

# EDITORIAL

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Father Philip Nolan, O.P.

**I** DON'T REMEMBER EXACTLY when **MAGNIFICAT** became a fixture in my childhood home. It's certain, however, that by the time I went off to college, it was as much a part of the domestic scenery as the creaky kitchen stools. Colorful stacks accumulated on bedside tables. Numerous copies of the current issue moved here and there—ever-present invitations to take a moment of prayer. Now and again, lean seasons came upon us. Perhaps a kids' subscription ran out, and, rather than taking initiative, we'd wait for an act of parental generosity—or an issue would disappear under the couch only to be discovered after the close of the month. In such times, my three siblings, my parents, and I jockeyed for access to the one or two available copies. Of course, I'd still insist that if I ever hid a copy of **MAGNIFICAT**, it was not to deny a family member its use, but simply because I wanted to know where to find it when I had a chance for some quiet.

From my childhood, through college and a couple years in the workforce, into seminary, and now into my early years as a priest, this publication has fed my life of prayer. The editorials by Father Peter John Cameron, O.P., and Father Sebastian White, O.P., made a great way to start the month. I love the meditations and the essays. And I now frequently use **MAGNIFICAT** as I prepare to say Mass and preach. So it is with a deep sense of personal gratitude and spiritual debt that I take the helm of **MAGNIFICAT**.

## An approaching surprise

It is the beginning of a new season in my own life. It's also the beginning of a new liturgical season. Advent has arrived. Where I live, in New York, this season brings a sharp chill and a variety of atmospheric touches to the neighborhood. Holiday music (prematurely) floods the airwaves.

Overnight, tangles of little lights grow up around trees like fast-spreading, illuminated ivy. And although I don't want to rush through Advent, despite my best efforts I find myself humming along to Christmas tunes, religious and secular alike. Year after year, I've come to expect the music, the decorations, and the festivities. The season runs like a script.

But on the first Sunday of Advent (November 30 this year)—the Gospel speaks not of what is expected, but of what is unknown. Jesus tells his disciples, *You do not know on which day your Lord will come*. In the grand scheme of life, we do not know the time of Jesus' final return, nor do we know when he will next come to us with a weighty demand or an unimaginable gift. In the more limited context of this season, while we can anticipate some activities of the days ahead, we're mostly ignorant of what will fill our time between now and Christmas. Below all the predictability of this season lies a permanent uncertainty: *You do not know*. The Lord's only assurance to us is that he is coming, that his day approaches, and that the timing and manner of his arrival may well be a surprise.

## Facing the unknown

Uncertainty marks every beginning in human life. As I begin this exciting ministry with MAGNIFICAT, I have, of course, some sense of what will be required of me. But, if I'm honest, I'm also a bit intimidated by the many unknown tasks that surely await. Such is life. All of us wake up not knowing what the day will bring. Parents welcome new children into the world, not knowing who these little ones will become. Marriages begin with spouses not knowing the detailed ways in which they will be asked to live out their vows. We walk the path of life with no way of telling what's around the next bend.

Very often, our ignorance of tomorrow becomes today's anxiety. We try to prepare for every contingency, but

in the end that's impossible and leaves us exhausted. For the Christian, however, ignorance of the future need not be cause for terror. Why? Because we know that whatever else comes, the good Lord will be there. We do not always know *how* he will come. We do know *that* he will come. *At an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.*

He will come, whether swaddled in a manger, stripped on the cross, or raised in glory. He will come in the gift of a deepened faith. He will come in the strength he gives us when he asks us to bear what we never thought ourselves capable of enduring. He will come in a surprise moment of understanding in a difficult relationship. And, ultimately, he will come when we pass beyond the veil of this life. However frightening the future may look, for us it also bears a promise—the promise of theophany, an encounter with our God.

While we do await the full revelation of his presence, even now God is already with us to lead us through what lies ahead. He is *behind and before* (Ps 139:5). He led us along the path that brought us to today and awaits us on the path ahead. Our prayer is a cry for direction, a need so beautifully expressed by Saint John Henry Newman:

Lead, Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,  
Lead Thou me on;  
The night is dark, and I am far from home,  
Lead Thou me on.  
Keep Thou my feet;  
I do not ask to see the distant scene;  
one step enough for me.

We head into the unknown, but we are sure of our guide. If we cannot see tomorrow, it is because he is asking us to trust him today. If we are lost, he is seeking us. If we are afraid to start, he is gently drawing us forward. Yes, there is much we do not know about the future. But we know this: he will be there. ■