advent are often thought of as symbolizing the four different ways that Christ comes into the world: (1) at his birth as a helpless infant in Bethlehem; (2) at his arrival in the hearts of believers; (3) at his death; and (4) at his arrival on Judgment Day.

Because Christmas falls on a different day of the week each year, the fourth week of Advent is never really finished; it is abruptly, joyously, and solemnly abrogated by the annual coming again of Christ at Christmas. Christ’s Second Coming will also one day abruptly interrupt our sojourn here on earth.

Since the calendar dictates the number of days in Advent, this book includes Scripture and meditation readings for a full twenty-eight days. These twenty-eight daily readings make up Part I of



this book. It is suggested that the reader begin at the beginning and, on Christmas Day, switch to Part II which contains materials for the twelve days of Christmas. If there are any “extra” entries from Part I, these may be read by doubling up days, if so desired, or by reading two entries on weekends. Alternately, one may just skip those entries that do not fit within the Advent time frame for that particular year.

Part III of this book proposes two optional formats for using each daily entry as part of a longer liturgical observance similar to Night Prayer combined with a version of the Office of Readings. These options are for those who may wish to use this book as part of a more developed individual or group observance. The purpose of these readings is to enrich the Advent/Christmas/Epiphany season of the liturgical year and set up a means by which individuals, families, or groups may observe the true meaning of the season.



PART I



READINGS *for*
ADVENT





DAY 1

*[Y]ou know what time it is,
how it is now the moment
for you to wake from sleep.
For salvation is nearer to us now
than when we became believers;
the night is far gone,
the day is near.
Let us then lay aside the works of darkness
and put on the armor of light;
let us live honorable as in the day,
not in reveling and drunkenness,
not in debauchery and licentiousness,
not in quarreling and jealousy.
Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ.*

ROMANS 13:11–14

Awake, You Sleepers

Many of the Zen stories which are almost always incomprehensible in rational terms are simply the ringing of an alarm clock, and the reaction of the sleeper. Usually, the misguided sleeper makes a response which in effect turns off the alarm so that he can go back to sleep. Sometimes he jumps out of bed with a shout of astonishment that it is so late. Sometimes he just sleeps and does not hear the alarm at all...

But we in the West, living in a tradition of stubborn ego-centered practicality and geared entirely for the use and manipulation of everything, always pass from one thing to another, from cause to effect, from the first to the next and to the last and then back to the first. Everything always points to something else, and hence we never stop anywhere because we cannot: as soon as we pause, the escalator reaches the end of the ride and we have to get off and find another one.

ZEN AND THE BIRDS OF APPETITE



Lord, be our alarm clock as we make our way through this Advent in expectation of your coming. Keep us from “sleeping at the switch” so that our life of faith has an opportunity to grow and mature in us, and so that our life in the world becomes one of light and honor and love. Above all, let us not sleep through your call. Give us the grace to use this Advent season as a time for our own growth and the growth of our spiritual community. Amen.





DAY 2

*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness....*

*The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.*

*It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD....*

*Although he causes grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
for he does not willingly afflict
or grieve anyone.*

LAMENTATIONS 3:22–26, 32–33

In the Midst of His Love and Mercy

*I*t is only the infinite mercy and love of God that has prevented us from tearing ourselves to pieces and destroying His entire creation long ago....On the contrary, consider how in spite of centuries of sin and greed and lust and cruelty and hatred and avarice and oppression and injustice, spawned and bred by the free wills of men, the human race can still recover, each time, and can still produce men and women who overcome evil with good, hatred with love, greed with charity, lust and cruelty with sanctity. How could all this be possible without the merciful love of God, pouring out His grace upon us?...

THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN



God of light, be the hope of our suffering. Keep us from the darkness of sin and greed; keep us from the mindless quest for superiority and success, from the depravity of hatred and anger. Astonish us with your mercy and love so that we may never forget your faithful compassion. Let us use this time of waiting to recover our bearings and refrain from afflicting anyone with our own sins, no matter how insignificant they may seem to be. Amen.





DAY 3

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning.
O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.*

PSALM 130 [129]:5–8

Going Forth to Christ

Advent is the “sacrament” of the PRESENCE of God in His world, in the Mystery of Christ at work in History...

This mystery is the revelation of God Himself in His Incarnate Son. But it is not merely a manifestation of the Divine Perfections, it is the concrete plan of God for the salvation of men and the restoration of the whole world in Christ.

This plan is envisaged not as a future prospect but as a present *fact*. The “last things” are already present and realized in a hidden manner. The Kingdom of God is thus already “in the midst of us.” But, the mystery can only be known by those who enter into it, who find their place in the Mystical Christ, and therefore find the mystery of Christ realized and fulfilled *in themselves*.

SEASONS OF CELEBRATION



Lord Jesus, assuage our blindness and activate our hearts during this Advent, so that we may find your presence hidden in ourselves. May we unveil the mystery of Christ-with-us and work toward the true restoration of the whole world in your image. Let your light shine in our hearts so that we may always know the truth of your love. Amen.

