

CHURCH STUFF

(A newsletter for Catholic cadets)
Week of 30 November, 2008

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.

Sunday (30 November) was 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, the Christ...and his saving presence in our lives.

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

May we pray in the silence of the ADVENT season in these words:

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 of you.

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

DID YOU KNOW?

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's as if people were afraid of darkness and all it symbolizes.

It's time for ADVENT and CHRISTMAS.

Since the AD 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 pagan excesses 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 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 vestments for Mass. 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.

FOR YOU FIELD ARTILLERY TYPES:

In Catholic tradition, 4 December (Thursday), is the Feast of St. Barbara. She has long been considered the patron-saint 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 centuries.

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

But from these windows, she looked upon the surrounding countryside and marveled at the living things. She concluded that they must all be a 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 the change, and Barbara acknowledged her conversion. Despite his threats, she refused to renounce her Christianity. So 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 Barbara.

THEOLOGY EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW:

THE VIRGIN BIRTH:

From the beginning, the Catholic Church has 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 Western Churches as early as the AD 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, belief in the VIRGIN BIRTH 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 generation. 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 the VIRGIN BIRTH has always been a significant part of Catholic belief, and one of the earliest references to it (after the Scriptures themselves) 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.

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

So the 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 aspects, 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