

Advent & the New Evangelization

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 2, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

I had not intended to spend the week speaking about Advent, but I have warmed to my theme. [Monday](#) [1], I argued in favor of Christian resistance to the commercialization of the Christmas season in part by focusing on the Advent theme of expectation, about which the Holy Father spoke so beautifully at last Sunday's Angelus. [Tuesday](#) [2], I discussed the ways our commercial culture corrupts our souls in ways that make the celebration of Christmas impossible. And, [yesterday](#) [3], I looked at the distinctive Marian quality to the Advent season. Today, I wish to examine how the spirituality of Advent is uniquely suited to understanding what the "New Evangelization" means.

To get into the spirit of Advent, we must imagine a world without Jesus Christ. We must put ourselves into the mindset of those Jews who were waiting for the Messiah, wondering and waiting for salvation, most especially from their political enslavement but more generally from all the evils of the world. We must, as it were, erase from our minds all the images of Jesus we hold in our minds, all the teachings, all the parables. What is left? For most people in the first century B.C. (the Jews were different, and deserve a different, longer, more thoughtful treatment than I can offer here), they did not recognize the need of a savior. They lived in a pagan world, filled with false gods who interfered, often in arbitrary and solipsistic ways, with the created world, gods who could be appeased by sacrifices that were as anthropocentric as the gods those sacrifices were meant to appease. Some people, the elites, were in on the pagan game, and knew that "the gods" were fiction; they turned to rigorous philosophical speculations that remain among our civilizations proudest accomplishments (think Plato and Aristotle). Mostly, however, the men and women of the first century B.C. were governed by a naturalistic worldview, in which the ways of the world were the ways of the world. The sun rose in the east. Some people were born slaves. Might made right, whether considering a flood or an army.

Does that brief (and admittedly, apologetically, superficial) summation of the weltanschauung of the pre-Christian era sound alarmingly familiar? You do not have to look long or hard in contemporary American culture to run into a thousand false gods. Some of the philosophic and scientific achievements of our day are just as secular and just as magnificent as Plato's or Aristotle's philosophies. I have my difficulties with the Seraglio of the Enlightenment. I believe anyone who recites the Nicene Creed must, repeat must, have difficulties with the Enlightenment. But, who would want to live in a country or a culture that has not been touched by the achievements of the Enlightenment? And Charles Darwin, of course, gave new life to a naturalistic worldview in ways the pre-Christian ancients could not even imagine.

In short, the situation the Church faces today is remarkably similar to the world into which God sent His Son. If we could, in the past seventeen hundred or so years, assume that we were passing on the faith to children within the context of a Christian culture, we can no longer make that assumption. We can't start a conversation with an unbelieving, unchristian culture with the Church's opposition to same-sex unions or debates about the new translation of the Roman Missal. We need to go back to basics. We need to understand that the world we are called to evangelize today is a world in which the "acids of modernity, as Walter Lippmann called them, have eaten away not only at belief but at the disposition to believe. People do not see the need for faith.

I have previously called attention to the way a young German theologian named Josef Ratzinger began his book, *An Introduction to Christianity*, published in 1968. He recalled the story of a meeting between an Enlightenment skeptic and a great rabbi. The Enlightenment scholar had thoroughly decimated the philosophic premises upon which the rabbi stood. He had questioned everything, pointing out inconsistencies in the Torah and overturning the entire approach the rabbi took to the questions of humanity. Eventually, the rabbi turned to the scholar and said, "My son, the great scholars of the Torah with whom you have argued wasted their words on you; as you departed you laughed at them. They were unable to lay God and his Kingdom on the table before you, and neither can I. But think, my son, perhaps it is true."

Pope Benedict takes that "terrible perhaps" very seriously. And so must we. Unfortunately, too many "conservatives" within the Church are terrified of that "terrible perhaps" and too many "liberals" like to wallow in the "terrible perhaps." A young theologian named Ratzinger could write profoundly about the symbiotic relationship between belief and unbelief, but as Pope, he must confirm the faithful, for many of whom his great theological speculations are beyond their imaginings. But, he has committed his papacy to the "New Evangelization" and that commitment must rest on the hope "the sure hope actually" that belief will triumph over unbelief.

Advent is the season of the "terrible perhaps" the season when we must recall that there was a time before "the Glory of the Lord shone round about them." It is the season in which we must recall the time before the arrival of our savior. It is the season when we should wrestle with unbelief, not only with alternate beliefs, but with simple unbelief. (It is also a time to drink deeply from the spirituality of the Hebrew Scriptures but, again, that deserves a different and longer treatment.) We must not only focus on the articles of our Creed when we evangelize, but on the opening words, "I believe." Many people in our world today, like those in the first century B.C. do not perceive the need, or even the possibility, of God intervening in human history in an authentically new way. We know He did. But, if the New Evangelization means anything, it means that we must learn anew how to proclaim the Good News about Christ to a world that has grown lazily accustomed to the rhythms and reasons of unbelief. If we lead with morals "be they sexual ethics or social justice" we have put the evangelization cart in front of the incarnational horse. We Catholics believe what we do about traditional marriage and about a just wage because Christ came into the world, not the other way round.

I fear that the New Evangelization will become a buzzword. Already, I fear that some of the brethren think the key to the New Evangelization is to somehow convince the culture to hold the line on traditional marriage or to "build the City of God" as that insipid contemporary hymn has it. No. The New Evangelization is about understanding how our own day is like Advent. It is about learning to proclaim that the Crucified Lives to a culture that stays in absolute denial about questions of eternal life and refuses even to print sympathy cards that mention the word "death." It is about the frankly outrageous claims "that God Himself was born of a Virgin, walked on the earth, was killed as a common criminal and raised from the dead" at the heart of our faith and how those large, outrageous claims actually do correspond to the yearnings of every human heart. And, it is about learning to value what is good and even great in the secular culture we are called to evangelize and confidently engaging that culture, avoiding what is contrary to the Gospel to be sure, but no longer defensive or dismissive about the engagement. If this only yields a program of moral reform, from the left or the right, we will not have grasped what Benedict is calling us to. If, on the other hand, we can close our eyes and imagine what it must have felt like to be a shepherd boy or one of the Magi on that first Christmas night, that is what the New Evangelization is all about. We are called, finally, to wonder and awe before the great claims of our faith and Advent is the time to prepare ourselves for that wonder.

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