

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Advent Isn't Christmas

One day a week before Thanksgiving, I was heading out of our apartment building. The lobby was deserted. But that doesn't mean it was quiet. The sound system was piping in Burl Ives. "Have a holly jolly Christmas..." I smiled at Lorenzo, the doorman. "Christmas music? Already?" I said. He smiled back, and winced. "Too early," he replied, shaking his head. "Much too early."

A couple hours later, when I returned home, the sound system had been turned off. The lobby was blissfully quiet. Lorenzo looked much happier.

Have you hit holiday overload yet?

The constant drumbeat of Christmas—Little Drummer Boy or no—is an opportunity for us to focus on something many of us forget: This isn't Christmas. Not yet. No. This is Advent. And it demands something besides carols and tinsel, eggnog and fruitcake.

It demands, in fact, silence.

"Advent is a time of waiting, of expectation, of silence," wrote Dorothy Day. "Waiting for our Lord to be born. A pregnant woman is so happy, so content. She lives in such a garment of silence, and it is as though she were listening to hear the stir of life within her. One always hears that stirring compared to the rustling of a bird in the hand. But the intentness with which one awaits such stirring is like nothing so much as a blanket of silence."

Have you felt yourself wrapped in that blanket lately? Me neither. We are swallowed, instead, by noise.

In mid-November, we started being assaulted on TV with commercials cheerfully insisting that we celebrate Kwanza, Christmas, Solstice and "Dowhateveryou-wannukah"—never mind that, in the process, they were melding one of the holiest of Christian feasts into an amalgam of commercial, materialistic mush.

Even earlier, some of the radio stations began cranking out seasonal songs, 24/7. Around Halloween, the stores put up decorations. Sales started, and the Christmas cycle went into high gear. What's in the air isn't joy. It's pleading.

And so, the noise continues. "It's the most wonderful time of the year," Andy Williams tells us. "It's the hap-happiest season of all." Sorry. I'm not feeling it.

And, frankly, we shouldn't. These weeks before Christ's birth are a time for taking stock, and stepping back.

Thomas Merton put it beautifully. "The Church," he wrote, "in preparing us for the birth of a 'great prophet,' a Savior and a King of Peace, has more in mind than seasonal cheer. The Advent mystery focuses the light of faith upon the very meaning of life, of history, of man, of the world and of our own being. In Advent, we celebrate the coming and indeed the *presence* of Christ in the world."

My suggestion: Turn down the volume over the next few weeks. Wait a while before trimming the tree, hanging the lights and stapling red tinfoil to the front door. Keep Christ in Christmas—and the Savior's absence in Advent. Spend less time at the mall, and more in quiet contemplation. Appreciate this period of expectation—Great Expectation, in fact—and learn to spend more of this time in a kind of holy longing.

That longing will be fulfilled soon enough. Among other things, Advent can teach us the virtue of patience. All good things do indeed come to those who wait.

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