

CELEBRATING AN ETERNAL ADVENT

In the first 1200 years of Christianity, the greatest feast was Easter with the high holy days of Holy Week leading up to the celebration of the resurrection of Christ. But in the 13th century, a new person entered the scene: Francis of Assisi felt we didn't need to wait for God to love us through the cross and resurrection. Francis intuited that the whole thing started with incarnate love, and he popularized what we now take for granted as Christmas, which for many became the greater Christian feast. The Franciscans popularized Christmas. Maybe their intuition was correct.

Francis realized that if God had become flesh—taken on materiality, physicality, humanity—then we didn't have to wait for Good Friday and Easter to "solve the problem" of human sin; the problem was solved from the beginning. It makes sense that Christmas became the great celebratory feast of Christians because it basically says that it's good to be human, it's good to be on this earth, it's good to be flesh, it's good to have emotions. We don't need to be ashamed of any of this. God loves matter and physicality.

With that insight, it's no wonder Francis went wild over Christmas! (I do, too: my little house is filled with candles at Christmastime.) Francis believed that every tree should be decorated with lights to show their true status as God's creations! And that's exactly what we still do 800 years later.



Remember, when we speak of Advent or preparing for Christmas, we're not just talking about waiting for the little baby Jesus to be born. That already happened 2,000 years ago. In fact, we're welcoming the Universal Christ, the Cosmic Christ, the Christ that is forever being born in the human soul and into history.

And believe me, we do have to make room, because right now there is no room in the inn for such a mystery. We see things pretty much in their materiality, but we don't see the light shining through. We don't see the incarnate spirit that is hidden inside of everything material.

The early Eastern Church, which too few people in the United States and Western Europe are familiar with, made it very clear that *the incarnation was a universal principle*. Incarnation meant not just that God became Jesus; God said yes to the material universe. God said yes to physicality. Eastern Christianity understands the mystery of incarnation in the universal sense. So it is always Advent. God is forever coming into the world. "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world and the world came into being through him, and the world did not know him". (John 1:9,10).

We're always waiting to see spirit revealing itself through matter. We're always waiting for matter to become a new form in which spirit is revealed. Whenever that happens, we're celebrating Christmas. The gifts of incarnation just keep coming. Perhaps this is *enlightenment*.

(Richard Rohr, cac.org)