

CHURCH STUFF

(A newsletter for Catholic cadets)

Week of 1 December, 2002

To my Catholic brothers and sisters in the Corps:

Hope you had a good Break.

God knows, we all needed it.

Hope you had a chance to relax and unwind...

And now that we're back, let's not allow the busyness of Army-Navy week and the approaching exams to overshadow the fact that the Church has begun the Season of ADVENT...the Catholic way of preparing for Christmas...a time of SILENCE and EXPECTATION...

This Sunday (1 December) is the First Sunday of ADVENT.

It's a good time of year to think about HOPE, a time to remember the great gift of God to us all: Jesus Christ...and his saving presence in our lives.

My prayer for you is that you all allow the magic of this season of HOPE - when darkness begins to slowly give way to light - to change you.

May we pray in the silence of the ADVENT season:

How silently,
how silently,
the wondrous gift is given.

I would be silent now, Lord,
and expectant...
that I may receive the gift I need
and become the gift others need.

A good ADVENT to each one of you.

May your journey to Christmas be focused and centered, and may we each become a BLESSING to one another.

THINGS CATHOLICS CAN DO:

JOIN US FOR DAILY MASS

Every day at 0630 (except Saturday and Sunday).

Catholic Chaplain's Office.

A great way to observe ADVENT.

MAKE PERSONAL CONFESSION

Annual ADVENT PENANCE SERVICE.

Tuesday, 10 December, at the Chapel at 1930.

OPEN HOUSE

We'll be having an OPEN HOUSE in the Catholic Chaplain's Office on Sunday, 15 December, from 1400 to 1700. What this means is as follows:

- you become sick of studying, so
- you come down to our office, and
- we feed you handsomely, while
- you chill for a little bit before
- going back to the books.

This is a no-brainer.

Plan on stopping by on the 15th (I'll remind you).

CADET CHRISTMAS LITURGY

The annual CADET CHRISTMAS LITURGY will take place at the Chapel at 1930 on Tuesday, 17 December. It's our way of saying MERRY CHRISTMAS to all of you before we go our separate ways over Break. More info later.

ADVENT! ADVENT! ADVENT! ADVENT! ADVENT! ADVENT!

Daylight grows shorter.

The darkness of night grows longer, with some first signs of snow.

Lights begin to shine.

They were not there before; they are on trees and in windows.

It is as if people are afraid of darkness and all it symbolizes.

It's time for ADVENT and CHRISTMAS!

Since the 900s, ADVENT has been the beginning of the Church Year.

From ancient times, people tended to precede a season of feasting with a season of fasting. In the 5th century, the Christians of Gaul (France) began ADVENT with 40 days of FASTING (not to include Saturdays or Sundays): they started on 11 November (St. Martin's Day - Martin is the patron-saint of infantry - and as a matter of fact, these Christians used to call this period "St. Martin's Fast").

At Rome in the mid-500s, the Church developed the custom of special days in December devoted to penance. This was because the pagan Romans celebrated a 5-day harvest-festival - Saturnalia - from 17 to 23 December; the Christians wanted to offset the feasting and excesses of the pagans with a proper mood to prepare for Christmas.

By the time of Pope Gregory I (early 600s), these fast-days had evolved into a four-week period of fasting and penance in a joyful spirit. This was the origin of our ADVENT.

In the early 800s, Pepin the Frank - and his son Charlemagne - adopted the liturgical customs of Rome, and ADVENT was established in the outlying regions of Europe. Thus, it was extended to the whole Western Church of that time throughout those regions which were called Charlemagne's "Holy Roman Empire".

For centuries, the Catholic Church preserved the penitential theme for ADVENT. Musical instruments were not played in churches. Purple (the color of seriousness and penance) was used in the Mass vestments. No weddings were celebrated. And heavy fasting was prescribed.

Nowadays, the Church emphasizes the JOY OF PREPARATION rather than the PENANCE OF REPENTANCE (which is more reserved for Lent).

So, ADVENT should be a time when we watch the DARKNESS gradually give way to LIGHT...and when we surround ourselves with reminders (like Christmas trees and wreaths, colored lights, the manger) that Jesus Christ is the complete message of God - a saving intervention in human history - AND that because of him, HUMAN HISTORY is essentially lifted out of the DARKNESS of human sin.

This is a time to celebrate our SALVATION.

FOR YOU FIELD ARTILLERY TYPES:

In Catholic tradition, 4 December (Wednesday) is the Feast of St. Barbara. She has long been considered the patron of FIELD ARTILLERY. Here's her story as the centuries have preserved it:

According to legend, BARBARA was the beautiful daughter of Dioscorus, a nobleman of the Roman Empire, believed to have lived in Nicomedia in Asia Minor (Turkey) in the 3rd or 4th century.

To limit BARBARA'S exposure to Christianity and encourage her development as a zealous pagan, her father kept her shut up in a tower, lighted by two windows.

But from these windows, she looked upon the surrounding countryside and marvelled at the living things. She concluded that they all must be part of a master-plan and that the idols of wood and stone worshipped by her parents were false.

She obtained instruction in Christianity and was baptized. In token of her faith (while her father was away), she had another window pierced in the tower, making three - as a symbol of the Holy Trinity.

On his return, Dioscorus asked her why she had made this change, and BARBARA acknowledged her conversion. Despite his threats, she refused to renounce Christianity.

He delivered her to the local magistrate, Martinianus, who failed to persuade her, even with torture.

Dioscorus himself took his daughter to a high mountain, where he beheaded her.

Afterward, as he descended the mountain, he was caught in a sudden and violent storm. In a blinding flash, he was consumed by lightning.

BARBARA is usually represented standing near a tower with three windows, holding in her hand the palm-leaf of a martyr.

As a logical consequence, BARBARA came to be regarded as the sainted patron of those in danger from thunderstorms, fire, explosions - that is to say, sudden death. And given the questionable reliability of early cannon, such events as misfires, muzzle-bursts and explosions were very common. It's easy to see why artillery personnel came to seek the patronage of ST. BARBARA.

DID YOU KNOW?

THE CHRISTMAS TREE!

The CHRISTMAS TREE had its origins in Germany.

The religious use of evergreens and trees has been traced to pre-Christian practices. They were a symbol of life and were popular among a widely-diverse population. Egyptians, Chinese, Hebrews, as well as people of Scandinavia and Germany, all used evergreens in some form or other to remind themselves of the ENDURING NATURE of life.

The CHRISTMAS TREE, as we have it today, seems to have come from TWO different customs: the MORALITY PLAYS of medieval times and a WINTER FESTIVAL of lights, dating from pre-Christian times.

In the Middle Ages, travelers and actors visited cities and towns and acted out different stories from the Bible. Among these stories was the drama of Adam and Eve, with the message that a Messiah would come. In those times, 24 December was observed as the Feast of Adam and Eve, and one of the props in the play was a TREE (reminiscent of the Tree of Life in Genesis 3). Of course, the TREE was decorated with an apple (even though the Bible didn't mention a specific type of fruit on the biblical tree).

Children were especially fascinated with the TREE in the play, and soon, parents were erecting TREES in the homes and decorating them with fruits and pastries.

At the same time, the Germanic peoples were continuing to observe the custom of a **FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS**.

As the Winter Solstice approached, they would engage in a ceremony of the lighting of **CANDLES** as a promise that the sun would return, the days would become longer again, and Spring would eventually come. It didn't take Christians long to see these lights as the symbol of **CHRIST** shining in the midst of a world of sin and spiritual darkness. The candles were placed on a pyramid with the Star of Bethlehem at the top.

In the 17th century, the two traditions merged, and we have the beginnings of the **CHRISTMAS TREE** as we know it.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the custom had spread from Germany to France and the Slavic countries, and by the mid-1800s, **CHRISTMAS TREES** appeared in England. The practice had been introduced in the USA by German Moravians in Pennsylvania and by the Hessian soldiers during the Revolutionary War.

So from its earliest beginnings as two separate traditions, the **CHRISTMAS TREE** has preserved rich **CHRISTMAS** symbolism: the **GREEN** of hope at a time of dying, the **BURNING LIGHT** of Christ at a time of spiritual darkness, and the fruits of **PARADISE**.

PLEASE REMEMBER IN YOUR PRAYERS

- ...Mrs. Lucy Butts, wife of CSM Butts, who is recovering from a stroke.
- ...as exams approach, let's remember any cadets who are in academic difficulty.
- ...for all those who will be lonely during the coming holidays.
- ...for several cadets who are wrestling with difficult personal problems.
- ...for safety and easy travel for everyone involved in Army-Navy this coming weekend.
- ...for our military brothers and sisters - and their families - throughout the world, especially those who will be separated for the holidays.

GOT A QUESTION?

Q: Father, I was wondering why Catholics make "The Sign of the Cross" and Protestants don't.

A: There's no really "dramatic" answer to your question, as far as I know. It's been a part of Catholic practice since the earliest times. There's an early Church writer named Tertullian (c AD 225) who wrote about this gesture as a way for Christians to sanctify daily life or to signal mutual recognition during periods of persecution. In those early times, the cross was drawn on the forehead with the right thumb; later it became a larger gesture, as we know it today.

I've seen Episcopalians and some Lutherans use The Sign of the Cross in the same way that Catholics do, although these have been few and far-between in my experience.

I suspect that the answer simply lies in the history of the differences that have divided Catholics and Protestants since the time of the Reformation (1500s).

One of the great objections that the Reformers had in those days was about the whole question of "images" in the Catholic tradition. What use should be made of "externals" in religious practice? Should statues and stained-glass and crucifixes be part of one's individual religious practice? Did these things divert attention from the real center of faith - in the human heart? Were statues and crucifixes and external practices (like The Sign of the Cross) actually getting in the way of "true" worship of God?

And certainly, there were lots of excesses in Catholic practice at the time.

The Reformers felt that "externals" were an obstacle to authentic religion, and they stripped their churches of just about everything "external". In doing so, they believed that they were restoring "purity" to worship and eliminating what they considered to be "superstitious practices".

The Catholic tradition felt the opposite. Catholics continued to use "externals", feeling that they could be an aid to authentic worship, if correctly understood.

I suspect that The Sign of the Cross was a part of this process. Catholics continued to use The Sign of the Cross, believing that the act of tracing this sign on one's body helped the mind to focus on the presence of Christ in the heart.

But within the Protestant tradition, the practice was discontinued, and although later Protestants restored some use of statues and stained-glass windows, etc., it would be fair to say that subsequent generations of Protestants remained opposed to the extensive use of such "externals".

And the two traditions continued to be in opposition on this question as the centuries progressed...up to the present day.

As I said, this would be my take on the question. Hope it gives you some insight into the history of the different traditions of Christianity.

THEOLOGY EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW:

THE VIRGIN BIRTH:

From the beginning, the Catholic Church believed in the VIRGIN BIRTH of Jesus. It figured prominently in two of the four Gospels (Matthew and Luke, chapter 1 in both). It was one of the constants of belief in the Early Church, and it was made "formal" in the ancient creeds for both the Eastern and the Western Churches as early as the 300s.

The Church has looked at this belief from two perspectives:

- a) it's part of the definition of Jesus' mission; and
- b) it's a "mark of honor" for his mother Mary.

With reference to Jesus' mission, this belief highlighted and emphasized his role as the BEGINNING of a NEW AGE for HUMANITY. As the NEW Adam, he begins the RENEWED human race by reversing the curse of the OLD Adam, and he comes directly from God without the need for biological regeneration. As a human being, then, Jesus is a BRAND NEW CREATURE, brought into the world solely by the power of God's Holy Spirit.

With reference to Mary herself, the concept of VIRGIN BIRTH highlights the Church's appreciation of her as the NEW EVE. Just as the OLD Eve was cursed in the childbearing process ("I will multiply your pains in childbearing; you shall give birth to your children in pain...")

Genesis 3:16), so the NEW Eve bears her unique child Jesus apart from human biology, which had fallen under a curse.

The idea of VIRGIN BIRTH has always been a significant part of Catholic belief, and one of the earliest references to it (apart from the Scripture itself) was in a letter of St. Ignatius of Antioch (died around AD 110). Writing to the Christians of Ephesus, he observed:

And the Prince of this world
was in ignorance of the virginity
and her childbearing
and also of the death of the Lord -
three mysteries loudly proclaimed to the world,
though accomplished in the stillness of God.

Ephesians 19:1

And Aristides of Athens, the first Christian apologist, wrote to the Emperor Hadrian (AD 125 or so), professing the "virginal conception" as an article of Christian belief.

So this belief was present in the Church from the beginning as a statement about the unique nature of Jesus as the "New Adam", "God from God", "Light from Light", "Begotten, not Made", "One in Being with the Father".

And Mary was seen as the instrument of the miracle. She was the "New Eve", "Sanctuary of the Most High", "Spiritual Vessel", "Ark of the Covenant".

In both cases, the emphasis was on the NEWNESS and UNIQUENESS of God intervening directly in the "normal" human biological processes in order to REVERSE the sin of the original Adam and Eve and their consequent separation from grace.

UNSOLICITED SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK:

"Those who are in a hurry
delay the things of God".

St. Vincent de Paul
(d. 1660)

And that's the way it is, a day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our time...

and YOU ARE THERE!!

Have a good week.
GO ARMY, of course.
Keep Christ in your hearts.

Woodie