



## THEOLOGY CORNER

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### “What Are We *Really* Preparing for in Advent”

Last month, I dealt with the idea of opening our hearts to the coming of Christ in our lives “right now” as we prepare for our celebration of the coming of the Christ child — a celebration of the Incarnation; the Word made flesh which dwelt among us in the humility of his humanity. While these are always points of emphasis in the season of Advent, they are certainly not the *only* comings of our Lord for which we prepare. A lesser discussed “coming” or “advent” of Christ is his Second Coming (i.e., the Parousia). Although many avoid talking about the Second Coming of our Lord at the end of time (due either to lack of knowledge on the subject or in fear of scaring people), it serves as a major theme in the readings leading up to Advent and throughout the Advent season. For instance, what exactly does it mean when we profess in the Nicene Creed that Christ “*will come again to judge the living and the dead*” or that we “*look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come*”? Moreover, how do we prepare for such an event?

The first question that typically follows from the idea of the Second Coming and the Last Judgment is: “What is the point of another judgment beyond the judgment that we receive at our death?” Admittedly, at first glance, it seems rather redundant. But a deeper look into this will show that our first or “particular judgment” has to do with the consequences of our actions as they relate to our soul — our individual relationship with God. Whereas the final or “general judgment” has to do with the consequences of our actions as they relate to others and how they impacted human history. At the Second Coming, the ultimate meaning of all creation and of the entire economy of salvation is made known to all (CCC, 1040).

But what does this have to do with the season of Advent? Everything. Advent is the dedicated time in the liturgical year in which we give special attention to our preparation for all three “comings” of Christ. We read from the first letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians “that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” (1 Thess 5:2). In other words, the time of judgment will be a surprise. Christ also warns us to be vigilant so that the day does not “catch you by surprise like a trap.” (Luke 21:34). Lastly, he says, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” (Matt 24:36). In light of this, our level of preparation will dictate whether the surprise is a good one or whether it is bad like a trap.

#### “The Three Comings of Christ”

The idea of the three comings of Christ was popularized by St. Bernard of Clairvaux. We are most familiar with what we call the First and Second Coming of Christ.

**The First Coming** refers to the coming of Christ in the Incarnation dwelling among us as the child Jesus.

**The Second Coming** being the coming of Christ in glory at the end of time.

**The Third Coming** or sometimes referred to as the “middle coming” is the coming of Christ in spirit and power within ourselves — taking possession of our whole way of life. This is Christ living in us.

Putting this all together, we see that the First Coming of Christ involves his visible condescension into the flesh, the Second Coming as his visible coming in glory and majesty in the end, and the Third (technically middle) Coming as an *invisible* power to dwell in us.

As an addition to these, Christ also comes to us

None of us like bad surprises, but every bad surprise comes about from a lack of preparation.

The Third Sunday of Advent is Gaudete (“rejoice”) Sunday. This celebration points out that all three comings of Christ should be something that we rejoice in. The Second Coming should be a joyful surprise for us all because a good disciple of Christ awaits his coming and his judgment in joyful hope. This is because we know that God is just and we want nothing more than for his will to be carried out for all of mankind. If we develop in our relationship with Christ right now, then we have no cause for concern but only joy when we witness his reign at the end of time. If we come to the Lord prepared, we will be the voice of the great multitude that John speaks of in Revelation, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.” (Rev 19:7). This is precisely the point of Advent: that the Church, the Bride of Christ, may be prepared for the bridegroom.

We look forward to the “resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come” because it is through the resurrection of the body that we partake most perfectly in the resurrection of Christ as our souls are reunited with our bodies, glorified and becoming incorruptible by the power of Christ’s Resurrection. The life of the world to come is the completion of the new creation when God brings about the heavenly Jerusalem — bringing about his final plan for salvation, lifting up all of creation and re-ordering it to himself as it was in the beginning. We cannot even fathom how great that would be, but we can prepare for it nevertheless. May the Lord offer us a participation in his joy and peace as we prepare for his arrival.