NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Advent: A time for coming near

Richard McBrien | Nov. 30, 2009 Essays in Theology

The First Sunday of Advent, which we celebrated yesterday, marks the beginning of the church's liturgical year, which, of course, makes no sense to most people who are satisfied that the new year begins Jan. 1.

But that is only the case where the Gregorian calendar, traditionally attributed to Gregory XIII (pope from 1572-85), is normative. In fact, Christians, who had followed the Julian calendar until 1582, used to celebrate New Year's Day on March 25, the feast of the Annunciation.

For the Chinese and other Asian communities, New Year's Day has a changeable date, falling somewhere between January 10 and February 19. This year the Lunar New Year begins on Sunday, February 14.

The Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) is also a moveable holiday, observed sometime in September or early October. This past fall it was celebrated beginning at sundown on Friday, September 18, and continuing on Saturday, the 19th.

The church's First Sunday of Advent usually occurs in late November, as it did this year, but it can fall as late as Dec. 2. When that happens, as it last did in 2006, the Fourth Sunday of Advent is also Christmas Eve.

Advent, as this column pointed out in 2006, has never had the same spiritual drawing-power as its sister season of Lent. What both seasons have in common, however, is that they are periods of spiritual preparation for major feasts: Christmas and Easter respectively.

Advent, which is derived from a Latin word which means "a coming toward (or near)," focuses the church's attention on the three comings of Christ: in the past at his birth at Bethlehem, in the present, especially in his presence in the community gathered for the Eucharist and in the sacrament itself, and in the future, at his Second Coming.

We need no special reminder during Advent of the feast that celebrates the Lord's initial coming at Bethlehem. We are given ample advance notice of the approach of Christmas in commercial advertising, which used to begin in earnest after Thanksgiving but now begins after Halloween, in seasonal music on radio and television, and in the multiple lights and decorations that appear on our houses and streets, and in malls and department stores.

We do believe in the Second Coming as well as Christmas, but only notionally, that is, as an idea that has little or no meaningful connection with our everyday experience.

It is the coming of Christ in the present that is the most spiritually engaging of the three comings we celebrate in Advent.

The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy pointed out that, when Catholics gather for the Eucharist, Christ is present in the worshiping community itself, in the Word that is proclaimed, in the

persons of the various ministers, and uniquely in the sacrament of Holy Communion (n. 7).

Christ also comes to us in the present even apart from the Eucharist, through what this column once referred to as "the stable door of ordinary human experience."

Advent is a time, therefore, for redirecting our sense of expectation of the Lord's three comings away from "out there" to "right here."

We are reminded of this in the series of classic questions posed to the Lord in the parable of the sheep and the goats, "When did we see you hungry and feed you...?" (Matthew 25:37).

But Advent also reminds us that we are "coming toward" a richer and fuller future, when Christ will come again to make all things new. Seen from a different angle, there is also a "coming toward" on God's part, which is why our most fitting Advent attitude is one of hopeful expecta-tion.

"The message of Advent," this column previously declared, "is that the blessings of the Kingdom will 'come toward' us only to the extent that we 'come toward' those most in need of our love and support."

For this reason the primary spiritual challenge of the Advent season is to redirect our sense of expectation, particularly of Christ's Second Coming, from "out there" to "right here," in our ordinary daily experience when and where we encounter the neighbor or community of neighbors in need.

Indeed, Christ is to be found more often there, in these ordinary circumstances of life, than in the church's creeds, codes, and cults.

It is a lesson to be learned in Advent this year and every year, when the church bids us to begin anew along the path of Christian discipleship.

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Source URL (retrieved on *09/23/2014 - 06:06*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/advent-time-coming-near