

Advent a Time of Joyful Penance
Deacon George Zarella

For many of us Thanksgiving kicks off another season of "here we go again" fending off the annual bombardment from advertisers and the temptation to measure Christmas in terms of presents. It's a month-long struggle to get all of our holiday work done and somehow keeps Christ in Christmas.

So did you know that Christmas isn't the Church's major holiday. Church Fathers such as Augustine didn't include a commemoration of Christ's birth in their lists of holidays at all. Early Christians focused their attention on Easter as the holiest day in the Church's calendar. As far as fasting remember Every Friday has been and is still is recommended to be a day of penance (by the way-the rule is either eat no meat or an equivalent penance, every Friday).

Simplifying things to a leisurely level would be a courageous counter-cultural stand and that is why we have advent, the weeks before Christmas, a season that can still put the holiday in perspective.

Advent is a lot like Lent. Starting in about the sixth century, Advent and Lent used the same liturgies, Mass for Mass, in the Latin Rite. During both seasons, you would see the purple vestments of mourning, a symbolism echoed today by the colored candles of the Advent wreath and the altar vestments. Advent fasting and almsgiving used to keep people aware of the proper use of material goods and of the need to offset other people's poverty with the excess from our own prosperity.

But there's one crucial difference between Lent and Advent: Christmas doesn't have Passion Week preceding it. The penitential observances of Advent always had a festive character to them. The idea was to contain your excitement before Christmas and to use that energy in preparing for Christ's coming. So people took on these penances joyfully-something that only a Christian could do. They'd pause in their celebrations to acknowledge their sins and to clean house spiritually, overjoyed that Christ came to us, but aware of our unworthiness to receive him.

We still use Advent calendars and wreaths to measure our joyful anticipation, but we can learn a lot from the old Advent practices that we've forgotten. Families would have meager meals and give the unused food to the needy. Parishes used to have penitential feasts after Mass during Advent, with menus that were abundant but austere-bread and water, maybe, or fish, but plenty of it.

People had a good time keeping Advent, although music and dancing were forbidden then, just as during Lent. It was all part of a "discipline of joy" that is still an important part of our heritage today. Listen to the Mass after the Lord's Prayer: "In your mercy keep us free from sin as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ." That's Advent, right there. Maybe we can still recapture this Christian attitude of joyful

penance. And remember to pay more attention to Easter. It's still our highest holy day. And the weather's usually nicer, too.

Deacon George Zarella is a permanent deacon, and the pastoral associate at Holy Cross Parish in South Easton, as well as a hospice chaplain. You can contact him at gzarella@holycrosseaston.org. For more information on Holy Cross Parish, please visit www.holycrosseaston.org.