

Dear Johan,

Advent is my favorite season of the year. I love the fact that we take time to prepare for the birthday of Jesus. Sadly, I don't know the meaning of the word Advent. Do you know what it means and where it comes from?

*Gentle Reader-*

The notion of the birthday of Jesus makes me a little uncomfortable. It reminds me of an unfortunate “children’s Mass” with birthday cake and birthday song. Thankfully, there were no candles to be blown out. How many should there have been anyway?

Just to be clear, the season of Advent is the time of preparation leading up to the solemnity of Christmas in all its theological complexities. It is marked by the four Sundays of Advent.

The English word Advent comes from the Latin *Adventus Domini*, meaning the coming of the Lord. Most of us understand this to mean Jesus’ presence with us at Christmas as we commemorate and celebrate his birth. The full meaning of *Adventus Domini*, however, embraces Jesus’ birth two thousand years ago, his presence with us today, as well as his return at the end of time. Advent thus becomes a time of preparation not only for the celebration of Jesus’ birth on Christmas. It also is a time when we become more aware of Jesus’ presence in our lives today. And it is a time during which we prepare for his Second Coming at the end of time.

As a result, when we pray *Maranatha* or “Come, Lord Jesus,” we not only pray for his presence in our midst at Christmas but we also pray for

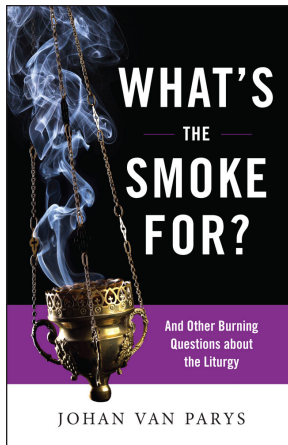
his presence among us today. And, most astoundingly, we even pray for his Second Coming, thus hastening the end of time.

As Christians we believe that when Christ returns he will inaugurate the completion of the messianic times. At that time, according to the prophet Isaiah, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares / and their spears into pruning hooks” and “the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, / and the leopard shall lie down with the kid.” “There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain.” “The desert and the parched land . . . will bloom with abundant flowers.” Not surprisingly, these are lines taken from readings used during the Advent season.

The beautiful season of Advent invites us to dream of that perfect world without disasters, disease, or death; a world where all God’s children and all of creation exist together in perfect harmony. It is also a season during which we commit ourselves to making this harmonious world a bit more possible.

So, when we sing *Maranatha* let’s do it with full voice and heart and let’s act in ways that will hasten the arrival of that perfect world.

I hope I did not ruin Advent for you.



Dear Johan,

Can you tell me why some people hold hands during the Lord's Prayer and others don't? And is one better than the other?

*Gentle Reader-*

I too have noticed that some people hold hands, while others extend their hands or just fold their hands when praying the Lord's Prayer. None of these are explicitly forbidden and none of them are explicitly encouraged. And, as with most matters liturgical, this is a very touchy one, as people, not unlike myself, either hate or love the holding of hands during this important prayer.

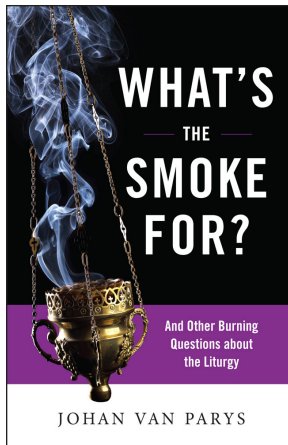
We have a long history of liturgical gestures. The oldest prayer gesture is standing with outstretched arms. In Latin it is known as the *orans*, from the verb *orare*, to pray. Depictions of men and women in the *orans* position have been found among early Christian art. Today, the ordained ministers are the only ones explicitly instructed to engage in this ancient liturgical posture.

Wanting to underline the centrality of the Lord's Prayer with our bodies, we went in search of an appropriate posture. Rather than assume the one we relinquished centuries ago, we assumed

another one, holding hands. But the two gestures are totally different. The *orans* is connected with the transcendental aspect of the prayer, the fact that the prayer is addressed to God; the holding of hands emphasizes the immanent aspect, the people's togetherness as they pray.

Of course, both emphases have their merit, yet, in pure sacramental theological thinking, the union of all Christians is primarily expressed by the sharing in the one Body and Blood of Christ, hence the term Communion (with the Body of Christ). The Lord's Prayer prepares us for this union as we stand together in *orans* (in prayer) before our Maker.

So, if I had to answer your question, which I suppose is the purpose of this book, I would suggest that you opt for the ancient gesture of the *orans*. In the same way as common language has been deemed unworthy of the liturgy so are common gestures. Holding hands seems just a bit too familiar.



Dear Johan,

I can't believe what people are wearing to church these days. Can't you do something about that?

*Gentle Reader-*

Believe me, I have tried, but people just don't like to be told what to wear. That will, however, not keep me from opining on the matter.

Shortly before I moved to the United States I was invited to join a group of other soon-to-be expats for an evening at the Belgian-American Foundation. The goal of the evening was to facilitate the transition from life in Europe to life in the United States. In addition to teaching us how to shop we were told what to wear. One of the points the American instructor made was that Europeans are much more formal than Americans. So, we were advised not to bring too many suits and formal outfits. Over the past 25 years, I have realized, however, that even if the majority of Americans are less formal than Europeans, there are different levels of informality. People tend to wear specific clothes to different events. Baseball games, picnics, fine dinners, and Sunday Eucharist require their own sets of clothes. Recently I have noticed, though, that some people come to church wearing Viking purple or Packer green. I suppose I should take consolation in the absence of the fake Viking hair and hats.

The reason for wearing certain clothes for certain occasions, be they formal or informal, is that clothes not only cover the body but they also communicate a message, whether intended or not. Most important they communicate how the wearer feels about the event that takes place.

And of course, you are correct: there is indeed appropriate and inappropriate dress for worship, especially for liturgical ministers. Last week one of our servers wore tennis shoes that light up at every step. These were inappropriate for two reasons. First, tennis shoes should be worn for tennis and not for church. Second, they were distracting to the assembly. Rather than gazing at the cross the server was carrying, parishioners stared at his fancy footwear.

I know that the last thing people want me to say is that their outfit is inappropriate for church. So I won't. But just so you know, when I get up on Sunday morning and decide what to wear, I always ask myself if my attire is fitting for the celebration of the Eucharist, rather than mindlessly throwing on shorts, a Grateful Dead T-shirt, and flip-flops.