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Ghosts of Advents Past

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It was a remark made to me nearly every December by a well-meaning person: “I know that this is your busiest time.” And I wanted to say, and sometimes did say if I had time for conversation, “Yes, this is a busy time, but the busiest is Holy Week, with services every day ending with the Great Vigil on Saturday evening, and three festival Easter Day Eucharists, when I want to be on the top of my form because I may not see some of those folks for another eight months or so until Christmas Eve. So while not the busiest time for a parish priest, thank you for recognizing how busy my life is right now.”

Yes, Advent season, which should be a time of at least some quiet and reflection on the coming of the Christ, has become extraordinarily busy. Much more so, it seems to me, over the course of my past life as a parish priest. I wonder if my reflections on the changing life of Advent are like yours? Are those Advents of years past now ghosts, because they are gone forever?

I was ordained a priest in the early sixties. Looking back, it seems to me that Advent then was a holier, more sacred time. Let me cite two examples. The formal dance organization of which we were members had two dances a year, one in the spring and one in the winter. And the midwinter dance “back then” was never, repeat, never before Christmas, because that was Advent. I recall a discussion about whether our bridge group should have our monthly meeting in December. Again, same reason—Advent was to be a more solemn time, and bridge games were fun. Ultimately, we decided to play, but the point is that we did think about that time of preparation for the Coming. Or was that just Virginia in the sixties, or that the Church had a more privileged time in the community?

How can I forget trying to find approximately twenty-five people each year to write Advent devotional pieces for the annual Advent booklet? Now several commercial publishers have gotten on the seasonal bandwagon, and many parishes simply purchase an Advent booklet for each member or family. Advent was, in the fifties, sixties, perhaps even into the seventies, a time when we parish priests would be asked by the Episcopal Church Women (the ECW) to do a program on “Toward a More Meaningful Advent.” Even the local Rotary Club wanted such a program, only they called it, “Getting Ready for a Blessed Christmas (now “Holiday”) Season.” Some of us will remember trying to explain to the Altar Guild why the rose candle was to be lit on the third Sunday and not the Fourth Sunday of Advent—no, it does not signify the lighter shade of purple as in the dawn of Christmas Day. How does one feel now about the recent invention of the tilted Advent wreath, so that one can see all the candles burning without one hiding another?

Remember with me—if you were married with children—trying to have a meaningful Advent at home. The family wreath had been made at church on the Sunday before or the first Sunday of Advent. The parish had furnished the Styrofoam wreath, the candles, and the greenery. We didn't

ask whose boxwoods had been significantly trimmed, whose pines and holly pruned, or—if no one had thought of it until the eleventh hour—where did someone (the rector?) find that many purple and rose candles? So after the chaos of children and adults making wreaths all at the same time, and then heading home with drooping candles and strange sprigs protruding, one such wreath arrived at the clergy home. And in all the hassle of parish visitations and at least two sermon preparations on John the Baptizer, was there time to light the one candle each night of the first week, two each night of the second week, and so on? For we wanted to be good parents, as well as the unseen example for all the other homes in the parish. Then someone gave the clergy family an Advent calendar and we added opening a little window to our daily family Advent devotion and candle lighting. We also made the discovery that Advent, according to the calendar makers, always had twenty-five days, because the calendar always started with December first!

Advent has had its puzzles, as well. What to do when the Fourth Sunday of Advent fell on December 24th? Is this the year we move from a real to an artificial Chrismon tree in the nave? We have a tradition of the Chrismon tree (the name is a combination of *Christ* and *monogram*) in our region of Virginia. An evergreen tree covered in tiny white lights symbolizes Christ as the Light of the World; decorations of white and gold represent symbols used by early Christians reminding us of the real reason we celebrate Christmas. Can we have our Chrismon tree up and decorated before the Fourth Sunday of Advent—we don't have much time between services on December 24! The Baptists had their Christmas pageant on the first Sunday of Advent and got it over with, so why can't we?

On a more personal note, my wife Mimi's birthday falls on December 24th. After a few years at the parish where I was rector for twenty-eight years, we added a family festival Eucharist at 4:30 PM on Christmas Eve. It gradually grew until it became larger than the traditional 10:30 PM Carols and Festival Eucharist. So we squeezed Mimi's birthday dinner and present opening between getting home from the family Eucharist and getting back for the later midnight mass. The putting together of some of the children's toys had to wait until after midnight. That last day of Advent was always a packed day for our family!

But now the Christmas music begins at the mall the day after Halloween. The parties are nearly all before Christmas. And last year, believe it or not, I attended a service on the First Sunday of Advent which was a combination of Advent wreath lighting, Chrismon tree lighting, and Kirkin' O the Tartan (a tradition of blessing family tartans). How's that for getting it all in at once?

Yes, Advent now is a busy time, and we may think that it's lost some of its meaning to commercialization and misplaced values. But blessedly, many of us can and do remember when finally, at the midnight Mass, we knelt before the final blessing. With the chandeliers dimmed and the candles—real candles—burning in the windows, we sang together the carol, "Silent Night, Holy Night" and knew within ourselves a benediction: "Christ the Savior is born."



The Reverend Dr. Robert T. Copenhaver has been retired for a decade. He lives with his wife Mimi and two golden retrievers in the mountains of Southwestern Virginia. They have four children and four grandchildren. He is chaplain to the retired clergy, spouses and surviving spouses for his diocese, and coordinates this same ministry for Province Three.