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CELEBRATING ADVENT IN YOUR HOME

The built-in sense of expectancy makes the season of Advent an opportunity to share the faith with our loved ones.

by Kathryn A. Schneider and Robert M. Hamma



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From the day the tree is taken down and the decorations put away, children everywhere begin the long wait for next Christmas. From their point of view, Advent lasts all year long! This built-in sense of expectancy makes the actual season of Advent for us—their parents, grandparents, or godparents—one of our most privileged opportunities to share our faith with them.

Unfortunately, it's also the time of year when the pace of life is the most hectic. We're feeling pressured to get the shopping done, to get the Christmas cards in the mail, and to make all the plans for Christmas Day. Sadly, the hope of Advent is reduced to the hope that we'll get everything done, and the anticipation of Advent turns into the anxiety that we may not.

It's certainly possible that, when we do stop and remember that this season is one of preparation for the coming of Christ, we'll recognize that we're trying to do too much. Or maybe we'll see that we're not doing what we truly want to do to prepare for Christmas. Perhaps then we can try to do just one thing fewer or one thing more. But even if we can't, just the act of pausing to remember is in itself an act of getting ready.

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

REFLECTION: Stay awake! Be ready! As Advent begins, the liturgy reminds us that we are also preparing for the coming of Christ at the end of the world. We cannot know the time of Christ's coming, but it will be like a thief in the night. The Lord is coming, and his coming is both frightening and filled with hope. On that day we will each have to give an account of ourselves. On that day the swords will be beat into plowshares and "the Lord, our justice, shall reign."

* LIGHT ONE PURPLE CANDLE.

SCRIPTURE: "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all . . . so as to strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus" (1 Thes 3:12–13).

PRAYER: Jesus, you are the light of the world. Teach us to leave the darkness behind and to live in your light. Help us not to hurt each other by our words and actions. Make us thoughtful and generous so that we can be ready to greet you when you come.

RESPONSE: Come, Lord Jesus!



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SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

REFLECTION: Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the path! We hear the voice of John the Baptist calling us to prepare our hearts to greet the Lord. "Reform your lives; the reign of God is at hand," he says. In other words, straighten out your crooked ways and make your rough places smooth. You, too, are a herald of God's reign. Make peace, give comfort, be patient. Cry out with your deeds: "Our God is coming! Prepare the way."

* * LIGHT TWO PURPLE CANDLES.

SCRIPTURE: "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to think in harmony with one another, in keeping with Christ Jesus, that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 15:5–6).

PRAYER: Teens, you are the light of the world. May the fire of your love burn away our sins. May it help us to prepare the way for you by being kind, forgiving, and fair.

RESPONSE: Come, Lord Jesus!

THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

REFLECTION: Rejoice! Here is your God! As the feast of Christmas draws closer, we are reminded that the Lord is with us even now. Jesus came to give sight to the blind and life to the dead. Christ's reign is among us through our deeds of love and generosity. Let us not grow weary, but steady our hearts and rejoice, for the Lord is close at hand!

* * * LIGHT THREE CANDLES INCLUDING THE ROSE-COLORED ONE.

SCRIPTURE: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near" (Phil 4:4-5).

PRAYER: Jesus, you are the light of the world. May your light shine brightly so we can see you everywhere. Help us to spread your light and joy by giving freely and happily to all we meet.

RESPONSE: Come, Lord Jesus!

FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

REFLECTION: The angel announces to Mary, "You shall bear a son whose name will be Emmanuel," which means "God is with us." With Mary, we are called to be Christ bearers. With her we wonder, "How can this be?" As Christmas draws near, let us open our hearts in trust to the power of the Holy Spirit who comes upon us. Let us join with Mary in saying, "Be it done unto me according to your will."

* * * * LIGHT ALL FOUR CANDLES.

SCRIPTURE: "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. . . . Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled" (Lk 1:42, 45).

PRAYER: Jesus, you are the light of the world. Yet you were born in the darkness of night, in a cold stable, with only the animals to warm you. Let the light of your love shine on us so we can see you today in all the helpless children, in all who have no home. Teach us how to love you in them.

RESPONSE: Come, Lord Jesus!

Kathryn A. Schneider has a master's of divinity degree from the University of Notre Dame and has contributed to various catechetical publications. Robert M. Hamma has an M.A. in liturgical studies from the University of Notre Dame. He is author of numerous books, including A Catechumen's Lectionary (Paulist Press).

AN ADVENT PRAYER

Loving God, as we stand before this manger, help us to make a place for your Son in our home and in our hearts. Help us to welcome him by being kind to one another and by reaching out to those who need us. We thank you for the great gift of Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

ADVENT FEASTS FOR FAMILIES

Many feasts happen to fall within the Advent season. These are three of the most popular. The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception is a holy day of obligation.

DECEMBER 6: ST. NICHOLAS

A fourth-century bishop from from what is now modern-day Turkey, St. Nicholas is patron of children and the inspiration for Santa Claus. Known for his acts of charity, he often left gifts of food or money for the poor in the dark of night so that no one but God could see his good works. On this night in many countries children put shoes outside their door to be filled with treats in memory of St. Nicholas' great kindness. Consider how your family can imitate his kindness, especially toward children in need.



DECEMBER 8: IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

This holy day celebrates that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was free from sin from the moment of her conception in the womb of her mother. Mary is pure from the outset. Prepare to bear the Christ child by going as a family to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation during Advent.

DECEMBER 12: OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE

In 1531 Mary appeared to an Indian named Juan Diego in Tepeyac, Mexico. When asked by the bishop for proof of her appearance, he presented his cloak, upon which the Virgin had emblazoned her image. Our Lady of Guadalupe is patroness of the Americas. As Mary appeared to Juan Diego as a humble Aztec maiden, consider your own concern for the poor and lowly as you pray her Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55).

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ADVENT ACTIVITIES

THE ADVENT WREATH

This custom's origin is in pre-Christian Germany and Scandinavia, where the people gathered to celebrate the return of the sun after the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. The circular wreath made of evergreens with four candles interspersed represents the circle of the year and the life that endures through the winter. For us, the lighting of the Advent candles represents the promise of the coming of Jesus, the light of the world. As the light of the Advent wreath grows, we share in the expectation of Isaiah, of John the Baptist, and of Mary for the fulfillment of God's promise to send a savior. We look forward to the coming of Jesus, who pierces the darkness of sin by the light of his love.

Many families choose to make the Advent wreath a focus of their prayer, often at mealtime. Choose a time that best suits your family and try to involve everyone. One child could light the candles or read the prayer; another could offer a petition or blow out the candles.

How to Make an Advent Wreath. Begin with a round piece of styrofoam, available at craft shops, and cut four evenly spaced holes into which you will place the four candles. Traditionally there are three purple candles and one rose candle (for the third Sunday). You'll find it helpful to place the styrofoam circle on a pizza pan or round cookie sheet covered with foil so that you can easily move your wreath to and from the table. Place fresh evergreen branches over the styrofoam. Replace them when they dry out in order to preserve the symbolism of the vitality of God's love. Encourage the children to participate as they are able, by gathering branches, placing the candles, and so on.



THE ADVENT CALENDAR

This tradition originated in Germany. Although many of the Advent calendars available today have lost any Christian content, there are still some available which retain Christian symbolism. Look for those that tell the story of Jesus' birth or contain Bible passages. These calendars often consist of a biblical scene with the 24 days before Christmas marked on it, each date with a little door concealing an image behind it. As the children open another door day after day, take the opportunity to talk about Jesus' coming. It will add to their pre-Christmas fun and sense of expectancy.

THE ADVENT CHAIN

This paper chain represents our good deeds, our attempts to reach out to others as we celebrate the coming of Jesus. An Advent chain can be made easily with strips of construction paper, scissors, pen or crayon, staples or tape. Each time a child does a good deed, he or she writes or draws it on a strip of construction paper. The strips are then stapled in a circle, forming a chain. As the days of Advent and the links mount up, the chain grows as a visible sign of each child's attempt to reach out to others. The chains can be used to decorate the Christmas tree or the doorways of the children's rooms.

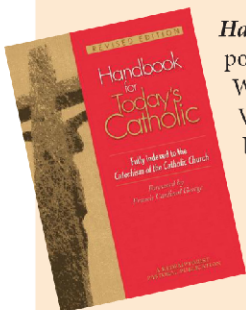
THE MANGER SCENE

Tradition credits St. Francis of Assisi with creating and popularizing the manger scene. Many homes display a manger scene during the Advent and Christmas seasons. Making the manger a focus of family prayer turns it into more than just another Christmas decoration.

During the first week of Advent, set aside time when family members can set up the manger together. As you take out each of the figures, explain their role in preparing for and welcoming the child Jesus. Be sure to leave the crib empty, waiting until Christmas Eve or Christmas morning to place the child Jesus there. The empty crib will serve as a reminder that we are still waiting for the coming of Jesus.

You may also want to wait until Christmas to display the Wise Men, or you could place them on the other side of the room and move them closer and closer each day as Epiphany approaches.

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