

Introduction to Advent

The calculation of Advent in the Orthodox Church differs from that in Western Churches. Whereas the season of Advent in the West begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, or the Sunday nearest the feast of St. Andrew, the Apostle (Nov. 30), the “Christmas Fast,” or “Little Lent”, as it is called in the Orthodox Church, traditionally begins 40 days before Christmas on November 15.

Our preparation during the season of Advent is, of course, focused on the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh, the Incarnation. In the West, Advent carries with the theme of Christ’s coming in the flesh another theme—His Second Coming. The Orthodox Church devotes only one Sunday in Advent to Christ’s Second Coming, since this theme is emphasized more heavily during Holy Week.

Let each of us approach Advent anticipating the coming of the Lord and to allow this anticipation to intensify in us the presence of Christ. For the Lord is already present with us, but the Grace of Advent allows us to experience a more vivid, perhaps new, awareness of this presence. In Advent He reveals Himself to us as “He who comes”, the one who desires to be with us. Let our prayer be “Come Lord Jesus”, and throughout Advent let this prayer intensify and drive away all thoughts and passions incompatible with the coming of Christ.

It is a time in the Orthodox Church that is not well defined and so is often ignored or missed. There are, for instance, no special Advent services and the first Advent hymn is not heard in church until November 21

Sundays in Advent

There are six Sundays which usually fall during the season of Advent. Each carry with them a theme which helps us to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

The Gospel lesson for the **Sixth Sunday** before Christmas is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Christ exhorts us through this story to show mercy and compassion toward our neighbor. And who is our neighbor? Everyone is our neighbor and especially those in need.

The Gospel for the **Fifth Sunday** before Christmas is the parable of the rich fool who determined to tear down his barn and build greater ones in order to store all his crops and goods. But his soul was required of him that night. Christ tells this story in order to warn us against covetousness, and thinking that our life consists in the abundance of material possessions.

The Gospel for the **Fourth Sunday** before Christmas is the parable of the Rich Young Ruler whom Christ told to sell all that he had and distribute it to the poor, in order to have treasure in heaven and to come and follow Him.

The Gospel for the **Third Sunday** before Christmas is the story of the woman whom Christ loosed from a spirit of infirmity which had plagued her for 18 years.

The Gospel for the **Second Sunday** before Christmas is the parable of the Great Supper. Those who were invited to eat bread in the Kingdom of God made excuses for not accepting the invitation—possessions, work, family. They did not inherit the Kingdom of God.

What can we learn from these lessons? How do they prepare us for the celebration of Christmas? First, we must show mercy and compassion toward others even if it costs money. We must bring our tithes into the storehouse of the Kingdom of God, before building our own barns. We must examine our attachment to material things and be prepared to lay aside whatever amount that prevents us from following Christ.

We must acknowledge our own spirit of infirmity and look to the Incarnate Son of God who came to raise the image of God which had fallen in each of us.

And finally, we must not let the cares of this world—possessions, work, family—come before Christ and His Kingdom or we will be shut out.

The **Sunday before Christmas** is called “The Sunday of the Genealogy of Christ”. The Gospel lesson from Matthew 1 brings all those who looked forward to the coming of the Messiah together with us who enjoy the blessings of His coming. The Epistle lesson is from Hebrews 11 which recalls the faith of those who have gone before us, and inspires us to turn the eyes of our hearts toward Jesus, the author and fulfillment of our faith.

Fasting and Almsgiving

The proper attitude while fasting is crucial if it is to be of any spiritual benefit to the individual. Mere abstinence from types of food is not enough. Control of overeating is essential no matter what foods are eaten. But even this is not enough in and of itself. Unless an inner fast of the heart accompanies an outward fast, such an observance will be of little or no benefit, in fact it may ultimately be counterproductive if it produces a spirit of legalism or arrogance. The following exhortation from St. John Chrysostom points out that the true nature of fasting involves much more than mere abstention from certain foods:

“Do you fast? Give me proof by what you do! What do I mean?

Don't fast by the mouth, but also the eye, the ear, the feet, the hands—all members of your body. Let your hands fast by being pure from stealing and taking things which others should have.

Let your feet fast by not running to watch things you shouldn't.

Let your eyes fast, being taught not to look at things they shouldn't.

Let the ear fast also. The fasting of the ear consists in refusing to listen to evil talk and rumors. Let the mouth, too, fast from disgraceful talk.”

But fasting, even when observed properly, is not carried out for its own sake. We fast in order to pray. Further, these two should be joined by works of love and compassion, that is, almsgiving. With these three joined to a proper spirit of devotion, one is better able to prepare himself to celebrate the joy of Christmas.

Seasons of preparation such as Advent and Lent include not only the disciplines of prayer and fasting, but also almsgiving. Christ points to these three disciplines as foundational to true spirituality (Matt. 6).

During Advent, there is a strong focus on almsgiving. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the life of St. Nicholas is such an ideal expression and example of charity. His giving spirit seems to permeate the whole season. Almsgiving really is more than just writing a check to the church's special Christmas fund. The word "alms" in the Greek language actually means "a kindness" or "a kind act." In the book of Acts we find St. Tabitha, whom Peter raised from the dead, described as a woman "abounding with deeds of kindness and charity." The word used here for "deeds of kindness" is the same word for "alms" used in Christ's Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6). If we read this passage from Christ's sermon thinking "charitable deeds" rather than "giving money" then we come away with a renewed understanding of what almsgiving is all about. The New King James version translates "alms" as "charitable deeds":

"Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly." (Matthew 6:1—4)

This is not to say that a person cannot show pity, mercy or compassion on others by means of giving money. If a person has been blessed financially, then the giving of money might be his or her best way to show mercy on others. All too often, however, those who struggle financially think that they must necessarily be excused from almsgiving since they have no money to give. But certainly anyone can show pity, mercy or compassion on others through acts of kindness.

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