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MONASTERY JOURNEY TO Christmas

BROTHER VICTOR-ANTOINE
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NOVEMBER 16

Early Preparations

*All peoples of the earth,
All children of men,
Rich and poor alike, go out to meet him crying:
“Shepherd of Israel, hear us,
You who lead Joseph’s race like a flock,
Tell us if you are the One.”*

MATINS RESPONSORY FOR ADVENT

 preparations for the Advent and Christmas seasons start early in our monastery. Early in the autumn, we begin making preparations for our annual monastery Christmas craft fair, which takes place during the first week of Advent. Autumn is such a busy season here. We are plunged into multiple harvest activities: canning and freezing vegetables for our winter fare, gathering and splitting wood to sustain our three wood-burning stoves through the cold months ahead, storing hay bales in the barn for the sheep. Besides all these daily activities, the gardens are slowly being put to rest, and the last of the potted plants are being brought inside the greenhouse to save them for the next garden season.

While all these seasonal activities are taking place in the

monastery, we are also mindful that the time of the craft fair is quickly approaching and therefore we must hasten with preparations for the yearly sale. Principal among our preparations is the construction of the small Nativity scenes, or “crèches,” as we love to call them in French. The word “crèche” is almost identical to the English word “crib,” and in either language it is a word that warms the human heart intimately. Christmas abounds with multiple cultural traditions, as every country and people try to portray in their native crèche their own particular cultural depiction of the mystery of the Incarnation. Here in the monastery, we try to remain attentive to these transcultural expressions as we build the physical settings for each crèche. The figurines or “santons” that compose each crèche come from many diverse countries. Thus, we cannot simply place them in just any form, setting, or arrangement. We must remain sensitive to the culture of origin and create the adequate type of setting. There, these lovely figures may feel at home. Jesus, through the mystery of his Incarnation, wishes to feel at home in each home and culture, for his message of salvation is for all humankind. He comes as a Savior to all.



During these late-fall days, in the silence and quiet of the monastery, we labor with steady intensity to make the crèches and other handicrafts for the Christmas fair. Our monastic

silence provides a rich inspiration during our work. It allows us to be sensitive to the foreign, faraway cultures where some of the crèche figures have their origin. The pensive atmosphere also makes us aware of the natural products (wood, stone, hay, etc.) that are used in the fabrication of the scenes. These products are recycled materials, used again for a higher purpose. For this reason, they must be treated with care and respect. These early preparations are filled with the joy of anticipation, the sort of joy that culminates and finds its completion on Christmas Day. *“Iucundare, filia Sion, exsulta satis, filia Jerusalem.”*

NOVEMBER 17

Advent Plans: Quiet Stillness

*Seek the Lord while he may be found; call him while
he is near. Alleluia.*

ADVENT ANTIPHON



Interestingly, our Thanksgiving celebrations are barely approaching and people seem to be ready to jump right into the Christmas celebrations. The commercialization of the season in the media, in the stores, and in other such places is no help whatsoever in preparing for Christmas. For instead of focusing on Advent as a preparatory time, they distract us with their glitter, sights, and sounds, creating a false allure of celebration that is neither Christian nor real. The Scriptures tell us that there is a time and season for everything, for each particular event. There is a time of preparing for Christmas, and that is Advent, and then there is a time for Christmas itself. There is no doubt in my mind that the more serious we are about our personal Advent journey, the greater the joy we shall reap during our Christmas celebration.

It is a good practice to make concrete plans on how best to keep our Advent observance. Often, if no plans are made in advance, much of Advent goes unnoticed and wasted. Since Advent

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is basically a quiet time of waiting for the arrival of the Light at Christmas, it is good to start by trying to become more internally quiet during this rather brief season. It is also important to make a point to observe quiet time during the day for prayer, reading, reflection, or even just for a quiet stroll through the wonders of nature. If we are serious about integrating a quality quiet time into our daily routine, we shall discover the marvels it can work in our personal lives. Some of the quiet time can also be spent writing to those with whom we are close and with whom we



have not been in touch in a while. During our quiet time, we can also anticipate some early Christmas preparations, but without the rush or frantic obsession one observes on the last days just before December 25. Above all, we must make the most of these moments of stillness by

remaining calm, silent, and spending quality time with the Lord. The words from one of the psalms counsel us: “Be still, and know that I am God.” Monks always strive to preserve a more quiet recollected spirit during these lovely Advent days and thus enjoy the Lord’s intimate company. There is no reason why others, in a monastery or elsewhere, could not do the same wherever they are. It is a question of resolving to do so and making the effort. The Holy Spirit shall do the rest. “*Veni, Sancte Spiritus.*”

NOVEMBER 18

Advent Waiting

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer awaits the precious fruit of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You too must be patient. Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand.

JAMES 5:7–8

Desires are nourished by delays.

ENGLISH PROVERB



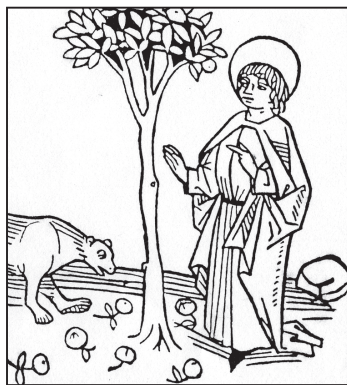
Advent is primarily about waiting. It is about waiting for the Lord to come. There is something special about this particular type of waiting. First of all, waiting is a spiritual attitude we cultivate deep within ourselves. We know the Lord is coming, and therefore we desire and hasten his arrival by a patient attitude of waiting for him. We wait and wait for the Lord. We become very conscious of the waiting. It is an eager waiting, full of anticipation and wonder, for as the prophets of old, our companions on the road, we long to see his face.

The Lord, of course, is very much aware of this patient waiting, of this deep yearning for him, and he is ever ready to come

NOVEMBER • 17

into our lives and fulfill our deepest desires. Advent waiting is always twofold. On our part, we await prayerfully, consciously, and anticipate his coming. On God's part, he is eager to arrive and find a warm dwelling place in our hearts. The greater our desire and patience in waiting for him, the fuller we shall be filled with his presence.

The early Christians, as the Apostle James reminds us, lived daily, steadily, waiting patiently for the Lord. Of course they thought this was going to be the Lord's final, triumphant coming and it was going to happen very soon, thus they wished to be ready



for it. Perhaps at one point they were a bit disappointed that it didn't occur according to their expectations. At the end, it didn't matter, for their eager waiting for him was rewarded by the Lord entering into their lives more fully and transforming every inch of their beings. Furthermore, many of them were blessed with a physical

vision of the Lord just before they underwent martyrdom. The Lord may not always act according to our expectations. After all, he tells us in the Scripture, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways." Yet he never disappoints us.

If we learn to cultivate this inner attitude of waiting for him steadily, faithfully, not only during the blessed Advent days, but throughout the whole of our lives, we shall likewise be rewarded with the grace, joy, and warmth of his real presence in the innermost of our hearts. "*Ecce, Salvator venit.*"