

ADVENT *and*
CHRISTMAS
—— *with* ——
THOMAS MERTON

A Redemptorist Pastoral Publication



Liguori

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*A*dvent is a time of waiting, of expectation, of silence. Waiting for our Lord to be born. A pregnant woman is so happy, so content. She lives in such a garment of silence, and it is as though she were listening to hear the stir of life within her. One always hears that stirring compared to the rustling of a bird in the hand. But the intentness with which one awaits such stirring is like nothing so much as a blanket of silence.

DOROTHY DAY



Introduction

THOMAS MERTON, O.C.S.O., Trappist monk, hermit, peace activist, poet, retreat leader, and spiritual writer, was one of the most charismatic religious figures of our time. He died in Bangkok, Thailand, in 1968, the result of an accidental shock from an electric fan. He was on a journey to meet with monks of the Eastern spiritual tradition, in which he was greatly interested. His pilgrimage to Thailand, India, and Sri Lanka was his first long journey outside the Abbey of Gethsemani in many years and was part of a search to learn more about those aspects of Asian spiritual traditions that could be applied to Western monasticism. Merton's interest in this area can be seen in his books *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, and *The Asian Journals of Thomas Merton*.

Born in France in 1915 to an American father and a New Zealand mother, Merton converted to Catholicism in 1938 while he was a student at Columbia University in New York City. This experience is detailed in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), an autobiographical account of his conversion and his eventual decision to enter the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani, located in Kentucky, in 1941. During his initial period at Gethsemani, he wrote *Seeds of Contemplation* and *The Waters of Siloe*.

Merton was ordained a priest in 1949. During the period after ordination, Merton wrote *The Ascent to Truth*, *Bread in the Wilderness*, *The Sign of Jonas*, *The Living Bread*, *No Man Is an*

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Island, and *The Silent Life*. After being appointed Master of the Choir Novices in 1955, Merton penned such books as *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, and *Disputed Questions*. It was also during this time that he wrote essays deploring nuclear arms, the war in Vietnam, racial inequality, and violence of all kinds.

Small selections from Father Louis' books (those mentioned in the preceding paragraphs and many more) have been chosen to provide inspiration for the passage through Advent. Even these small paragraphs show Father Louis as a warm and straightforward writer who can speak plainly to his readers. As he wrote in the preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "I don't want to speak to you as an author, or a narrator, not even a philosopher, but simply as a friend. I would like to speak to you as your alternate self....If you listen you will hear things that will be said that perhaps are not written in this book. And that will be coming, not from me, but from the One who lives and speaks inside both of us." So, let us begin.



PART I



READINGS *for*
ADVENT



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DAY 1

*[Y]ou know what time it is,
how it is now the moment
for you to wake from sleep.
For salvation is nearer to us now
than when we became believers;
the night is far gone,
the day is near.*

*Let us then lay aside the works of darkness
and put on the armor of light;
let us live honorable as in the day,
not in reveling and drunkenness,
not in debauchery and licentiousness,
not in quarreling and jealousy.
Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ.*

ROMANS 13:11–14

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Awake, You Sleepers

Many of the Zen stories which are almost always incomprehensible in rational terms are simply the ringing of an alarm clock, and the reaction of the sleeper. Usually, the misguided sleeper makes a response which in effect turns off the alarm so that he can go back to sleep. Sometimes he jumps out of bed with a shout of astonishment that it is so late. Sometimes he just sleeps and does not hear the alarm at all....

But we in the West, living in a tradition of stubborn ego-centered practicality and geared entirely for the use and manipulation of everything, always pass from one thing to another, from cause to effect, from the first to the next and to the last and then back to the first. Everything always points to something else, and hence we never stop anywhere because we cannot: as soon as we pause, the escalator reaches the end of the ride and we have to get off and find another one.

ZEN AND THE BIRDS OF APPETITE



Lord, be our alarm clock as we make our way through this Advent in expectation of your coming. Keep us from “sleeping at the switch” so that our life of faith has an opportunity to grow and mature in us, and so that our life in the world becomes one of light and honor and love. Above all, let us not sleep through your call. Give us the grace to use this Advent season as a time for our own growth and the growth of our spiritual community.

Amen.

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DAY 2

*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness....*

*The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.*

*It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD....*

*Although he causes grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
for he does not willingly afflict
or grieve anyone.*

LAMENTATIONS 3:22–26, 32–33

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In the Midst of His Love and Mercy

*I*t is only the infinite mercy and love of God that has prevented us from tearing ourselves to pieces and destroying His entire creation long ago....On the contrary, consider how in spite of centuries of sin and greed and lust and cruelty and hatred and avarice and oppression and injustice, spawned and bred by the free wills of men, the human race can still recover, each time, and can still produce men and women who overcome evil with good, hatred with love, greed with charity, lust and cruelty with sanctity. How could all this be possible without the merciful love of God, pouring out His grace upon us?...

THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN



God of light, be the hope of our suffering. Keep us from the darkness of sin and greed; keep us from the mindless quest for superiority and success, from the depravity of hatred and anger. Astonish us with your mercy and love so that we may never forget your faithful compassion. Let us use this time of waiting to recover our bearings and refrain from afflicting anyone with our own sins, no matter how insignificant they may seem to be. Amen.





DAY 3

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning.
O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.*

PSALM 130 [129]:5–8

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Going Forth to Christ

Advent is the “sacrament” of the PRESENCE of God in His world, in the Mystery of Christ at work in History....

This mystery is the revelation of God Himself in His Incarnate Son. But it is not merely a manifestation of the Divine Perfections, it is the concrete plan of God for the salvation of men and the restoration of the whole world in Christ.

This plan is envisaged not as a future prospect but as a present *fact*. The “last things” are already present and realized in a hidden manner. The Kingdom of God is thus already “in the midst of us.” But, the mystery can only be known by those who enter into it, who find their place in the Mystical Christ, and therefore find the mystery of Christ realized and fulfilled *in themselves*.

SEASONS OF CELEBRATION



Lord Jesus, assuage our blindness and activate our hearts during this Advent, so that we may find your presence hidden in ourselves. May we unveil the mystery of Christ-with-us and work toward the true restoration of the whole world in your image. Let your light shine in our hearts so that we may always know the truth of your love. Amen.





DAY 4

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.*

*For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.*

*Nations shall come to your light
and kings to the brightness of your dawn....
but the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.*

ISAIAH 60:1–3, 19

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Called Out of Darkness

Every baptized Christian is obliged by his baptismal promises to renounce sin and to give himself completely, without compromise, to Christ, in order that he may fulfill his vocation, save his soul, enter into the mystery of God, and there find himself perfectly “in the light of Christ.”

As Saint Paul reminds us (1 Corinthians 6:19), we are “not our own.” We belong entirely to Christ. His spirit has taken possession of us at baptism. We are the Temples of the Holy Spirit. Our thoughts, our actions, our desires, are by rights more his than our own. But we have to struggle to ensure that God always receives from us what we owe him by right.

LIFE AND HOLINESS



O Lord, awake us from the comfortable existence in which we too often may be safely cocooned, and challenge us to accept the call of our baptism. Afflict us with your grace so that we take seriously our efforts to aid the poor, to comfort the sad and lonely, to let our light shine as a beacon to all who may need our help. Allow us to serve also as a wake-up call to our brothers and sisters whose companionship in Christ we share. Amen.





DAY 5

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light.

EPHESIANS 5:8–14

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Worthy Beacons

We are supposed to be the light of the world. We are supposed to be a light to ourselves and to others. That may well be what accounts for the fact that the world is in darkness! What then is meant by the light of Christ in our lives? What is “holiness”? What is divine sonship? Are we really seriously supposed to be saints? Can a man even desire such a thing without making a complete fool of himself in the eyes of everyone else...? To tell the truth, many lay people and even a good many religious do not believe, in practice, that sanctity is possible for them. Is this just plain common sense? Is it perhaps humility? Or is it defection, defeatism, and despair?

If we are called by God to holiness of life, and if holiness is beyond our natural power to achieve (which it certainly is) then it follows that God himself must give us the light, the strength, and the courage to fulfill the task.

LIFE AND HOLINESS



Christ, Our Redeemer, help us stand firm in the safety of your everlasting light and sustain us in the glorification of your works. Wash us clean with your grace, so that we may be released from our obsession with our own egos and our “own story.” Fill our hearts with courage and faith so that we may seriously follow the path to holiness and saintliness. Amen.

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DAY 6

[Y]ou say, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.” You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

REVELATION 3:17–20

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Correcting the Sinner

*I*t is normal and necessary for a mature Christian to have to confront, at some time or other, the inevitable shortcomings of Christians—of others as well as of himself. It is both dishonest and unfaithful for a Christian to imagine that the only way to preserve his faith in the Church is to convince himself that everything is always, in every way, at all times ideal in her life and activity. History is there to prove the contrary. It is unfortunately true that Christians themselves, for one reason or another, may in the name of God himself and of his truth, cling to subtle forms of prejudice, inertia, and mental paralysis. Indeed there may even be serious moral disorders and injustices where holiness should prevail....

The Christian must learn how to face these problems with a sincere and humble concern for truth and for the glory of God's Church. He must learn to help correct these errors, without falling into an indiscreet or rebellious zeal....

LIFE AND HOLINESS



God of love, help us to hear your knock on the door to our hearts so that we may not fail to be invited to your eternal banquet. Amplify in us the spirit of courage and love so that we may surrender our tendencies toward moral dysfunction and prideful self-indulgence. Give us the wisdom we need to face the problems of our world, our families, ourselves with radical honesty and appropriate sensitivity. Keep our heads from the sands so we may address the real improprieties we find around us. Let us work to heal at least one wound this Advent. Amen.

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