

*“Come therefore, Lord Jesus, seek Thy servant, seek Thy weary sheep.”
— St. Ambrose of Milan*

“Quaere, inquit, servum tuum, quoniam mandata tua non sum oblitus. Veni ergo, Domine Jesu, quaere servum tuum, quaere lassam ovem tuam; veni, pastor, quaere sicut oves Joseph. Erravit ovis tua, dum tu moraris, dum tu versaris in montibus. Dimitte nonaginta novem oves tuas, et veni unam ovem quaerere quae erravit. Veni sine canibus, veni sine malis operariis, veni sine mercenario, qui per januam introire non noverit. Veni sine adiutore, sine nuntio, jam dudum te expecto venturum; scio enim venturum, quoniam mandata tua non sum oblitus. Veni non cum virga, sed cum caritate spirituque mansuetudinis.”[\[1\]](#)

The sacred time of Advent is of ancient institution and we find mention of it from around the fifth century, as a moment of the Liturgical Year destined for the preparation of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ *secundum carnem*. Indeed, Advent marks the beginning of the Liturgical Year, allowing us to seize this opportunity to follow, with holy resolutions, the voice of the Church.

The discipline of penance and fasting during Lent in preparation for Easter is certainly of apostolic origin, whereas that *in expectatione Domini* comes after and inspired by the former, becoming less rigid with the passage of centuries to only abstinence on certain days of the week. *“It is true that Saint Peter Damian, in the eleventh century, still supposes that the fast of Advent was of forty days, and that Saint Louis, two centuries later, continued to observe it in this measure; but perhaps this holy king practiced it in this way out of a transport of particular devotion.”*[\[2\]](#) The softness of modern generations has induced the maternal wisdom of the Church to mitigate the rigorous disciplines of former times, without preventing them from being practiced voluntarily; but maybe the present situation leads us to consider as opportune — precisely because they are not imposed — the privations practiced by our ancestors in obedience of an ecclesiastical precept.

The liturgy of the Advent season is indebted to the labors of St Gregory the Great, not only for the texts of the Office and the Mass, but also for the very plainchant compositions. The ancient trope *Sanctissimus namque*, which introduces the Introit *Ad te levavi* of the First Sunday of Advent, recalls the inspiration of the Holy Pontiff by the Holy Ghost, Who appeared in the form of a dove.[\[3\]](#) Initially consisting of six weeks and then five, the weeks of preparation for the Holy Nativity were reduced to four between the end of the ninth century and the beginning of the tenth, which means the current use is at least a thousand years old. The Ambrosian Church still maintains six weeks, for a total of forty-two days, modelled after Lent.

Amongst the first authors of homilies on the subject of Advent, we find Saint Ambrose, Doctor and Father of the Church. It is with a prayer that we find in the *Commentary on Psalm 118* that I would like to begin this meditation. The incipit of the prayer is *Quaere, inquit, servum tuum*. As you yourselves can see [note 1, below], the entire text is punctuated with quotations from Sacred Scripture: not in order to show off a biblical expertise, which the Holy Bishop of Milan certainly possessed, but because of that understanding of the Word of God which is the fruit of an intimate and vital assiduity for the soul, just as air is indispensable for breathing. This led Saint Ambrose to speak and write himself using the words of the sacred Author, not with an intent to plagiarize divine Wisdom, but because he had made them so much his own and repeated them in turn almost unaware.

When we approach the writings of the Saints, we can in some way feel disoriented or confused, like laymen; but if we have the grace to unite ourselves to the liturgical prayer by attending Holy Mass and with the recitation of the Divine Office in the traditional form, we find that it is the voice of the Church herself that accompanies us in this meditation on the Scriptures, right from the Invitatory at Matins. And this is true also for the Advent liturgy: *Regem venturum Dominum, venite adoremus*, the singing of the first prayer, intoned in the middle of the night in anticipation of the rising of the true Unconquered Sun. Following this solemn invitation to adore the divine King is the beginning of the book of the Prophet Isaiah, ringing forth as a severe rebuke to His people:

“Hear, O ye heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord hath spoken. I have brought up children, and exalted them: but they have despised me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel hath not known me, and my people hath not understood. Woe to the sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a wicked seed, ungracious children: they have forsaken the Lord, they have blasphemed the Holy One of Israel, they are gone away backwards. For what shall I strike you any more, you that increase transgression? the whole head is sick, and the whole heart is sad. From the sole of the foot unto the top of the head, there is no soundness therein: wounds and bruises and swelling sores: they are not bound up, nor dressed, nor fomented with oil.” (Is 1:2-6)

The Prophet’s revelation shows the Lord’s indignation at the unfaithfulness of His people, obstinate in their rebellion against His holy Law. But the literal or historical^[4] sense of Isaiah’s passage concerning the Jews is accompanied by the moral sense, that is, concerning what we must do. It is therefore to us that the Majesty of God turns: *“For the Lord hath spoken” (ibid., 2)* once again to admonish us, to show us our betrayals, to spur us to conversion.

Thus, while we ask the Lord to deliver us *de ore leonis et de profundo lacu*, we realize how little we deserve God's mercy, how unworthy of His pity and how deserving we are of His punishments. *Deus, qui culpa offenderis, pœnitentia placaris...* The prostitutions — as Scripture calls them — into which the Jews fell are now joined by new and far worse prostitutions, not by a people to whom the Redeemer was promised, but a people which was born of His side, the Mystical Body of the Redeemer Himself; or rather, of that ilk who call themselves Catholics, but who by their unfaithfulness dishonor the Bride of the Lamb, as members both of the learning and teaching Church. The new Israel has shown itself no less rebellious than the old, and the new Roman Sanhedrin is no less guilty than those who made the golden calf and offered it for the adoration of the Jews. If therefore the Prophet threatens terrible scourges upon those who disobeyed the Lord without having seen the coming Messiah, how much greater must be the words of a Prophet "of the end times" in light of the rebellion of humanity redeemed by the Blood of that divine Messiah, having been able to see the fulfilment of the Prophecies and the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity?

In the dramatic crisis that now for 60 years afflicts the Church of Christ, and which today is showing itself in all its gravity, a *pusillus grex* [little flock] asks their Lord to save humanity that has gone astray, when corruption and apostasy have penetrated even the sacred enclosure and unto the highest Throne. And it is *pusillus* [little] because the majority of those who have been regenerated in Baptism and have thus deserved to be called "sons of God" daily deny the promises of that Baptism, under the leadership of hirelings and false shepherds.

Think of how many believers, raised in absolute ignorance of the fundamentals of the Faith despite having attended Catechism, are steeped in heretical philosophical and theological doctrines, convinced that all religions are equivalent; that man is not wounded by original sin but naturally good; that the State must ignore the true Religion and tolerate error; that the mission of the Church is not the eternal salvation of souls and their conversion to Christ, but the protection of the environment and the indiscriminate welcoming of migrants. Think of those who, even though they fulfil their Sunday obligation, do not know that the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Our Lord are contained in the Holy Host, and think it is only a symbol; think of those who are convinced that repenting to themselves is sufficient to approach Communion, without calling to mind the torments that hang over those who receive the Lord's Body and Blood unworthily. Think of how many priests, how many professed religious, all the sisters and monks who believe that the Council had brought a breath of renewal in the Church, or fostered a knowledge of Sacred Scripture, or enabled the laity to understand the liturgy, hitherto ignored by the masses and jealously guarded by a caste of rigid and intolerant ecclesiastics. Think of those who saw in it an indestructible

beacon against the darkness of the world, a concrete and impregnable fortress in the face of the assaults of the 'modern' mentality, of widespread immorality, of the defence of life from its conception to its natural end. Finally, think of the irrepressible satisfaction of the enemies of Christ to see the prostration of His Church before the world, with ideologies of death, the idolatry of the state, of power, of money, of the myths of false science; a Church willing to deny her glorious heritage, to adulterate the Faith and Morals taught to her by Our Lord, to corrupt her liturgy to please heretics and sectarians: not even the most delirious ravings of the worst Freemason could have hoped to see the fulfilment of Voltaire's cry: *Écrasez l'infame!* [Crush the loathsome thing!]

In Advent we find ourselves symbolically at the gates of the temple, like Ash Wednesday in Lent, and watch from afar what happens at the altar: here is the Birth of the King of Israel, and there His Passion, Death and Resurrection. Let us imagine that we have to make an examination of conscience before we can be admitted to the holy place, as individual believers and as part of the ecclesial body. We can only come close to worshipping the King of kings, the Lord of lords, if we understand, on the one hand, the infinite Good that is offered to us in swaddling clothes in the manger; and on the other hand, our absolute unworthiness, which must necessarily be accompanied by the horror of our sins, the pain of having infinitely offended God and the desire to make reparation for the evil done through penance and good works. And we must also understand that, as living members of the Church, we also have a collective responsibility for the faults of the other faithful and of our Pastors; and as citizens, we have a responsibility for the public faults of the nations. For the Communion of Saints enables us to share with the purifying souls and the merits of those of the blessed souls in Heaven, in order to balance in an incomparably more effective way than that "communion of the wicked" which makes the effects of their evil deeds fall upon their neighbors, particularly upon other people who are enemies of God.

"Come to me, those who are tormented by the attack of dangerous wolves," Saint Ambrose exclaims. *"Come to me, those who have been driven out of paradise and whose sores have long since been penetrated by the serpent's poisons, those who have wandered far from Thy flocks in those mountains."*

We are beginning to realize that we are being besieged by ravenous wolves: by those who sow error, by those who corrupt morals, by those who propagate death and despair, by those who want to kill us in our souls even before they kill us in our bodies. We come to understand how shallow and foolish and proud we have been to allow ourselves to be deceived by the false promises of the world, of the flesh, and of the devil; how untrue were the words of those who, since the expulsion of our First Parents, continue to repeat the same temptations, to exploit our weaknesses, to exploit our pride and our vices in order to

bring us down and drag us with them to Hell. We have forgotten that we have been cast out of the earthly paradise, that we bear the marks of the venomous sting of the serpent, that we have sinned by abandoning the secure pasture of the true Faith to let ourselves be seduced by the world, by the flesh, by the devil. For if we were to live conscious of our primordial sin — which is also a collective and hereditary guilt — and of all the evil we commit and that we allow; if we were to meditate on our inability to save ourselves except through the supernatural help that God grants us through Grace; if we would not persuade ourselves that many of our actions are grave offences against the Majesty of God and that we would deserve to be wiped off the face of the earth in a way far worse than what happened to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, then we would not even need the Good Shepherd to come looking for us, to abandon the ninety-nine sheep safely in the mountains, where *“ravenous wolves cannot attack them”*.

The Saintly Bishop adds: *“Come without dogs, come without evil doers, come without the hireling, who does not know how to pass through the door. Come without a helper, without a messenger”*, because the dogs, the evil doers and the hireling are transient figures, destined to perish, to disperse at the breath that breathes forth from God’s mouth, even if at this moment it seems that the world belongs to them. *“Come, then, and seek Your sheep, not by servants, not by hirelings, but by You in person”*: the unfaithful servants invite us to be *“resilient”* and *“inclusive”*, to listen to the *“cry of Mother Earth,”*^[5] to subject ourselves to vaccination with a serum made with aborted fetuses; the hireling, *“cujus non sunt oves propriæ”* (...) scatters us, abandons us, does not drive away the ferocious wolves and does not punish the wicked, but rather encourages them.

Why then should the Lord come? Why can we ask Him, *“Come Thou in person”*? St. Ambrose answers in prayer by quoting the Psalmist: *“For I have not forgotten Thy commandments”* (Ps 118:176). Our obedience to God’s will finds perfect correspondence — and a divine example — in the obedience of the eternal Son of the Father from all eternity, accepting to incarnate Himself, suffer and die for our salvation: *“Then said I: Behold I come: in the head of the book it is written of Me: that I should do Thy will, O God”* (Heb 10:7). The Lord comes in obedience to the Father and we must await His coming by being obedient to the will of the Holy Trinity, *“for I have not forgotten Thy commandments.”*

The reason why we can be sure that the Lord will come after us, delivering us from the onslaught of wolves and the nefarious influence of evil doers and hirelings, is that we must not forget what He has commanded us; we must not take His place by deciding what is good and what is evil; we must not follow the multitude into the abyss for human respect or because of cowardice or complicity, but remain like the ninety-nine sheep in the secure pastures of the Holy Church, *“for the ravenous wolves cannot attack them as long as they*

are on the mountains”, closer to God by being detached from earthly things. In addition, we must exercise Holy Humility, recognising ourselves as sinners: *“come and seek out the one sheep that has erred”*, for *“Thou alone art able to turn back the errant sheep and You will not grieve those from whom You have strayed”*, that is, the Catholics of all times, who have remained faithful, safe from the wolves in the high pastures. *“And they too will rejoice at the return of the sinner”*.

The prayer of Saint Ambrose continues with a very profound and meaningful expression: *“Receive me in the flesh that fell in Adam. Receive me, not from Sarah, but from Mary, so that I may be not only a virgin untouched, but a virgin immune, through the effect of grace, from every stain of sin”*. In Holy Mary, *Sancta Virgo virginum*, we find the Mediatrix of all graces; in Her, most pure creature, is incarnated the Eternal Word of God, from Her the Savior is born to the world; through Her we are presented to Her divine Son, and by His merits we may be received *“in the flesh that fell in Adam”*, by virtue of the Grace that restores us in friendship with God. A most fitting inspiration for meditation as we prepare ourselves for the Holy Nativity.

But there is another very important consideration that St. Ambrose leaves at the end of his oration: *“Bring me by the Cross that gives salvation to the wanderers, in which alone there is rest for the weary, in which alone shall all who die live.”* Everything revolves around the Cross of Christ, it rises in time and eternity as a sign of contradiction, by which we remember that it is an instrument of Redemption, salvation for the wandering, rest for the weary, life for those who are dying. A 14th-century miniature by Pacino di Buonaguida^[6] presents a very rare and highly symbolic image: the Lord climbing up the Cross with a ladder — the *scala virtutum* — to emphasize the willingness of His sacrifice and the “paradox” of His dual Nature. In 17th-century iconography we find a recurring image of the Child Jesus sleeping on the Cross,^[7] an explicit allusion to divine love and the sacrifice of Christ. Christmas and Easter are intrinsically linked; thus, in preparation for the Birth of the Savior, we must always contemplate the centrality and veritable fulcrum of the Cross, on which rests the Child Jesus, and on which ascends, by way of a mystical ladder, the Immaculate Lamb. It is there that we also have to arrive, because it is only on the Cross that we find salvation, in pursuit of the Lord: *“And He said to all: If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me”* (Lk 9:23).

“Veni, ut facias salutem in terris, in coelo gaudium,” “Come and accomplish salvation on earth, joy in heaven.” Let this be our invocation during the sacred time of Advent, to prepare ourselves spiritually for the trials that await us.

+ Carlo Maria Viganò, Archbishop

November 28, 2021
Dominica I Adventus

[1] “Seek, he says, Thy servant, because I have not forgotten Thy commandments [Ps 118:176]. Come therefore, Lord Jesus, seek Thy servant, seek Thy weary sheep; come, Shepherd, seek, as Joseph sought the sheep [Gen 37:14]. Thy sheep hast wandered while Thou didst tarry, while Thou hast been about in the mountains. Leave behind Thy ninety-nine sheep, and come seek the one which hath wandered [Mt 18:12 ff; Lk 15:4]. Come without dogs, come without evil doers, come without the hireling, who does not know how to pass through the door [Jn 10:1-7]. Come without a helper, without a messenger. I have been waiting for Thy coming for a long time. For I know that Thou wilt come, for I have not forgotten Thy commandments [Ps 118:176]. Come not with a rod, but with charity and in the spirit of meekness [1 Cor 4:21].” — Saint Ambrose, *Expositio Psalmi CXVIII*, 22, 28.

[2] Dom Prosper Guéranger, *L’Anno liturgico*, I. Avvento — Natale — Quaresima — Passione, trad. it. P. Graziani, Alba, 1959, pp. 21-26.

[3] “*Sanctissimus namque Gregorius cum preces effunderet ad Dominum ut musicum donum ei desuper in carminibus dedisset, tunc descendit Spiritus Sanctus super eum, in specie columbæ, et illustravit cor ejus, et sic demum exortus est canere, ita dicendo: Ad te levavi...*” Trope to the Introit of the First Sunday of Advent — Cfr. <https://gregobase.selapa.net/chant.php?id=4654>.

[4] *Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia* (The letter teaches what has happened, the allegory what you have to believe, the moral what you have to do, the anagogy the goal you have to aim for) — Nicola di Lyra, *Postilla in Gal.*, 4:3.

[5] Cfr.

<https://www.vaticannews.va/it/papa/news/2021-10/ebook-papa-francesco-laudato-si.html> and <https://www.avvenire.it/opinioni/pagine/il-grido-della-terra-e-dei-poveri>.

[6] Cfr. <https://scriptoriumdaily.com/ladder-at-the-cross> — A painting of the Giotto school with an identical subject is in the Monastery of Sant’Antonio in Polesine, Ferrara. See also by Anna Eörsi, *Haec scala significat ascensum virtutum. Remarks on the iconography of Christ Mounting the Cross on a Ladder* — https://arthist.elte.hu/Tanarok/EorsiA/Fulltexts/Idegen/l%E9tra_a.htm.

[7] See, for example, Guido Reni's painting, *Gesù Bambino addormentato sulla Croce*, oil on canvas, c. 1625.