

# Escaping the Christmas Rush

By Thomas Storck

About this time of year most of our fellow countrymen are either rushing excitedly about, preparing for Christmas, or feeling guilty that they are not rushing about. In addition, they are about to begin their holiday season of parties, concerts and the like. But Catholics would do well to pause before joining in all this shopping and merrymaking, for then we might discover that this is not the best way after all to prepare for the coming feast of Christmas.

Most Catholics are aware that starting around December 1 the Church begins the season of Advent. And we probably have some notion that Advent is meant to prepare us for Christmas. But how? Why does our culture begin to celebrate Christmas just when the Church is beginning to observe Advent? What is Advent really about?

## The Great Gift of Advent

Apparently most Catholics look on Advent as something that occurs only within the walls of the church, something that has no meaning for their lives. For do we not join in the merrymaking and hectic rush of Christmas even as the Church pauses quietly to reflect on the coming birth of her Lord? Even many Catholic schools hold their Christmas parties during Advent. But this is not what Advent is for: it is a gift for us, a means of preparing spiritually for Christmas and is not intended as something that only affects us when we are at Mass. The spirit of Advent should guide how we Catholics spend our time during the entire period preceding Christmas.

Admittedly preparing for Christmas can be a burden. I know the difficulties of providing gifts for children and relatives and sending cards. But despite this, we should try to make Advent something of what the Church intends it to be, a period of preparation for Christmas, not an anticipation of Christmas. Thus we should avoid Christmas parties in Advent, just as we would avoid celebrating Easter during Holy Week. Of course, it is legitimate and good to celebrate feasts such as St. Nicholas Day (December 6), but we should try to avoid specifically Christmas motifs. Personally, I do not like to see Christmas trees put up or carols sung till



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**The Adoration of the Magi reminds us that Christmas is a great Christian feast when we commemorate the birth of the Son of God. So that our Christmas celebration may be truly meaningful, the Church offers us the weeks of Advent as a time of spiritual preparation and renewal.**

late on December 24. Just as we do not proclaim the Resurrection on Good Friday, we should not proclaim the Nativity until its proper time.

I have mentioned things not to do during Advent. What are things that we should do? Depending on the practices of our spiritual life, we should attempt to integrate the themes of Advent into our daily prayers and other spiritual exercises. One popular family practice during Advent is the nightly lighting of the Advent wreath. There are many ways this can be done. After lighting the appropriate candles, the family might kneel around the wreath for night prayers or for the family Rosary. Family members might take turns reading appropriate Advent scripture passages, for example, using the Advent readings for Mass as found in the missalette.

If we make a daily meditation, appropriate subjects for Advent could be the prophecies of the Old Testament, especially those directly dealing with our Lord's coming. Some suggestions for readings can be found in the readings at Mass (both for Sundays and weekdays) and in the Liturgy of the Hours (Breviary).

In order to get a sense of how God prepared Israel for the coming of the Messiah

there is nothing better than reading parts of the Old Testament. If this is something we have ever thought about doing, why not consider beginning it this Advent? The earliest books of the Old Testament tell of Adam's Fall and how God began the painstaking process of our redemption by calling Abraham and forming the nucleus of the chosen people, of the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of the promised land. The later books, such as Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, narrate the life of Israel under her kings as God continues to lay the groundwork for the Incarnation. And of course the prophets, especially Isaiah, contain many references to the Messiah who is to come. Anyone who becomes familiar with the Old Testament will understand the New Testament much better, for the coming of Christ is nothing but the fulfillment of the Hebrew scriptures.

The human person is a creature with a window both to the spiritual and the physical worlds. We are neither angels nor brute beasts. And so that we can better focus on one thing at a time the Church year presents the mysteries of salvation to us one by one. Advent is a gift of time to us to become better acquainted with the

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# Mary's Role in Overcoming Sin and Evil

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Spain, as a result of which King Alfonso XIII was driven into exile in April 1931. The Spanish Church was furiously persecuted and Spain had to endure the terrible atheist-inspired atrocities of the Civil War which broke out in 1936.

At the suggestion of Sister Lúcia, the Portuguese bishops solemnly renewed the national consecration of Portugal on December 8, 1940. This act was a factor in keeping Portugal from becoming involved in the Second World War.

On the night of January 25-26, 1938, a vast display the aurora borealis was seen all over the northern hemisphere. Sister Lúcia interpreted this as the sign sent from God as promised by Our Lady in July 1917 at Fatima. It was the sign that would foreshadow a war to come if people did not cease offending God.

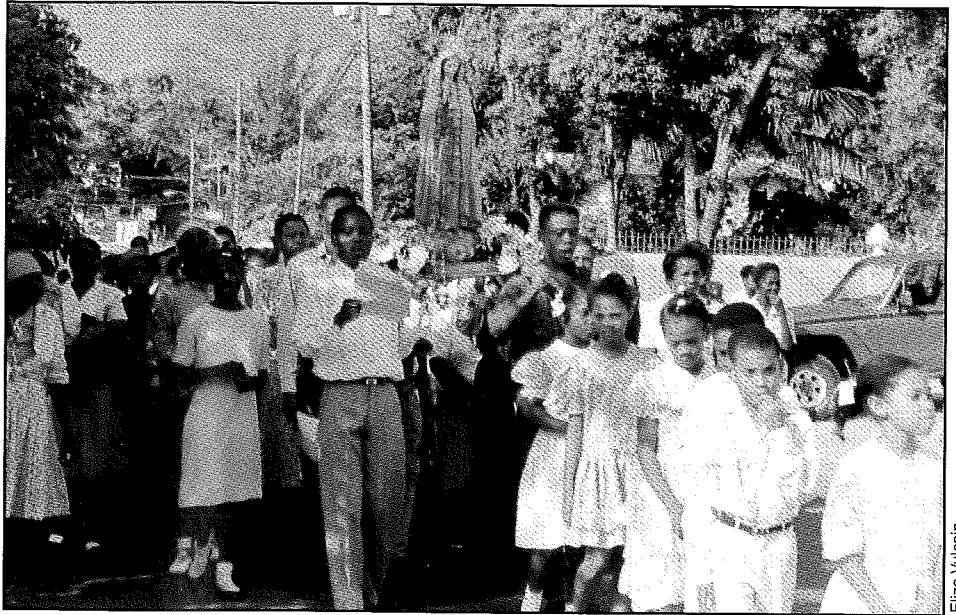
Sister Lúcia wrote to Pope Pius XII on December 2, 1940, that Our Lord had promised to give a special protection to Portugal during the war, because the bishops had consecrated their nation to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. To quote from her letter, "And this protection will be the proof of the graces which God would give to the other nations if, like Portugal, they were to consecrate themselves to it".

It is a fact of history that, despite serious pressures, Portugal remained at peace throughout the war, in a position of neutrality.

## Christmas Rush

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long preparation God gave Israel for his coming. If we jump into the mad rush of parties and shopping in late November when can we prepare spiritually for our Lord's birth? As Catholics we should be prepared to part from the world's ways whenever they conflict with the Church's. Then when Christmas does come, then we can rejoice, then we can celebrate, then our feasting and gift giving will not leave us breathless and disappointed, but be part of the eternal rejoicing of the angels in heaven.



Eliza Vulcan

Young Haitian Blue Army members walk in procession with a statue of Our Lady of Fatima in the countryside near Port-au-Prince. The Blue Army Prayer Cell Program was recently inaugurated in the Port-au-Prince area.

## The Portuguese Miracle

The words of Cardinal Cerejeira aptly sum up the significance of Our Lady's apparitions at Fatima: "What happened in Portugal proclaims the miracle. It is the announcement of what the Immaculate Heart of Mary is preparing for the world. The revelations of Fatima are the manifestation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to the modern world in order to save it".

There is only time to mention very briefly how, on May 13, 1955, the Soviet Union voluntarily agreed to withdraw its occupation forces from Austria, after Fr. Peter Pavlicek O.F.M. organized a Fatima Rosary Crusade and enlisting some ten percent of the population to pray the Rosary every day.

Until March 25, 1984, no power in the world had been able to halt the increasing military strength and ambitions of the Soviet Union, nor the world-wide penetration of the regime's Marxist-atheist philosophy, and the violent persecution of the Church which it engendered – not even the consecrations to the Immaculate Heart of Mary by Popes Pius XII and Paul VI.

The significance of Pope John Paul II's collegial consecration of the world and (implicitly) Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary can be viewed in relation

to the so-called "Last Vision" of Fatima that Sister Lúcia experienced in the Dorothean convent chapel at Tuy, Spain on June 13, 1929. It was during this vision that the request for the collegial consecration of Russia was made. In the vision, Our Lady conveyed this request standing on the altar, beneath a depiction of the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, as Sister Lúcia movingly records in her memoirs. Changes in the Soviet Union began almost immediately after John Paul II carried out this consecration and ended in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

## The Grace of the Consecration

John Paul II's consecration of 1984 is therefore, the latest and most powerful example in the history of Our Lady's message, that God has granted, and will grant, the wonderful gifts Our Lady of Fatima promises to the Church – the triumph of her Immaculate Heart, the conversion of Russia, a period of peace for the world – on condition that we faithfully comply with her requests.

At Fatima, Our Lady told us: "God wishes to establish in the world devotion to my Immaculate Heart". May Mary, the perfect icon of the Most Holy Trinity, as Bishop Alberto Amaral of Fatima called her, inspire us all to do God's will, and serve Him through the devotion to her Immaculate Heart.