

The “Three Advents” of Christ: A Seasonal Meditation

Presented by Jon Sozek

Community of Ss. Isidore and Maria | Glastonbury, CT

November 14, 2018

Our authors

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)

- French abbot; reformer of Benedictine monasticism
- Regarded as founder of the Cistercian and Trappist orders
- Canonized in 1174; named a Doctor of the Church in 1830

Thomas Merton, OCSO (1915-1968)

- Author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) and many other works
- Joined the Trappist order; ordained a priest in 1949
- Our text for today: “The Sacrament of Advent in the Spirituality of Saint Bernard” (1952), collected in *Seasons of Celebration* (1965)

Passages from Merton

[1] The twelfth century Cistercians place a special emphasis on the coming of Christ by His Spirit to the Christian Person. ... This is the special presence of God in the world that fascinates them and draws them to Him in meditation upon the Bible, where He is present in His Word and in the light generated by that Word in the heart of the Believer. This is their *devotio*. (p. 1)

[2] Bernard sees that the Sacrament (of Advent) is the Presence of Christ in the world as Savior. In his theology, Advent does not merely commemorate the Incarnation as a historical event, nor is it a mere devotional preparation for the Feast of Christmas, nor an anticipation of the Last Judgment. It is above all the “sacrament” of the Presence of God in the world and in time in His Incarnate Word, in His Kingdom, above all His presence in our own lives as our Savior. (p. 3)

[3] [Bernard] repeats in more concrete and practical terms his statement of the necessity of our finding Christ the Savior here and now among us ... [He identifies] three reasons for our misery and helplessness: [1] we are deceived in our judgments of good and evil; [2] our attempts to do good fail, lead to nothing; [3] we do not succeed in our efforts to resist evil. The presence of Christ in us overcomes these obstacles. (p. 3)

[4] Christ who is present in the world, living in His mystical body, His Kingdom, is also reigning in heaven. To enter into the Mystery of Advent is to enter into the *Pascha Christi* or the passage of Christ through this world in order that He might raise up all creatures in Himself to heaven. (p. 4)

[5] We do not have to travel far to find [Christ]. He is within us. ... [We need only turn to] the *verbum fidei*, the spoken word which plants the seed of faith in our hearts and introduces us into the ... *Pascha Christi*. It is by the word of faith ... that the "Advent" of Christ becomes a reality in our personal lives. Above all this means "believing with the heart that God has raised Christ up from the dead." (p. 5)

[6] St Bernard continues: "No great journey is shown to you: if you wish to meet God, go as far as your own heart" (p. 6)

[7] To find the word in our heart we must enter into ourselves not so much by introspection as by compunction. This is important. The inward movement of compunction is ... a liberation of ourselves, which takes place in the depths of our being ... This liberation from concentration on oneself is the beginning of a conversion, a *metanoia*, a real inner transformation. ... [This is] a dynamic work of God's power. We go to meet the transforming action of God in our souls. This spiritual encounter is an Advent, in which God comes to our inmost self and we find ourselves in Him. (p. 6)

[8] [This is] a breaking out of the prison of "selfhood." ... The true interior life is not our own life within the depths of our own being. It is the coming of God into our being, from which we have previously gone out, in order to make room for Him. God's presence, in His purity, gives us a true interior life. (p. 6)

[9] St Bernard frequently returns to the idea of the "three Advents" of Christ. The first of these is the one in which He entered into the world, having received a Human Nature in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The third is the Advent which will bring Him into the world at the end of time. (p. 9)

[10] The second [Advent] is in a certain sense the most important for us. The "Second Advent" by which Christ is present in our souls now, depends on our present recognition of His *pascha* or *transitus*, the passage of Christ through our world, through our own lives. (pp. 9-10)

[11] This middle Advent is the way by which we pass from the first to the third. In the first Christ was our Redemption, in the last He shall appear as our Life. In this

present one, as we sleep between ... [the first and last Advents], He is our rest and our consolation. There is nothing inactive about this "sleep," [however.] It may mean quiescence, darkness and emptiness for our natural activity, no doubt. But in this "darkness" God comes to us and works mysteriously within us in spirit and in truth. (p. 10)

[12] The humility of Christ, living and efficacious in us, exalts us and unites us to Him in His glory. His humility makes us seek nothing in this world except to do perfectly the will of God. ... Such is the hidden Advent in which wisdom, without noise of words, builds His house in our hearts, raising it upon seven pillars and turning our souls into His palace and His throne. ... [This] inner purity and humility, in which we learn to distrust our own powers and to depend on God for everything, without however neglecting any effort to do His will, gives us peace and joy (p. 11)

[13] Our *viaticum* in the Church's journey from the first Advent to the third is the word of God. ... [Yet] the word of God is useless to us, if it is merely "stored" in the mind or the memory. Just as we eat our material bread and nourish our bodies with it, so also we must "eat" the bread of life and feed our souls. To eat the word of God is first to absorb it into the depths of our being, by obedient and loving faith, then to let the power of the Word express itself in the vital activity proper to faith: in works of love, good habits, a perfect life. This then is what feeds and delights our life in the "second Advent." (p. 12)

[14] If we leave [the Virgin Mary] out of the Sacrament of Advent we shall never fully penetrate its mystery, since we need to go forth to meet our Savior on the same Road by which He came to us. ... It is in the virginal silence and solitude of Mary's humble prayer that the Divine Word descends upon our earth as quiet as dew in the night. ... This presence of God in Mary is itself the secret of Advent, the heart of the Mystery, for it is in Mary herself that the Son of God gave us the admirable *Sacrament* of Advent. (pp. 13-15)

Questions

1. During Advent, why is it valuable to reflect on each of the three Advents described by St. Bernard of Clairvaux? What does each one teach us about the coming of God?
2. What does Merton mean when he refers to the season of Advent as a “sacrament”?
3. Merton writes that “[t]he true interior life is ... the coming of God into our being, from which we have previously gone out, in order to make room for Him.” What does this mean to you?
4. Merton distinguishes between “storing” the Word of God within ourselves, and “eating” it. How do you understand this distinction?

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace
Streams of mercy, never ceasing
Call for songs of loudest praise
Teach me some melodious sonnet
Sung by flaming tongues above
Praise the mount, I'm fixed upon it
Mount of Thy redeeming love

Here I raise my Ebenezer
Here there by Thy great help I've come
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure
Safely to arrive at home
Jesus sought me when a stranger
Wandering from the fold of God
He, to rescue me from danger
Interposed His precious blood

Oh, to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be
Let that grace now like a fetter
Bind my wandering heart to Thee
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love
Here's my heart, oh, take and seal it
Seal it for Thy courts above

Performance by Sufjan Stevens, *Songs for Christmas* (2006)