

# The Other Side

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## Unto Us A Child

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## Prepare for the Coming One

WE'RE ENTERING ADVENT—a time of joyful anticipation and hope. Yet we know well that, for many of us, Advent is a time of frantic preparation and compulsive consumption.

Somehow, the other Christian season of anticipation—Lent—doesn't produce the same confusion. We understand Easter, because it bursts out of sorrow and pain. But Christ's Mass arrives after a period of supposedly joyful anticipation which is too often filled with frantic, joyless, conflict-laden activity. Christmas is often a relief rather than a renewal.

Advent is the season of Christ's *coming*. This is a strange notion for us, because our lives are built around going. We are going to school, going to work, going on vacation, going to become a doctor, going to retire—even going to die. We are a going people—constantly making, creating, becoming, inventing, conquering, implementing. But we also see the failures all around us—in the Middle East, Somalia, and Washington; in our cities, churches, and even our homes.

We have a deep sense of our inadequacy. Too often, we try to deal with this by going more, making better, working harder—as though our going will somehow overcome even the confusion of the Advent season.

But we are never *going* to Christmas. Christmas is always coming. We are not making our Lord in these weeks. God made Christ. Our Lord is coming to us.

Advent suggests that we are stationary—Christ is moving toward us. If we insist on going, we may not meet Christ. But if we rely on Christ's

finding us, we can be sure Christ will know the way. We need only be sure we recognize the One who comes.

Perhaps this is why Advent is also a season of preparation. We must be ready for Christ's coming. But that readiness is not the result of going or making or consuming. It is the result of being, loving, and praying.

Paul wrote to his brothers and sisters in Philippi: "My prayer is that your love for each other may increase more and more and never stop improving your knowledge and deepening your perception so you can always recognize what is best. This will help you to become pure and blameless and prepare you for the day of Christ" (1:9–10).

Paul tells us to prepare by loving one another. Christ comes, not as we go or make or invent or conquer or implement or progress or even fail, but as we love.

Our sense of failure, our sense of sin, may be the result of our assumption that in going, making, using, and consuming, we are the lords of the universe. How could our Lord come to people who believe they are going to create and conquer all they know?

Our failure is not that we haven't gone far enough, made well enough, or implemented enough. Our failure is that we haven't loved enough, cared enough, shared enough.

We can make machines, missiles, and space vehicles; create lawyers, doctors, and teachers. But we cannot make caring, sharing, or even love. These qualities come to those who stop going and making. They come because people can then feel, hear,





and see Christ's coming.

In every sense, God is speaking to us in these Advent weeks. The crises we think we have—energy, ecology, population, money, race—are not crises at all; they are the frantic last gasps of a people who have made gods of going, making, consuming, and conquering. We are experiencing the collapse of a faith based on going.

Christ is blessing us with a special vision of our own limits—and inviting us to await the coming One, whose love is without limit.

If we accept, we will find Advent a precious gift.

—John McKnight

## Daring to Know

AFTER A RECENT trip to Cuba, I again face a dilemma I've known all too frequently. How can I speak the truth about that nation—geographically and even culturally so near and yet politically so far away—without wallowing in rhetorical superlatives, disconnected statistics, or indecipherable description (of whatever political persuasion)?

Is it necessary—or even possible—to find a new language, free of words co-opted in the old?

I offer a story. Accompanying me on this trip was a young woman I will call Charity—*Caridad*, had she been born in Cuba. Charity's mother was airlifted off the island just after Fidel Castro's rise to power, one of thousands of Cuban children flown to "safety" in the United States by Operation Peter Pan from 1959 through the mid-sixties.

Motivated by extreme fear of communism, Catholic Charities and other organizations placed these children in U.S. orphanages, where some remained for months or even years. In many cases, parents were never able to reunite their families.

Charity's mother grew up and married another exile. Understandably, Charity was raised amidst denial and resentment, products of a political situation that has separated tens of thousands of Cuban families.

The stories that graced Charity's childhood mostly demonized the revolution—and left her feeling fragmented. With her trip to Cuba, she hoped to see for herself,

to come to terms with her homeland and her own identity, to bridge those ninety nautical miles and light years of perspective.

One story Charity had heard over and over concerned her great-great-grandfather. He had owned a resort hotel in Matanzas province, a beautiful place with halls and gardens she felt she knew through her mother's memory. The revolution had demanded that he turn over his property, the story went, and when he refused, they murdered him. Charity brought this as baggage on her journey.

One day, we found ourselves in Matanzas province. Searching a map, Charity realized the site of her great-great-grandfather's hotel was not far away. She decided to go there.

When she found the place, images leapt from memories not even her own. Many neighbors remembered the old man, who had been loved by all. From one mouth after another, a new story emerged.

Yes, the revolution had wanted the hotel, which it considered a historical site. Charity's great-great-grandfather had shared several dinners with Fidel Castro himself—and had gladly offered his property in return for another home of his choice. He lived many more years until, quite elderly, he fell and broke his hip. Eleven months later, he died in a Havana hospital.

Charity believes this version of her great-great-grandfather's life. It was given by too many townspeople for her to doubt. But how does one measure truth? By the gauge born of frustration within the exile community? By the pulse of a reality left far behind?

One way I choose to measure it is through its impact on this young woman herself. With tears in her eyes, and indicating her softly rounded, very Cuban body, she told me, "You know, for the first time in my life I feel good about myself. I hope I can take that feeling home with me."

Perhaps truth is found most completely by making connections and daring to risk. Perhaps those who are courageous enough to fully engage their memory, intellect, and feelings will one day break down the misinformation blockade and find the truth that will set us all free.

—Margaret Randall

