

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
Why Advent Makes You a Missionary

Two of the best things my parents ever did for me were to stay married to each other, and to fill our home with lay missionaries. As non-Catholic Christians, we did not have a well developed understanding of the Sacraments, but I still watched my parents *live* a sacramental marriage. They treated marriage as a sacred trust, a precious gift to be nurtured, fought for, and protected. Without conscious awareness, I *felt* that their marriage was a sign and instrument of salvation. One way they showed this was by making our home a shelter and refuge for those who took up the charge of sharing Christ. I don't think I would have fought and struggled to keep my own faith, if it had not been for these gifts from my parents.

When I started to think about becoming Catholic, I naturally reflected more and more deeply on the sacramental character of the faith, and to understand the reality I had experienced as a child. I came to understand that the heart of the Christian faith is the *sacramental* mystery of Advent, the mystery of the Incarnation. Why do I say this mystery is sacramental?

A Sacrament is more than a symbol. It is a sign or symbol that actually *brings about* or *makes present* the thing signified. (CCC 774, 1131) The Incarnation is like a sacrament because it is not just a sign of God's love or His presence with his people. It actually effects, in a mysterious way, the union of God and man. The Church fathers used to say that Christ *assumed* human nature in order to *heal* human nature, and raise it to a participation in divine life. St. Peter said that Christ makes us "partakers of the divine nature." (2 Peter 1:4)

Since my parents were baptized Christians, their marriage actually brought sanctifying grace into our home. The sign of that grace was the faithful, Christian union of man and woman. The reality signified was the spousal love of Christ for his Church, the Advent mystery, the union of God and Man, the sharing in "the divine nature" of fruitful, supernatural love.

It was fitting that my parents love was fruitful not only in bearing children, but in furthering the missionary work of Christ. When the Second Vatican Council took up the subject of missions, the Fathers emphasized that missions flow from this sacramental character of the Incarnation:

The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since . . . it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit . . . God decided to enter into the history of mankind in a new and definitive manner by sending his own Son in human flesh . . . [Jesus] founded His Church as the sacrament of salvation and sent His Apostles into all the world just as He Himself had been sent by His Father. (*Ad Gentes Divinitus*)

The Council's decree on missions points specifically to Advent as a missionary imperative for the Church. Between the first and second advents of Christ, the Church is to draw from the Incarnational mystery the grace to unite Christ and the world:

And so the time for missionary activity extends between the first coming of the Lord and the second . . . As members of the living Christ, incorporated into Him and made like unto Him through baptism and through confirmation and the Eucharist, all the faithful are duty - bound

to cooperate in the expansion and spreading out of His Body, to bring it to fullness as soon as may be. (*Ad Gentes Divinitus*)

The Council also offered some practical suggestions for families to live this missionary imperative. The "first and most important obligation for the spread of the Faith is this: to lead a profoundly Christian life. . . . By a truly Christian life, families become seedbeds of the lay apostolate and of vocations to the priesthood and the Religious life." Nurture a "knowledge and love of the missions." And, finally, offer material assistance to missions.

I thank God for parents who lived their Sacrament with depth, conviction, and sincerity, and who desired to live "a profoundly Christian life." I experienced not just a sign of Christ, but Christ himself. In truth, I owe my faith to their faith and marriage. This advent, consider the missionary imperative of our Christian life and commit to whatever form of sacramental life God has given you. Live a profoundly Christian life. Support the missions. And you will be Christ to your family and to the world.