

*Advent: Its History, Part 3*

December 16, 2018

The custom of fasting fell into disuse by the 14th century, such that Pope Urban V in an effort to prevent the total decay of the Advent penance, insisted only that the clerics of his court should keep abstinence during Advent. St. Charles Borromeo (died 1584) tried to bring his people back to the spirit of the ancient practice. Pope Benedict XIV (died 1758), when archbishop of Bologna, also tried to rekindle the fervor for this ancient practice in the minds and hearts of his flock. He tried to remove the erroneous idea, which was prevalent in his day, that the practice of fasting during Advent was strictly for religious. He tried to show them that the laws and practices of the universal Church called for all to prepare for the great feast of the birth of Jesus.

In the Greek Church, the fast of Advent remained in force and is still practiced today, though it is not as strict as the fast of Lent. It begins after the Feast of St. Philip on November 14th in their calendar and has only seven days of strict fast. Meat, butter, milk and eggs cannot be consumed during the fast, but fish, oil and wine are permissible except on the strict fast days. (Fish, oil and wine are not allowed during Lent.)

In looking at the History of Advent, we can see that there never was any great unity in the practices in the Church, even concerning the fast. In some places it was reduced to a simple abstinence while other places kept the full fast. Some places the abstinence was only for the clergy and, in others, it was a fast and abstinence for all. Though the character of the Advent fasting has changed throughout the centuries, and is now quite relaxed in the West, the character of the liturgy has not changed. And so, it is in zealously following the liturgy of this beautiful season that the faithful will prepare themselves for Christmas according to the ancient customs that inspired the liturgical tradition.

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