



## from the director's desk

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*Ignore any rumors of uprisings within the CBHD ranks, Paige will return to this column for the Spring issue. Having gladly relinquished the responsibility, she was able to focus more energy on research for her superb exploration of the technical and ethical issues with the emerging topic of uterus transplants. So it is my privilege to offer a few thoughts from the managing director's desk.*

Amidst the bustle of Black Friday, Cyber Monday, holiday parties, and the annual suspension of dietary willpower in the onslaught of abundant holiday treats and feasts, we may forget it is also the season of Advent. In this strange cultural juxtaposition of commercialism gone awry and theologically rich celebrations of historic Christian significance, several thoughts come to mind as we prepare for our holiday celebrations. Many from a more liturgical background will be familiar with Advent marking the beginning (and in some distinct theological ways the end) of the year in the liturgical calendar, at least for those of us from Protestant or Catholic backgrounds. Advent in these churches is often visibly celebrated through the practice of lighting candles as part of an Advent wreath—one of those rare ecumenical rituals that emerged from a single Protestant tradition (apparently an early Lutheran custom), but is now widely practiced across a spectrum of denominations. Each of the four primary candles of the wreath represents the passage of time in the weeks of the Advent season, but in many ecclesial traditions these candles also take on the symbolic representation of four Christian virtues: hope, faith, joy, and love. A fifth candle may be included, the Christ candle, which is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas day to mark the beginning of Christmastide and the celebration of the incarnation through the birth of Jesus Christ.

Advent is a particularly rich period in the church year, something which I have found is underscored through the practice of lighting the candles of the Advent wreath. “Advent” comes to us from the Latin *adventus* meaning “arrival” or “coming to.” We celebrate this beginning with the lighting of the first candle of the wreath, the hope candle. It reminds us of the promise of a coming savior, the messianic hope—a hope that as Jesus said to his disciples, “many prophets and righteous people longed to see . . . and to hear” (Matt 13:17 NIV). We remember this hope, this promise, as it was realized in the coming of the Christ in the most vulnerable of human forms, in the birth of our savior and Lord. And yet, in this very same hope we remember that the fulfillment of the promise of the messiah’s coming in the first Advent, was also marked by the promise of a second Advent, the blessed hope, in which as the Nicene Creed affirms, that having been seated at the right hand of the Father, “he [Jesus Christ] shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.”

In the hope of Advent we remember not one, but two central tenets of the Christian faith. First, we remember and celebrate the coming of the promised messiah through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the divine mystery of the God-man, through whom the way of redemption is made possible. In this taking on of our frail human flesh, the incarnation also reaffirms our humanity as embodied creatures. Given that Christmastide follows right on the heels of Advent, we see the clear connection between the hope of promise and its fulfillment as we celebrate the birth and life of Jesus. While a robust doctrine of creation and the attendant reflections of theological anthropology may take pride of place for many in the formulation of Christian bioethics, the implications of the first Advent and the doctrine of the incarnation are also critical for a robust Christian engagement with bioethical issues.

Advent also marks a curious beginning/end to the liturgical year. Having celebrated Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that empowered the Christian church into life, the liturgical calendar ends with a season of Ordinary Time. The transition of Ordinary Time to a new year gives us pause as we stand in the tension between the first and second Advent. As we light the hope candle, we are reminded of the coming of the God-man incarnate, but we, also, are reminded that we eagerly await a second Advent. In this hope our attention is called to a second central tenet of the Christian faith, the doctrine of eschatology focused not on those things leading up to the last thing, but on the consummation of all created reality. Having recently watched the movie *Transcendence*, I was struck afresh with how easy it is to allow our human ingenuity—and the products of that ingenuity—to become the hope and means of our salvation. When we allow our

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desires for the realization of intermediate goods such as health and wellness to stand in the place of the ultimate good (a point the late Edmund Pellegrino so eloquently challenged when he spoke to us in 2008 on healthcare as a good, but not the *summum bonum*). Or, when the defeat of death and the extension of human life at any and all costs become the ultimate good of our existence.

So very often we are tempted to place our eschatological hopes not in *adventus*, but in *futurum*. *Futurum*, as theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann have noted, speaks to that which is an extension of the present, something we can expect through “anticipation” as Oliver O’Donovan suggests. With utopian expectations of singularities and convergence prophesied in the not-too-distant future, we see manifestations of the power of *futurum* for our contemporary world, and the temptation to yield to it in the hubris of self-realization. Both *adventus* and resurrection, by way of contrast, involve divine irruption,

introducing both continuity and discontinuity through divine activity with that which went before. As O’Donovan notes, hope offers no assurances “on the basis of the present,” but is “founded on promise.” He goes on:

Yet in denying us the speculative assurance we crave for, promise allows hope to be born, and through hope opens the way to agency. . . . It enables us to face uncertainty in the certain knowledge that whatever the future holds, it holds the coming of the Son of Man.<sup>1</sup>

In this coming year, may we continue to reflect on these lessons of Advent and enrich our understanding of the implications of a distinctly Christian hope for our understanding of issues at the nexus of technology, science, medicine, and our common humanity. ●●●

1 Oliver O’Donovan, *Self, World, and Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 122-123.

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