

Partners *in* FAITH

Helping our children grow in their Catholic faith.

Special Advent Edition

Advent: Preparing for the real gifts of Christmas

The season of Advent is rich with hope. Not only does it open a fresh new liturgical year, it heralds the fulfillment of God's promise of a savior. Advent helps us to celebrate the real promise of Christmas - the coming of justice, peace, and freedom.

Here are some ways to observe Advent so that when Christ comes you will be ready and waiting to welcome him:

Comfort the lonely.

This can be the loneliest time of the year. Make a list of people you know who live alone, are new to your area, or who have family far away. Include them in your family events, invite them to midnight Mass, or visit with them during this season.

Make peace.

This is a time to make peace with one another and take real steps to forgive or ask forgiveness. Try to avoid quarreling and pray for an extra measure of patience.

Give to those who need generosity.

Share what you have: money, canned goods, clothes, or time to volunteer. Build new holiday traditions around giving and service.

Reach out to strangers.

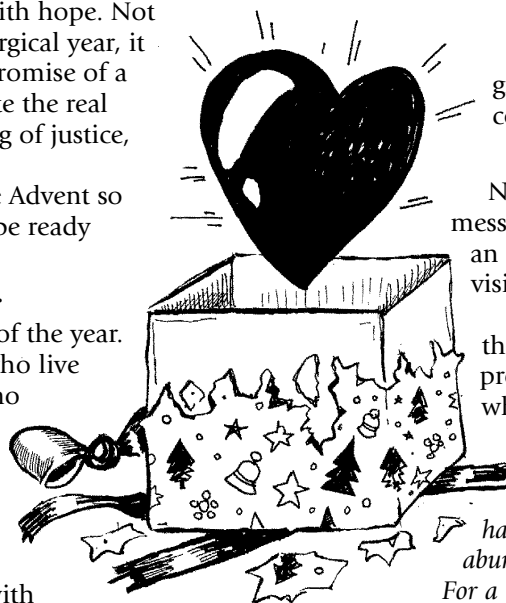
Someone in your neighborhood, apartment building or workplace may be grateful to share your table. Be ready to add an extra chair.

Learn something new about the Catholic faith.

Read a daily verse in the Bible, find out who the people in the stained-glass windows are at your church, pick up a title at the Catholic bookstore, join a Bible study or prayer group.

Celebrate the rituals.

Light candles in an Advent wreath each night of season. The wreath is an ancient symbol of victory, in this case paying tribute to Christ's victory over sin. The three purple candles represent penance, sorrow, and longing expectation. The rose candle that is lit the third week of Advent represents hope and the coming joy.



Attend Confession.

Seek reconciliation with Jesus and you can greet the Messiah this Christmas with a clean conscience and a heart full of joy.

Be open to wonder and surprise.

Nothing could be more surprising than the messages Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth, got from an angel. Be hopeful; stay open to surprising visits and good news in your life.

No matter what your observance, remember this: The Messiah is already among us. His presence is affirmed through our good works when we share from our riches or our poverty.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing. For a child is born to us, a son is given us; and upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:1-2,5)



Sharing Advent with Children

Advent can get lost in a child's view of the Christmas season. Here are suggestions for observing this special time as a family.

- **Start an evening Advent ceremony before dinner or bedtime.** Light one candle each night during the first week, two candles the second week, etc. Say a few prayers and read a passage from the Gospel according to St. Luke to tell the story of the Nativity.
- **Help each child write a letter to the Baby Jesus** telling him how much we love him and look forward to his arrival. Read the letters on Christmas Day.
- **One night each week, add a piece or two to the Nativity.** Have Mary and Joseph start way across the room and move them closer each week. Add straw or grass to the manger to make it comfortable for the Baby. Put up the angels and shepherds last, building momentum for the birth on Christmas.
- **Take a moment after Mass on Sunday** to pray together and prepare each heart to receive Christ this Christmas.

Six simple ways to savor the spirit of Advent and Christmas



Without our really knowing or intending it, the joy of Christmas can get lost in the wrappings and trappings of a hectic holiday. Here are some ways other Catholics have found to savor the spirit of the season.

Give simple gifts from the heart.

Gabrielle remembers, "One year when my father lost his job, we had no money for gifts but lots of people to give to. So my mother came up with the idea of baking. We went to the library and researched special recipes and decided upon a couple for cookies and one for sweet bread. We spent the next few weeks elbow-deep in red and green colored dough, and each batch of whatever we made was better than the next. Mom bought some inexpensive tulle fabric and we wrapped our baked treasures in plastic wrap and colored tulle. People really valued the time and creativity that went into our gifts."

Simplify your shopping.

As Carlos' family grew, they decided to start picking names instead of buying for all the relatives. "It felt funny at first, but picking names really cut down on the stress of financing a huge gift list. It also helped us concentrate on the gifts we did buy so that they were more special and heart-felt then if they were just one of a bunch.

Tell the Story.

Lisa remembers, "When I was little, our neighbor across the street babysat for us one night about two weeks before Christmas. We asked him to read us a story before putting us to bed and he pulled down the family Bible from the shelf. He read the Christmas story from Luke and made it come alive in a way no one ever had for us. I've done that each year as an adult and it is one of my favorite traditions." Martin's family adds a twist. "Every Sunday night we read more of the Christmas story from the Bible but pace it so that the last part - the Nativity - is read at Christmas dinner. It really helps us focus on the reason for the season."



Welcome the traveler.

When Tina moved to a new town, she couldn't make it to her family's home for Christmas. Instead of feeling sorry for herself, she opened her new home to strangers.

"It started out for people who had nowhere else to go or who were estranged from their own families. Then it became a mass gathering of friends and family and I had 60 people last year. What a great way to get to know my new home - by welcoming my neighbors to it!"

Be St. Nicholas to someone.

Mike said, "After plowing through an orgy of presents one year, my wife and I decided that the focus of our Christmas celebration was off base. We agreed to cut down on the stuff we bought for each other and use the extra money to buy for someone who needs it more. The next year I noticed a family at church whose children had light jackets on in the middle of winter. The parents had none at all. I didn't know them well enough to approach personally, so we came up with a St. Nicholas scheme.



Right after Mass we went to the store and had a ball picking out coats, hats, mittens, and scarves for everyone in the family. We guessed at the sizes and got a gift receipt, just in case. My wife wrapped everything and tied huge bows on top. I took the gifts to the rectory and asked that the family be told only that 'St. Nicholas' left something at the church for them. Imagine how great my wife and I felt when we saw the family at Mass on Christmas Day decked out in the gear we bought for them. They never knew we were 'St. Nicholas.' They just knew someone cared."

Serve the poor.

Kenny and his wife found a way to quiet a family squabble and bring more spirit to their Christmas celebration. He said, "One year we were caught between families for



Christmas dinner. My family wanted us to celebrate with them, and my wife's family was insisting we go to their home. Since we couldn't please everyone, we decided to please Jesus. We had our Christmas dinner at the Knights of Columbus soup kitchen after we served the homeless theirs. I never tasted anything so good."

The key to savoring these seasons is to remember what they are all about ... *love*. God's love for us that spills over into our love for others. One year from now Aunt Helen isn't going to remember what you bought her for Christmas. But she will remember that you made her feel loved. That's the real gift you want to give at Christmas.