

Advent: Preparing for Christmas

By Graham Osborne

The Church, in her wisdom, divides the liturgical year up into various seasons, where she guides us to focus on different aspects of the Christian life. As Christmas approaches, Advent is the season the Church has specifically set apart to help us to prepare for it. But how best to do this? The Church gives us some guidance.

The word Advent, comes from the Latin *adventus*, the translation of the Greek word, *parousia*, which means, presence or arrival. In the Christian sense, it usually refers to the second and final coming of Jesus. With this sense in mind, the Church's Congregation for Divine Worship reminds us that, "Advent has a twofold character: as a season to prepare for Christmas when Christ's first coming to us is remembered", *and* "as a season when that remembrance directs the mind and heart to await Christ's Second Coming at the end of time". "Advent is thus a period for devout and joyful expectation" – a time of "waiting", "conversion", of "joyful hope".

From these guides we can glean some practical insights. For the world, especially in western cultures, Advent is often simply a time of parties, decorations and gift buying. But the Church gently bids us to wait on some of these things, choosing to focus on a more spiritual preparation for recalling the birth of our Savior and his imminent return.

Where as for many, Christmas literally ends with Boxing Day, for the Church, the real celebration has just begun! The glorious days of the great Christmas Octave have started: 8 days of rejoicing, culminating in the great Solemnity celebrating Mary the Mother of God on January 1.

Now comes the *full* celebration of the birth of Jesus, but also coupled with a joyful anticipation of his promised return. Indeed, the people once in darkness have seen a great light, and the contrast against the more reserved days of Advent is spiritually and emotionally powerful. This is exactly what the Church intended the effect of Advent to be. It's the *preparation* for the celebration.

But how do we deal, in a practical way, with this divergence that the Church is calling us to – away from what everyone else may be doing around us during the time of Advent? Perhaps to begin, we can ground ourselves on two Christian foundations that Jesus left us: "one thing is necessary", and "seek first the Kingdom". If we can keep these two lights firmly before us, we will find our way – and all the rest will be given to us.

In particular, we can look to the Church's own preparations to give us some guidance here. The Gloria is not sung in Advent [with exceptions], and the directives for music and altar decor underline that these should both be "marked by a moderation suited to the character of this time of year, *without expressing in anticipation the full joy of the Nativity of the Lord.*" This is key. The Church is emphasizing that we should not be celebrating the full joyousness of Christmas just yet – before the appointed time. There is purpose in the more reserved days of Advent.

In the daily and Sunday Mass readings, we hear Old Testament prophets promising the Messiah. We hear the preaching of John the Baptist calling us to repent and turn away from our sins. There is a call to conversion, to change our ways, to grow in holiness, but all tempered with the certain joy that, not only has our savior already come, but he *will* come again!

But still we wait. And we recall. There is expectation. And the Church wants us to enter into this sense of preparation and waiting as fully as possible, while sidestepping, as best we can, the potential distractions of the noisy din carrying on around us.

And so, the Church is also calling us to be somewhat reserved in our preparations at this point too – to not *fully* express the joy of Christmas ahead of time, but to wait until the *appropriate* time. Perhaps we wait to decorate our house. Maybe we turn on our outside lights for the first time at midnight on Christmas eve [recalling that "the bridegroom comes at midnight", Mt 25:6]. Perhaps we delay the decorating of our tree until Christmas eve or close to it. Maybe we play only those carols directed particularly towards Advent. Maybe we hold off on sampling that Christmas baking until... well... Christmas!

These are little things, but they can help us keep spiritual tempo with the Church's preparations – little things we can offer the babe in the manger on that glorious Christmas night.

In our homes, we can add some devotions as well. It's a busy time there too, but we recall Martha and Mary. Who will we choose to imitate?

An Advent wreath is an obvious option [try making it yourself!], and wonderful to light each Sunday after dinner, accompanied with an Advent reading from Scripture and a prayer [there are options online]. Making your own Christmas decorations can be a wonderful preparation too [try getting clear glass ornament balls and painting them – kids, big and old, love this too!]

But our family favourite is the Jesse Tree. It is a short, but spiritually rich devotion that you can do every day of Advent [this in itself is a wonderful preparation for Christmas]. By adding a symbol to the tree each day, accompanied by an

explanatory Scripture reading and prayer, you trace salvation history right from Genesis to the New Testament. And it can be done in a family context, even by the youngest members – a *beautiful* Advent addition!

And on this family note, speaking as a dad, one thing I strongly recommend. St Nicholas is St Nicholas. Celebrate him and recall his holy example on his feast of December 6th for sure, but not on December 25. To mislead a child – or to even outright lie to them in some instances – about one of the holiest solemnities of the Christian year is not a good way to build a foundation of faith in our families. Keeping Christ in Christmas will help build a natural love and reverence for this great season from an early age, and will not be a source of disappointment as children grow older – when that inevitable day comes and they learn the truth...

But adding a retreat is a great idea, and daily Mass when you can – especially that last week before Christmas. Things like this can really help ground us in a true Advent spirit. I love to read the daily Mass readings every morning, linking them all together in a powerful line directly to the birth of Jesus. And we need these times of silence – times of prayer and reflection – if we are to prepare well. Seek first the kingdom and all those must-do things will be ordered in God's good time.

And finally, consider toning down the gift aspect of Christmas. And I say this especially with regards to children. An overwhelming flood of presents, among other things, can potentially send the wrong idea of what Christmas is all about. When we quietly learn to value created things over the Creator, especially at a young age, it can have profound effects on us as adults as well.

And so often, the well-intentioned buying of presents also becomes more of an overwhelming Christmas obligation, rather than an offering flowing from the heart. And the resulting overdrive of busy-ness can be very distracting and often detrimental to the more spiritual preparations we may be trying to make.

All gifts given invariably find their true richness and meaning when they are given to reflect and imitate the Father's gift of His Son out of love for us – and also to recall the gifts of the Magi, given to honor and worship Jesus.

If we can somehow unite our intentions for buying our gifts with the beautiful intentions of the Father and the Magi, our gifts will take on a new, almost sacramental meaning – matter conveying grace. And don't hesitate to make those gifts a little more spiritual in nature, more in line with the true sense of Christmas. To buy a gift with this adjusted perspective – suddenly, shopping is transformed into a holy, almost mystical activity. Imagine! The mall transformed into a place of grace...

So seek first the Kingdom this Advent. It can be found everywhere. It is at hand. And only one thing is needed...