

CU 1289

CATHOLIC UPDATE

Christmas Watch:

What Are We Waiting For?

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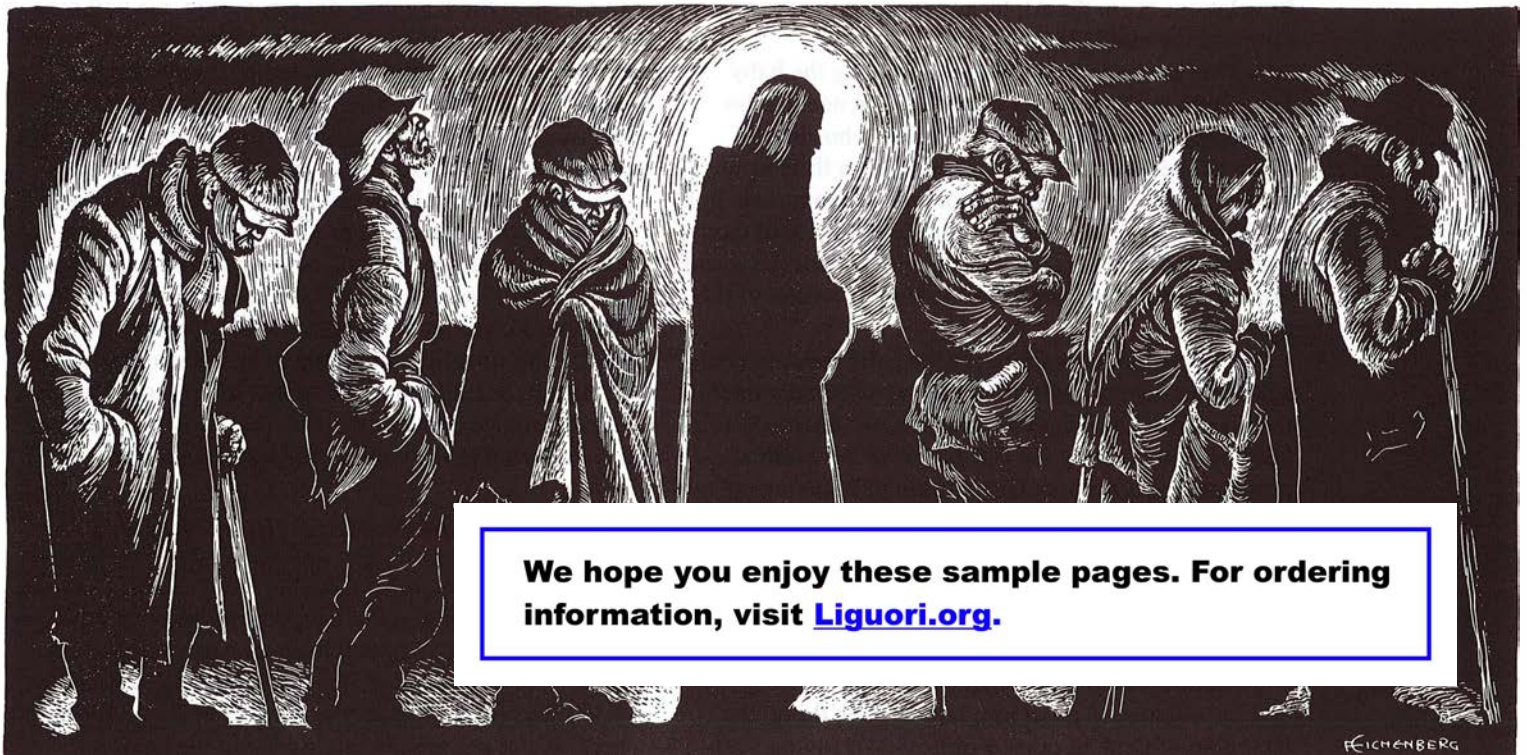
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"The Spirit and bride say 'Come.' Let the hearer say 'Come.' ...Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all."

The Christian Bible ends with this great invitation, found in the last lines of the last book of the New Testament, Revelation (22:17, 20-21). The coming of Jesus and the waiting for that coming, then, becomes the focus for all Christian history and yearning. "Come, Lord Jesus" means that all of Christian history has to live with an expectation—to live out of an inner longing or emptiness, a

kind of chosen nonfulfillment. For the fulfillment we await is always to come. When we demand satisfaction of one another, when we demand completion of history, or that our anxiety and dissatisfaction be taken away—as we impatient disciples are constantly doing—we're refusing to say, "Come, Lord Jesus."

The Gospel has different expectations of us than has our success-seeking culture. The Gospel goes against a need-meeting mentality. Yet need-meeting is what most of us daily give 95 percent of our energies to fulfill. We even assume at times that we have a *right* to feel happy. The Declaration of Independence cites the



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inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness. But the Gospel has a different message, namely, that when we set out to seek forms of created happiness apart from God, we are creating idols.

Many of us fall into the trap of setting up and maintaining kingdoms of earthly happiness—riches, social status, bigger houses, bigger cars—in the midst of a world filled with public suffering. In order to pursue these goals, we create an illusion about the world around us. We block ourselves from our brothers and sisters in Christ.

As Christians, however, we are called to see through these deceptive goals and to really say, “Come, Lord Jesus.” In other words, we are to open ourselves to the fullness of reality, to the full revelation of

the Lord of creation, whom some have called the “cosmic Christ.” To be open to the cosmic Christ is to be open to the Lord of history, to the Word of God deep within creation, drawing all to fulfillment. But so often we’re afraid for that to happen. We are afraid to wait for Jesus.

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We’re not simply waiting for a baby!

The aim of this *Update* is to help us reflect a little more daringly on what we really are waiting and preparing for as we wait with the Church for the coming of Christ. Sometimes our view gets a bit too sentimental and narrow as we wait for the “baby Jesus.” Yes, the Gospel informs us that Jesus was born as a tiny child in Bethlehem, but that is not the image of the total Christ presented by the Scripture as a whole. As Christians we await the Lord of History—the Jesus who says in Revelation: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (21:6).

This keeps us from overemphasizing the baby Jesus, which often comes from our own need: Who would not be happy to wait for a God who simply assumes the form of a baby and demands little or no adult behavior of us? Who is not tempted to remain in a position of sweet and sentimental feelings about God and to avoid an adult relationship with God or the world around us? We may need to broaden our notion of the Messiah.

Our custom of waiting for the baby Jesus to come again is an Advent tradition that developed only later in the history of Christianity. Such a limited focus can keep us from hearing the full power of the biblical proclamation. Our popular tradition of focusing on God’s entering the world each Christmas in the form of a helpless child is praiseworthy. Indeed, saints like Francis of Assisi stood in awe before the mystery of God who had become incarnate as a powerless baby. But we know that this is not the ultimate thrust of the Bible or the whole purpose of Jesus’ coming.

Jesus came to proclaim, largely, one thing: the Kingdom of God, in other words, God’s saving presence in the world. In the great summary of his teach-

ings, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pushes at that point from different sides. Yet while Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom, Christianity has sometimes proclaimed Jesus only—without his proclamation of God’s saving reign among us. We became preoccupied with proving that Jesus was God, defining Jesus, proving that Jesus was good and right and holy, and that all good people believed in Jesus.

In some cases Jesus himself and the Kingdom he proclaimed became overidentified with the Church. That is a mistake. Although the Church is meant to be closely related to the Kingdom and, indeed, an instrument of the Kingdom, the Church and the Kingdom are not the same. We can see that the Church is distinct from the Kingdom when we realize that the Kingdom—God’s saving will on earth—is indeed sinless. The Church, though divinely established to help spread God’s Kingdom, is often beset by sin. When we try to equate the Church itself with the Kingdom of God, we are creating something of an idol.

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