



SIEBENQUELL

In defence of Advent



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This is my 35th Advent as a priest. While it is my favorite liturgical time, I am keenly aware that it also awakens deep stress, dissatisfaction and even depression in a great many people. Here is a time that should bring us to the slower pace and the deeper heart. For the most part, it has been transformed into a season that harries us more than any other and that causes us to lose ourselves in a frenzy of consumption, partying and preparations for a perfect feast no one ever attains. Many people realise that this is a problem for them, but feel helpless to escape the same old cycle as every year.

Like every other problem known to human kind, our first instinct is to seek the culprit anywhere and everywhere, except in ourselves. We blame the society. We blame the hectic nature of modern life. We blame consumerism and globalisation. And now it is time to blame Advent.

I recently held a conversation with a man who was tremendously overwhelmed by the demands of his daily life. He described to me in some detail and at considerable length the long and wearisome hours of his first two weeks of the Advent season. Upon reaching the end of his tale of woe, he ended with the somewhat sarcastic remark: »So much for the so-called reflective season of Advent.« There we have it. He exercises, like so many others a criticism of the season, as if Advent could magically produce reflection in people unwilling to lift a finger to make it happen.

There is no reflective season. There are only reflective people. Advent offers us a four-week long reminder that we should take the time, make the time, to pause, reflect and go deeper. To become reflective, we must take a long, loving look at the real. The biblical stories remind us, that this means we must become true hearers of the Word. Yet, this is a process that cannot be accomplished swiftly. It takes time to genuinely hear anything. Authentic hearing means to take in, take up and take along. That requires three basic postures of the human heart: attentiveness, openness and availability

In a recent homily on Isaiah's vision of peace I wrote:

»We cannot take in, take up and take along anything without contemplation; the more contemplative, the more just. Lion and cattle, as well as infants and adders, will first act instinctively. The lion will follow its hunting instinct, the adder its protective instinct. But no one will act against his instinct who does not first reflect on what is inside him, what drives him, why it drives him and whether he could imagine living and acting in a completely different way. We must first look honestly at our prejudices and our fears, and admit that they are deeply rooted in us. In addition, we have to take time to look at the motivation of the other person, to understand his or her instinctive attitude. This is where deceleration is called for, because we cannot act or react immediately. That is what we do when we act instinctively. Without this contemplation beyond instinct, there will be no shalom.«

In the Advent season, we are called to move beyond our usual instinct to consume everything life has to offer, as quickly and thoughtlessly as possible. Yet, deceleration is not proclaimed by the Advent season, but chosen by the Advent person. There is never a time that can force us to be reflective, to move deeper into the inner life. Without making the choice and taking the time for a long, loving look at the real, we will never find our shalom.

In his seminal book, *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupery writes: »Men have no more time to understand anything. They buy ready-made things in the shops. However, since there are no shops where you can buy friends, men no longer have any friends«. In those words, the heart of Advent is to be found. We do not slow down, we do not reflect, we do not pause, only to we discover that we have no friends, simply because we never took the time needed to forge friendships.

The biblical stories tell us to seek friendship with God, with others, with the whole of creation as well as with ourselves. John Shea advises that we make friends with the storytellers of God. Walter Burghardt strongly recommends that we make friends with people who burn with a hunger for justice. Poets suggest that we make friends with the language that can unveil mystery and beauty. Musicians urge us to make friends with melody and rhythm. We could forge friendships with children, the infirm and the elderly. They will most assuredly lead us to the places where our speed and productivity are not king, but where we can touch the most tender and fragile places of creation.

Therefore, I rise for the 35th year in a row to the defence of the great Advent season. These days extend to us an invitation, which we are free to refuse. Yet, the refusal to accept an invitation does not mean that it contained no life in it.

Instead, it says something about our inability to find the fire in us to wager something new, different, untried and unfamiliar. Rush, if you must, but do not lay the blame of a hollowed out life and a depleted heart at the doorstep of Advent. There are no reflective season, just reflective people.

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