

*Christmas with
the Holy Fathers*



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Compiled by Peter Celano

FOREWORD BY THOMAS HOWARD



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Christmas with the Holy Fathers

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FOREWORD

*T*HE YEARLY RETURN OF ADVENT OFFERS to us a sequence of days in which we may turn our thoughts to a particularly rich series of events touching on the drama of our Redemption. Each event discloses a mystery, since in each case we find that what is played out on the stage of our own history reaches through the scrim that veils eternity from time, and presents to us mortals, in effect, the Love of God at work.

The whole season bids us reflect on the "coming" of God's Love to us in the person of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. The divine preparation for this great event is marked during the first few days of Advent with the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. And from there we move, with our Lady as it were, on to Christmas Eve with the shepherds, bringing with them the adoration of us all to the Incarnate One, and thence to the Morning of the Nativity itself. Christmas Night asks us to reflect on the call to holiness; and then we come upon St. Stephen's Day, which draws to our attention the first instance of our mortal flesh being asked to enter, via martyrdom, into

the mystery of suffering that had been prepared, in God's counsels, for the newborn Infant from before the Creation. We mark with a Solemnity the mystery that crowns the young Virgin as Mother of God, with all that this means of God's munificence in drawing our lowly humanity into the highest precincts of His own action. And finally the Magi arrive to adore, bringing with them, as it were, the whole Gentile world for whom the gospel is to be opened.

In this small book we are invited to order our minds to the joyful task of meditating on these mysteries under the tutelage of the Bishops of Rome—a vastly encouraging invitation, as it happens, since it confirms for us, the faithful, the Lord's promise in choosing Peter to be the first of the long apostolic succession of servants of the servants of God who will be our shepherds until He returns in glory.

—*Thomas Howard*



INTRODUCTION

*T*HERE IS NO BETTER TIME THAN ADVENT and Christmas to turn our heads and hearts around to the true meaning of our lives in Christ. Each year, we anticipate his coming, and then we learn anew how to best live into the meaning of Christ with us.

Still, there is probably no time of the year when it is more difficult to focus on our Lord than right about now. Slow changes have occurred over the last generation or two, diminishing the season of Advent for those of us who are old enough to remember earlier times. No sooner do the decorations for Christmas go up after (sometimes even before!) Thanksgiving, then we begin to lose focus on the waiting and anticipation that are meant to fill this season.

Customs have changed along the way. Caroling, for instance, has faded away from what used to be a delightful tradition in tightly knit neighborhoods. And of course gift giving has become something that our grandparents would never have imagined. Most of our children spend more time dreaming about what sorts of presents they will open on Christmas morning

than they do imagining what happened on that first night two millennia ago.

Christmas with the Holy Fathers offers an opportunity to you and your family to slow down and listen.



There's nothing more beautiful than the Christmas season as it is celebrated at St. Peter's Basilica and throughout Vatican City. If you are Catholic, you may well have watched on television, or perhaps even been there in person at some time in the past, as one of the Holy Fathers celebrated the Eucharist on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning. You may have actually heard some of the homilies, Angelus messages, and prayers that are excerpted in this book on the occasions when they were first given.

Many of these messages were originally delivered at difficult times in the history of the world. The Holy Father is a world leader, in addition to being the spiritual leader for more than one billion people. We have looked to the Holy Fathers for guidance in times of war and conflict, and often these Advent and Christmas messages have brought comfort and

perspective to the people of the world, people of all faiths, in times of extraordinary need.

The lights, music, and liturgy of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany continue for more than a month. The sermons given by the Holy Fathers throughout the ages at this time of year are among the most inspiring Christian literature ever delivered to an audience. Each Holy Father delivers special messages to the faithful on the great occasions of Advent, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God, and on the Feast of the Epiphany. Their addresses were originally delivered orally and to great crowds.

At times, the pope speaks primarily in his capacity as the bishop of Rome, his oldest ecclesiastical title, and we have an opportunity to see how the Archdiocese of Rome relates to its spiritual father. But on each of these occasions, the pope speaks to all of us as a spiritual father. For Roman Catholics, the pope is "Papa," our true spiritual father, and we turn to him for guidance. We are rarely more attuned to hear the words of our spiritual fathers than on these special days leading to the birth of our Lord.



The personalities of the popes are varied and different. Each has his own way of communicating, and each, his unique messages for the essential life of the Church in that day. The following collection includes messages from Holy Fathers going back in history as far as Pope St. Leo the Great (AD 440–61). Pope Benedict XVI recently referred to Pope Leo as one of the most important popes in history. At one of his weekly Wednesday audiences, Pope Benedict said that Pope Leo “was one of the greatest incumbents of the See of Rome, the authority and prestige of which he strengthened. He is also the earliest pope whose sermons have come down to us, sermons he would address to the people who gathered around him during celebrations.”¹

And then, of course, we have included selections from the messages of Pope Benedict XVI, as well as from Pope John Paul II (1978–2005). In his very first message from the loggia of St. Peter’s Basilica as pope, Benedict XVI referred to his predecessor as “the great Pope John Paul II” and since that time, Christians all over the world have been calling him Pope John Paul the Great, waiting for the day to come soon when we might add saint to his name.

Other favorite popes in history would include the following, many of whom are to be found in the following pages:

- Pope Saint Gregory I the Great (590–604)
- Pope Nicholas II (1059–61)
- Pope Saint Gregory VII (1073–85)
- Pope Innocent III (1198–1216)
- Pope Julius II (1503–12)
- Pope Paul III (1534–49)
- Pope Blessed Pius IX (1846–78)
- Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903)
- Pope Blessed John XXIII (1958–63)

The Christmas season has always been a special time for the Holy Fathers. Pope Saint Julius I, for example, was the one to mark December 25 as the official celebration of the great feast, in AD 350. December 25 is precisely nine months after March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation. (Ancient Christians also counted March 25 as the day of the crucifixion of Christ.) Pope Pius IX was the one to proclaim the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854, to be celebrated on December 8, and then Pope Pius X remembered the occasion fifty years later (both excerpted below).

You likely have other Holy Fathers on your own list of favorites. We have included excerpts from as many of their messages as we could.

All of their messages are vital messages for the people of God. It is during this time of year, more than any other, that people of the other Christian denominations and other faiths turn to the voice of the Holy Father. He speaks to the world and the world listens to what he has to say. The words that follow, from the homilies of the popes during this most important of seasons, have drawn two millennia of people, from all parts of the world, to the holy Catholic Church.



ONE

Advent

INCLUDING THE FEAST OF
THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION,
DECEMBER 8



THE MEANING OF ADVENT

*T*HE NAME *ADVENT* comes from the Latin word *advenire* (to come to), and refers to the coming of Jesus Christ to earth. This is the time of year during which the people of God begin preparing for the celebration of the Feast of Christmas that is to come, the annual birth of our Savior who comes into our midst.

The mystery of the Advent season is captured in remembering the original coming of Christ, as well as the Second Coming that we await in the future. The Messiah, the chosen one, will arrive in humble circumstances, foretold by the prophets. As Gabriel said to Mary, "Do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Look! You are to conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end." (Luke 1:30–33)

He lives among us; he is *Emmanuel*, God with us. And that babe from the manger will come again in bodily form, and his kingdom shall have no end.

According to the customs of the ancient Church, the observance of Advent once included fasting for a period of forty days, just as we do during Lent, today. But during the Middle Ages, Advent was changed to a four-week period. The first Sunday of Advent is always the Sunday closest to November 30, the Feast of St. Andrew, and the fourth Sunday of Advent is always the Sunday before December 25.

In the pages that follow, you will be able to join the Holy Fathers in the great expectation and then celebration of the birth of the Messiah. Then ponder, explore, and celebrate with the Church of ages past, as we strive to make the birth of Christ real and present in our lives, today.