

Advent: Its History, Part 1

December 2, 2018

The time of preparation for the great feast of Christmas, the anniversary of the birth of our Savior, is called Advent in the Latin Church. Though it is difficult to determine the exact history of Advent, it probably originated in the West, since it is where the date for Christmas was first fixed to the 25th of December. This date was fixed in the East only in the latter part of the fourth century, while it was set in the West at a much earlier date, though the exact time it was set is unknown. This time of preparation was observed long before the name Advent was given to it.

Historically, Advent has been a special time of preparation for the birth of the Savior by works of penance and prayer, at least in the Gallican church (Catholic church in France), where Advent practices were developed early. Rome adopted a certain penitential aspect later under the influence of the Gallican liturgy, and it seems it was established as a custom by the 13th century, as we learn from Innocent III. The penitential aspect comes from the eschatological formulae used during this season, formulae which were promoted by the austere Irish monks Columbanus and companions in the latter part of the sixth century. Originally, the Roman liturgy was filled with great joy and expectation at the announcement of the coming of the Savior. The influence of the Gallican liturgy on the Roman liturgy during the eighth and ninth century gave us both aspects in our present liturgy: the sadness of the purple, with the suppressing of the Gloria in Excelsis Deo, but at the same time, the joy and hope expressed in the prayers and singing of the Alleluia.

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