

Advent: Its History, Part 2

December 9, 2018

There are sermons dating back to the fifth century, which were exhortations in order to prepare the people for the feast of Christmas. We have two sermons of St. Maximus of Turin (died 467) and others by St. Cesarius of Arles. These sermons do not tell us the duration of Advent, nor what the exact nature of these practices of penance were, but they show us how ancient was the practice of distinguishing this time of preparation. Later in the 11th century, the sermons for Advent were more clearly distinguished from those of the rest year by the title given to them: "De Adventu Domini".

The oldest document mentioning the length and practices of Advent with any clearness is *The History of the Franks*, by St. Gregory of Tours (died 593). He said that St. Perpetuus (died around 480-494) called for a fast of three times a week, from the feast of St. Martin until Christmas. It is difficult to say whether a new practice was established at that time or whether an already existing law was enforced. Regardless, it was a time of penance, with an interval of 43 days (St. Martin's Feast on Nov. 11 through Christmas Eve), making Advent like a second Lent. The period was known as St. Martin's Lent or Fast and was even preceded with celebrations as was done before Lent (e.g., Fat Tuesday celebrations).

Slowly introduced, the practice eventually obtained the force of law, but was relaxed with time, so that the forty days became our present four weeks of Advent. The shortening of Advent started in France and spread to other countries. The first allusion to Advent being shortened is found in the ninth century, in a letter of Pope Nicholas I to the Bulgarians. There were some 11th and 12th century authors who speak of the 40 day fast before Christmas, but some of them may have kept up the ancient practice out of devotion (Traditional Carmelite Monasteries still keep up this period of fasting).

Rev. Charles Van Vliet, FSSP

Pastor, Regina Caeli Parish