

A Eucharistic Advent

Written by David Bonagura in *The Catholic Thing*
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Advent curiously proceeds from the future to the past, from the arrival of Christ at the end of time to the arrival of the infant Christ millennia ago at Bethlehem. The bridge joining the two is St. John the Baptist's message that still applies for us in the present: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 3:2)

We hear the Baptist's charge on the second Sunday of Advent but we rarely dwell on it. Bridges may be pretty to look at, but they are not destinations. We hurry across with a quick glance on our way to more important matters: shopping, decorating, feasting, opening our presents.

Yet John won't let us pass him unnoticed. Determined to penetrate our ears, now stuffed with air pods, he shouts a message that we must heed or suffer the consequences:

I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:11-12)

Only repentance – expressing sorrow for sin and asking for forgiveness – prepares us for Christ's birth. The road to Bethlehem runs wide through the wilderness by the Jordan. It's a rough road, quite out of the way, but the only way to the newborn king.

Bethlehem means "house of bread." What do we find there? The Word made flesh, the Bread of Life, whose flesh is life for the world. "My flesh is food indeed." (John 6:55) Jesus comes to us in the Incarnation so we "may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10) He nourishes our flesh with His own: "[H]e who eats me will live because of me. This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever." (John 6:57-58)

So what are we really preparing for in Advent? Yes, the birth of Christ, which is not only an end in itself (we simply *sit* with the Lord, adoring alongside the shepherds and Magi) but also a means to an end: it brings about our redemption. The Son of God has taken on flesh. He then gives us His flesh in the Eucharist so we can prepare to meet Him when He comes again in triumph.

The Advent of Christ in the flesh, then, sends us back to the future Advent that we celebrated first. And we arrive back there via the same bridge we crossed earlier: through repentance of sin as preached by the Baptist.



Baptism of Christ by Jacopo Tintoretto (workshop), 1580s [Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH]

Repentance is not a singular occurrence. We must repent daily because as we live, we inevitably sin. The Church urges a nightly examination of conscience to foster a habit of repentance. But our sorrow turns to joy, for we know the two sides of the bridge: the infant Christ and the judging Christ. Each fills us with awe. Each spurs us to action. Each calls us to a greater love.

The incarnation brings about our deification. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21) “God became man so that man might become God.” (St. Augustine)

The Eucharist allows the incarnate God to deify us from within. As we digest Him, we become more like Him. Our repentance prepares us to receive Him, who then provides us power to resist sin and to love more courageously. The Eucharist is the sacrament of love, which is the motive for and the means of repentance. In uniting love and repentance, the Eucharist also unites the two comings of Christ.

If John the Baptist is the bridge between the two Advents, the Eucharist is the bridge's vertical suspender and cables. Anchored deep in the sea and stretching skyward, it supports the entire bridge, equally present to both its ends that become one through it. It is not just functional, but beautiful.

Hence, for the Eucharist, we stop look up, and adore. Past and present become one in it because it is He who is “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” (Revelation 22:13) The Eucharist is the Christ of Bethlehem who is coming in triumph to judge the world.

Christ's self-sacrifice made the gift of the Eucharist possible. We never use the word, but Advent preparation – even the worldly kind of selecting gifts and decorating homes – requires sacrifice: we give ourselves, including our time and our money to charity, as our gift to others and, thereby, to Him.

And He returns the favor as we shift our focus back and forth from birth to death, from the manger to the judgment, from the end of Advent to its beginning – all with simultaneous repentance and love. “Truly, I say to you, there is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.” (Luke 18:29-30)