

# Catholic Traditions for Advent and Christmas

## By Michaelann Martin

**ISSUE:** How can families better live the spirit of Advent and Christmas in their homes?

**RESPONSE:** The Catholic Church has designated the four weeks preceding Christmas as Advent, a time to “prepare the way of the Lord” for His coming as our King and Savior. In addition, the Church teaches that

[w]hen the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Savior’s first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming. By celebrating [John the Baptist’s] birth and martyrdom, the Church unites herself to his desire: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (Catechism, no. 524; original emphasis).

By participating in various time-honored traditions, such as making Jesse trees or putting on a Christmas play at home, Catholic families can engage more fruitfully in the seasons of Advent and Christmas.

**DISCUSSION:** “Either we live the liturgical year with its varying seasons of joy and sorrow, work and rest, or we follow the pattern of the world,” writes Helen McLoughlin in *Advent and Christmas in a Catholic Home*, commenting on the challenge Catholics have of being “in the world but not of the world” throughout the year. She wrote these profound words in the 1950s, but they are even more important today because of the general decline in Catholic family life during the last 40 years. With two parents working in many households, there is less time to devote to the spiritual life of the family. As Catholic parents, we must readjust our priorities and teach our children by living our faith, both inside and outside the home.

It seems fitting that Advent is the beginning of the liturgical calendar, for it is a season of spiritual preparation marked by an eager longing for the birth of Our Savior Jesus Christ. There are age-old Advent practices, some of which are mentioned in this FAITH FACT, which will help our children and families live closer to Christ. The practices are time-tested and proven. They teach the doctrine of redemption and develop a sense of generosity toward God (cf. Catechism, nos. 2222-26). A family’s strong and living faith will become their heritage and a mode to reinforce the religious practices centered in the liturgy.

“Children love to anticipate,” writes McLoughlin. “When there are empty mangers to fill with straw for small sacrifices, when the Mary candle is a daily reminder on the dinner table, when Advent hymns are sung in the candlelight of a graceful Advent wreath, children are not anxious to celebrate Christmas before time. That would offend their sense of honor. Older children who make Nativity sets, cut Old Testament symbols to decorate a Jesse tree, or prepare costumes for a Christmas play will find Advent all too short a time to prepare for the coming of Christ the King.”

These are hopeful thoughts as we prepare to incorporate some of these liturgical activities into our home life during Advent to enable us to truly celebrate Christmas.

It is a shame that many do not fast during Advent, because without a fast there can really be no feast at Christmas. Fasting and other forms of penance, such as prayer and almsgiving, help to purify our hearts and prepare us for the celebration of Christmas (cf. Catechism, no. 1434). The Church especially encourages participation at weekday Masses during Advent, because in the Eucharist we find the source and goal of our Advent preparation: Christ Himself, whose sacrifice reconciles us with God (cf. Catechism, no. 1436; Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Eucharisticum Mysterium*, no. 29).

The Church primarily celebrates Christmas from Christmas Day until the Solemnity of the Epiphany, which commemorates the manifestation of Christ as the Savior of the whole world (cf. Mt. 2:1-12). The Church has also traditionally celebrated Christmas for 40 days, culminating on the Feast of the Presentation (Feb. 2). During this time, the birth of Christ is celebrated as one continuous festival. It is just as important to celebrate during the Christmas season as it is to prepare for Christ during Advent.

The following activities are provided so that you and your family can live Advent and Christmas to the fullest.

#### 1. Advent wreath:

The Advent wreath, which has German origins, is probably the most recognized Advent custom. It is a wreath made of evergreens that is bound to a circle of wire. It symbolizes the many years from Adam to Christ in which the world awaited its Redeemer; it also represents the years that we have awaited His second and final coming. The wreath holds four equally spaced candles, the three purple ones lit on the “penitential” Sundays and a pink one for Gaudete, the joyful third Sunday in Advent. There are many available prayers and hymns found in the reading list that can accompany your personal Advent wreath ceremony.

#### 2. The empty manger:

Each child may have his own individual manger, or there may be one manger for the whole family. The idea is that when acts of service, sacrifice, or kindness are done in honor of Baby Jesus as a birthday present, the child receives a piece of straw to put into the manger. Then, on Christmas morning, “Baby Jesus” is placed in the manger. Encourage your children to make Jesus’ bed as “comfortable” as possible through their good deeds. In the process, explain Christ’s incomparable self-gift at Christmas and Easter that enables us to be part of God’s family.

#### 3. The Jesse tree:

The Jesse tree tells about Christ’s ancestry through symbols and relates Scripture to salvation history, progressing from creation to the birth of Christ. The tree can be made on a poster board with the symbols glued on, or on an actual tree. For further information read, *Advent and Christmas in a Catholic Home*.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. St. Nicholas Day:

The feast of St. Nicholas is on Dec. 6th. It is a highlight of the Advent season. Each child puts out a shoe the night before St. Nicholas Day in the hope that the kind bishop—with his miter, staff, and bag of gifts—will pay a visit. The current “Santa Claus” is modeled after St. Nicholas, but commercialism has tarnished the true story. Many families give gifts on both Dec. 6 and Christmas. Read about St. Nicholas in your favorite saints book.

#### 5. The Christ candle:

Any large white candle can be used for the Christ candle. The idea is to decorate it with symbols for Christ. Use old Christmas cards, sequins, holly, etc. The candle can be lit on Christmas Eve to show that the Light of the World has arrived. Then continue to light the Christ candle throughout the year at Sunday dinner to remind your family of our waiting for Christ, as well as celebrating His birth and Resurrection.

#### 6. The Mary candle:

Some families have the custom of decorating the Christ candle with a blue veil on December 8th, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. On this great feast, others place a candle with a blue ribbon before a statue or picture of the Blessed Virgin, whose “yes” to God enabled our Lord’s coming at Christmas. The candle is lit during meal times to serve as a delightful reminder of Mary’s eager expectation of the “Light of the World.” It can also serve as a reminder to each family member to keep their own light of grace burning as a preparation for Christ’s coming.

#### 7. St. Lucy cakes:

The feast of St. Lucy, virgin and martyr, is on December 13th. This marks the opening of the Christmas season in Sweden. Her life story can be found in most saints books, as can the recipe for the traditional cakes. The symbolism is rich and her life story worthwhile reading.

#### 8. The Nativity scene:

This is the event in which the entire family shares—setting up the Christmas manger. Mary and Joseph should be far off traveling and their approach to Bethlehem can be adjusted daily. Older children can make life-size Nativity models, carve them, cut them out from cardboard, or set up pre-made figurines. The creative ideas are without limit. Make sure to place the Nativity scene where many can admire the children’s efforts to give God glory.

Father, all-powerful God,  
your eternal Word took flesh on our earth  
when the Virgin Mary placed her life  
at the service of your plan.  
Lift our minds in watchful hope  
to hear the voice which announces His glory  
and open our minds to receive the Spirit  
who prepares us for His coming.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

-Prayer for Fourth Sunday of Advent

## 9. Christmas baking:

There are many recipe books available to find great traditional Christmas baking ideas. (See recommended reading below.) The baking usually starts around December 20th. As Christmas approaches, the house will smell of baking and fresh wreaths. The glory of Christmas is at hand! Move the manger to a focal point, add lights to the Nativity to be lighted on Christmas Eve, and anticipate together.

## 10. Blessing of the tree:

More and more frequently families are blessing their Christmas trees. It is good to remind children that “the tree” relates to many aspects of our faith. For example, we are reminded that our first parents were not allowed to eat from one tree, and that Christ paid the great price for our redemption by hanging on a tree (cf. Acts 5:29-32).

There are many different stories which attempt to explain why we use a tree at Christmas. For instance, St. Boniface in the eighth century gave the balsam fir tree to the Druids in place of the oak tree, the symbol of their idol. He said, “The fir tree is the wood of peace, the sign of an endless life with its evergreen branches. It points to heaven. It will never shelter deeds of blood, but rather be filled with loving gifts and rites of kindness.”

There are more stories and blessings included in McLoughlin’s Advent and Christmas in a Catholic Home. A family can also participate in Advent through daily Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, or at least by following the weekday Mass readings at home, as the Church anticipates her Savior’s coming, and then His early life following Christmas. A family that participates together in Mass and other activities during the Advent and Christmas seasons will grow closer in Christ—“The Reason for the Season”—and give a great witness to friends and relatives.

Wisdom, O holy Word of God, you govern allcreation with your strong yet tender care. Come and show your people the way to salvation.

O sacred Lord of ancient Israel, who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush, who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain: Come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.

O Flower of Jesse’s stem, you have been raised up as a sign for all peoples; kings stand silent in your presence; the nations bow down in worship before you. Come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid.

O Key of David, O royal Power of Israel controlling at your will the gate of heaven: Come, break down the prison walls of death for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death; and lead your captive people into freedom.

O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: Come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

O King of all the nations, the only joy of every human heart; O Keystone of the mighty arch of man, come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust.

O Emmanuel, king and lawgiver, desire of the nations, Savior of all people, come and set us free, Lord our God.

—Antiphons for the Canticle of Mary  
Evening Prayer, December 17-23

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1 The Jesse tree reminds us of Jesus’ Davidic ancestry (cf. Mt. 1:1). For a greater understanding of the relationship between the house of David, Jesus, and the Catholic Church’s divine origin, see CUF’s FAITH FACT: “Rock Solid: The Salvation History of the Catholic Church.”

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