

Advent

Advent is a very significant time of the liturgical year—an opportune and privileged moment for listening to the announcement of the liberation of people and peoples. The season invites us to prepare for an approaching event that is always “still to come.” The word advent is pagan in origin, deriving from a context in which it signified the arrival of an important personage—for example, the Emperor—on a particular day or within a specific timeframe. It was not concerned about a waiting or preparation period for that event but rather with the celebrations that resulted from it.

But when use of the word advent shifted from the civil to the religious plane, its meaning took on greater substance. As with every liturgical celebration—although perhaps with particular intensity here—three dimensions of time co-exist: it is a remembrance of the past, a mystery celebrated in the present and an anticipation of the future.

Given the complexity of these three axes and the way in which they interweave with one another, it is not strange that the historical configuration of Advent took shape over a rather long period of time (from the 6th to the 8th centuries) and that certain aspects concerning its development are still unclear. The process started with a transposition of the “waiting” for Easter—a characteristic feature of the early Christian community, which looked forward to the coming (“advent”) of the risen Lord (the context in which the invocation *Maranathà* [Come, Lord!] emerged). When steps were taken to organize the liturgical year, this yearning was transferred in part and to an ever-increasing degree to Christmas-Epiphany, that is to say, to the manifestation of Christ Jesus in the mystery of his birth, which was seen as the first stage and guarantee of his second coming. In actual fact, Christians were waiting for something that had already taken place but that would reach its culmination in the parousia. Thus it was a coming that touched every aspect of the believer’s life.

In the Roman Liturgy, Advent comprises four Sundays, while in the Ambrosian Liturgy the number of Sundays is six. The number four is perhaps an allusion to what was traditionally considered the 4,000-year time span between the first announcement of the Messiah and his coming, amounting, in practice, to the whole preparatory period constituted by the Old Testament. Contemplation of the past underscored the memorial aspect of Advent and weakened its eschatological dimension, which had predominated so strongly in the early Christian Church. Preparation for Christmas, the feast of the birth of Jesus, prevailed. The liturgical reforms launched by Vatican II aimed at restoring the eschatological aspect of Advent to the first two weeks of the season through readings that look forward to the final coming of Christ the Judge, and at giving the second two weeks of the season (more specifically, from 17-24 December) a more clearly “Christmas” note through references to Mary.

Reassuring all this, we can say that the mystery of Advent meshes with history to manifest the justice of God toward the world, namely: his plan of salvation realized as a historical event, which now continues in the sacrament or mystery of the presence of Christ in the world as humanity awaits the power and glory of his full revelation.