

**Christmas:  
The Mystery is Present**

By Luigi Giussani

Translated by Vincent Petrucci

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The word “Advent” indicates something that happens: an event. For this reason, it is a fact that, in time and space, establishes a relation. It is not an isolated event, arid and without fruitfulness, but an event that continues in time and that, with time, generates new time and new space: it generates history. Advent contains a pedagogic dimension of Christian life when it becomes an occasion for frequent memory. It is through memory that the fact of Advent can become an educative dimension of one’s life.

In order to fully understand this word, it is necessary to keep in mind a passage from the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians: “Yet among the mature [*among those who have had the gift of understanding what faith is*] we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age [*it is not the wisdom that comes from the deep understanding that the philosopher or the sociologist or the political scientist or simply a man of good sense seek to gain*] or of the rulers of this age [*it is not the wisdom of those who govern the world*], who are doomed to pass away [*and it is history that demonstrates that they are nothing*]. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God [*it was hidden, before, because no one could have known it, even though the heart of man and, above all, the heart of the sons of Abraham, beat forcefully with the desire to discover such knowledge. Now it is hidden because, although it is among us, its mode of presenting itself is not the same as the wisdom that comes from mundane considerations*], which God decreed before the ages for our glorification [*glory is the victory within history, in time and space. God preordained the design of the world in such a way that we could be the forgers, shaping this victory within history, that it be us who convey the sense of all that men do and the sense of all of history*]. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” [*greatness lies in eternal glory, but it is also a great and grand thing to experience victory within history; the martyrs gave up their lives with the awareness that they were conquering history*].

Jesus is the keystone of the design preordained by God; He is the cornerstone of all of history and His is the name that indicates the design for all of history.

Conversion - and with this word I mean to indicate the movement of history towards its fulfillment, the direction it has assumed thanks to the impetus given by He who ordained it - conversion is passing from a gaze fixed upon oneself to a gaze fixed on Christ. As a prayer from the Ambrosian Liturgy of Advent says, "You, with unspeakable love, send Him into the world, He who has become one of us". Conversion is fixing our gaze not on ourselves, but on "One who is among us", on Christ who became one of us: *Emmanuel*.

### ***Christ, the Keystone of History***

Christ is one of us, even if He remains hidden and remains a Mystery, or, in other words, something that goes beyond our categories and our expectations. As Péguy said, "The stones rise up from below advance aridly, and faithfully and surely in all certainty without any kind of inquietude because, rising, they know full well that they will find the cornerstone at the appointment, at the right intersection, at the sacred crossing. And the cornerstone is Jesus."

The entire meaning of history is this continuous passage: if it does not tend towards its cornerstone, history caves in on itself. All of the meaning of history lies in this conversion, which is to say, looking at He who is coming, who is revealing Himself, instead of looking at ourselves.

All of the dynamism of a person's journey within the vocational companionship comes from conversion. And conversion is not a certain quantity of coherence; every moralistic conception of it is swept away when the root of morality is exposed: tending towards Christ, towards He who comes, and not just being concerned with oneself. A mere concern for oneself means affirming one's pride and instinctiveness; it means placing oneself at the center, while you find your worth when you look at He who is coming.

### ***Symptoms of Conversion***

We can indicate certain symptoms by which, day after day, moment after moment, it is possible to recognize and judge this tension, this morality.

The first is certainty. A person who is all intent upon Him who is coming is certain, because this person's present moment is already touched by Him who is coming, who has already begun to come. This certainty is in something possessed in the

present. You can wait for Him who comes with certainty, if you already have an experience of Him in the present. He who is to come is already present in His resurrection and in the continuity of the resurrection that it is presence of the Church, the unity that He creates in the world.

Certainty in He who is to come is called hope.

The second symptom of true morality is joy. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your modesty.” (Phil 4,4-5). This modesty indicates an adhesion to the unfolding of things according to a measure that goes beyond man, because it is the measure of God. Modesty, therefore, is a measure that obeys the design of God, without pretense, without presumption and without pretext.

The first and fundamental way with which the Mystery becomes manifest is the instant, the circumstance at hand. It is through the present circumstance that we adhere to our Destiny, that we penetrate into the Mystery, that we collaborate with the action of the Father in the world. And because the characteristic of every circumstance and of every instant is need, because man is a creature, then taking seriously the need of the instant, we collaborate in the plan of God.

“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts [*peace is another discrete way of saying gladness: joy, gladness, peace - they are three synonyms, but also three moments*], to which indeed you were called in the one body [*unity among men and with all things is the fruit of gladness, just as fecundity can only be the fruit of joy*]. And be thankful [*the greatest flowering of joy and of gladness and of peace is gratitude*].” The certainty of victory is full of modesty in front of all men because it knows with what cross it is bound; without sacrifice, we know, there can be nothing true.

Many passages from the Bible speak of this joy: Baruch 3,24-35; Baruch 5,1-9; Hosea 6,3-6.

The Ambrosian liturgy puts all of this in the following way in the prayers and in the Preface of Advent: “It is truly right and just, our duty and fount of salvation, to give you thanks, Father, always and especially in this time in which we celebrate with exuberant and joyful hearts the mystery of the coming of the Lord...In this way is rekindled the hope of reigning with Him.” “God of infinite might, you grant to the

Church of Christ to celebrate the ineffable mysteries in which our smallness as mortal creatures is plunged into an eternal relationship and our existence in time begins to flower into life without end. And so, in this shared joy, we elevate our hymn of praise.” “Our hearts are pervaded by the desire to shine like festive lights. Lead your family, O Father, with You to the eternal dwelling, this family that, at the banquet of salvation, already tastes the joy of your presence.”

For the man who rows his boat in a stormy sea, for the man who throws his empty nets into the water and then sees them fill up, for the man who eats and drinks, for the man who wakes and sleeps, for the man who lives and dies, Jesus is not a phantom. The cornerstone does not lie outside of the other stones, but is precisely the force that sustains them. Jesus is within the life of the man who wakes and sleeps, eats and drinks, lives and dies; He is within the man who exists. Man as he exists - this minute and irreplaceable protagonist of history - is an inexhaustible fount of relationships, because man does not exist if not as a relationship. There is no self that, in a second moment, enters into action in reality: the self, in any moment whatsoever, is relationship, relation with reality.

This is the point: that the relationship with the Infinite prevail and determine every relationship established in time and space, with every person and every thing. But the relationship with the Infinite is something enigmatic, obscure, nebulous, fear-inspiring until the Infinite became one of us: Christ. And so, the problem is that He be the cornerstone of the entire architecture of relationships that is my existence. In this way, even eating and drinking “are plunged into an eternal relationship”; they become an expression of the cornerstone of all of life, which is Christ. I affirm and I love Christ in my eating and drinking, in my waking and in my sleeping, so much so that “existence (within time), begins to flower into the life without end, and, following Your plan of love, man passes from a death sentence to a prodigious salvation.”

All of the relationships that we establish merely in force of ourselves are destined to rot, to disappear; all of the relationships that are conceived and generated with the cornerstone of Christ make up a story that grows into eternity, collaborating with and affirming the true meaning of the world.

## ***Instruments for the Journey***

There are three principal instruments of which the mysterious design of God makes use in order to bring us into itself, through our freedom.

The plan of God asks us to participate, even as the poor things that we are, in the death and resurrection of Christ. The death and resurrection of Christ, as they become continually present, are called *sacraments*: “Do this in memory of me.”

The second instrument of which the design of God makes use is *memory*. Memory is the opposite of sleepiness; it is being intent on something. You cannot be intent on Christ without saying, “Come”. The essence of all of our desires is the expression of a most humble and most simple desire: “Come, Lord Jesus”. For this reason, memory becomes entreaty.

“Jerusalem, my joy.” Jerusalem is the vocational companionship, without which one cannot live the experience of the Church; it is all in function of the edification of the body of Christ. It does not have any reason if not that of mission, of the edification of the Church, of the expansion of the Kingdom of Christ. The vocational companionship - which has this goal without end, as large as the world is large - does not subsist if not by beginning from the proximity of those with whom we live.

How do you build up the vocational companionship, without which we could not participate in the sacrament in the right way, as it would be reduced to pietism, and without which memory would be devotion to a phantom and sleepiness a continual threat? What permits us to construct Jerusalem, to build up the vocational companionship, is the fraternity among us.

But fraternity cannot but derive from a relationship of paternity, from being children; in other words, from recognizing that truly living life means following that which is born from our fraternity.

A relationship of paternity is the affirmation of the happy and complete destiny and, for that reason, the sacrifice of the father’s life so that our life might reach that destiny. It is not an insistence on comfortable desires, but a memory that crosses through, maybe upending, all of this and affirming its end: Christ. Paternity is

imitation of the Father, who established happiness for the life of His creatures and sacrificed Himself even unto death so that this would come to pass.

### The Paradox of Christmas

On Christmas, the Liturgy offers us these words: “Today, unto us, a Savior is born”. If a savior is necessary, it is because we don’t have it all together; it is because we are sinners.

One cannot begin if not from the truth. And the truth, that throws wide open our ability to comprehend, welcome and follow the Lord, is precisely this: that we are sinners; we are disproportionate to our destiny. We are not able to be that which we must be.

Every day, we feel the impact of this humiliation, even if, normally, it is covered up and obscured by the anger of our own justice: we say that we were in the right to have done things in a certain way. How much does it behoove us, instead, to begin from the awareness that we are sinners! In this way, wonder is born, because the Mystery that makes all things and that is the ultimate perfection of all things, this Mystery has forgiven us.

God reveals Himself to us as pardon. We will never feel Christ as a familiar presence if not from within the recognition that we are sinners. This is the paradox: the more this awareness that we are sinners is clear in us, then the greater will be our marvel and wonder for his pardon, which is the response of God to the fact that we are sinners.

In order to understand the mystery of our relationship with Jesus we must look to the figure of Our Lady. It should be clearer for us, because we actually make mistakes, while the Virgin Mary is immaculate, pure and simple, poor. But it is not easier because we are not as humble, or as sincere, or as limpidly aware as she was.

In the Madonna, the awareness of sinfulness was experienced as a sense of infinite disproportion between man and God. Her dialogue with the angel expressed this very thing. “How is it possible?” means, above all, “Who am I that the Lord should come to me?”

The outcome of the awareness that we are sinners and that God responds to our state with forgiveness is the complete destruction of our own idea of justice. It is

as if it breaks our entire mental structure. In those places where, according to our mentality, a fulminating justice should be used, there is forgiveness. From the sincerity of these two thoughts is born the truth and the possibility of gladness and of joy.

The joy of Christmas is the joy of the child, the joy of a grown child, for, to understand that we are sinners and that God is pardon, we must be mature.

And so, Christmas invites us to maturity. The consequence of this maturity that allows for joy is that we love the others. We love anyone and everyone, and would like to supply what they lack; we would want to meet the needs of everyone we meet.