

PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS WHEN ADVENT IS SO BUSY

By Katy DeCoste

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It's that time of year. Shop windows fill up with brightly-colored, twinkly light holiday displays, and living room windows fill up with Christmas trees. Festive music plays on repeat. If you're like me, this is the time of year when you realize Advent is approaching. And after Advent, Christmas. You start to feel the need to prepare your heart, as the Church encourages us to, for the birth of Jesus.

For many of us, this is also one of our busiest times of the year. If you have kids, you're swamped with Christmas concerts, school activities, and buying presents. If you're a teacher, your classrooms are filled with students who are desperate for the holidays. If, like me, you're a college student, you can barely see Christmas through the thick fog of papers and exams. Even if none of these apply, the November/December season is still packed with parties, decorations, presents, and parish events.

How can we prepare for Christmas when Advent might feel like a chore to be squeezed in amongst everything else going on?

The Catechism tells us that by celebrating Advent each year and renewing our preparation for Christ's first coming, we also prepare and renew our hearts for His second coming. Advent is a time when we joyously celebrate what Christ's coming means for every person: the promise of salvation for the whole world.

Spiritual Preparation

For a lot of people, this can look like greater involvement in parish life: maybe we attend Mass more often, participate in charity efforts through our parish, or volunteer to help with Christmas Masses.

It's easy to see how these practices ready our hearts for Christ. We welcome Him into our lives through our prayer, and we share Him through our time volunteering or our efforts to fundraise. We celebrate His gift of eternal salvation by sharing the talents He has given us, with the Church, our families and friends, and the disadvantaged.

But sometimes, these activities can become overwhelming. For instance, I used to sing in several choirs. While this was a beautiful way to share my God-given talents, the Christmas season was one concert after another. Even Christmas Mass became stressful as I volunteered in music ministry, sometimes at midnight Mass and again on Christmas morning.

Giving of our time and talents is a good thing—it's part of how Christ calls us to live as His disciples. Yet, as we might intensify our community involvement in the lead-up to Christmas, it's also important to take time away from all the busy-ness. Maybe this looks like taking silent time in prayer, being with family, or reading a good book. Or maybe, it looks like sometimes saying "no" when people ask us for our time, because we know saying "yes" would be too much. Either way, protecting our hearts as we give of ourselves helps us prepare for Christmas internally as we are preparing externally.

Domestic Preparation

For almost everyone, preparation for Christmas involves a lot of chores that may not initially seem to ready our hearts for Christ. We buy presents, bake cookies, and decorate our homes. These might seem like secular tasks which don't have much relevance to Advent. As a result, sometimes we feel like these seasonal jobs might distract us from Christ's birth. But everything from buying gifts to picking a Christmas tree is a reminder that *something special is happening*.

Our domestic preparations mark Christmas as a distinctive time of the year. But we must keep the time centered on Christ: as we place presents under the tree for our kids, we also bring them to Christmas Mass and teach them about the Nativity. As Christians, we understand that this isn't an arbitrary holiday, but a very real celebration of a God who "so loved the world that He gave His only Begotten Son, so that all who believe in Him might not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

By preparing our homes, we strengthen our communities. During Christmas, my home sees family members, friends, coworkers, fellow parishioners. Food, decorations, and gifts bind us together. They transform our private home into a space of hospitality, giving, love, and friendship. Since "wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst," our preparations for guests also become preparations for Jesus. As people enter our homes, He enters our hearts.

Private Preparation

For some of us, this might be the hardest part of Advent. In the weeks leading up to Christmas, we spend more time in prayer, receive the Sacraments of Eucharist and Confession more frequently, and re-evaluate ourselves and our relationships with Christ. Luckily, there are hundreds of ways to prepare our hearts privately. Advent is a popular time to begin Marian Consecration, and many Catholics practice daily devotionals for the Advent season. Most parishes provide opportunities for fellowship during Advent, such as Bible studies, daily Mass, hymn services, or Reconciliation services.

But if Advent is busy with our other forms of preparation, maybe we feel like we have no time for extra prayer or time spent in faith formation.

The Christmas story shows that *Jesus doesn't come when it's convenient for us*. Think of His mother! She was betrothed to be married and becoming pregnant put her in immense danger. Think of the Wise Men! They had to travel for months just to catch a glimpse of Jesus! The truth is, we always have busy lives. Jesus won't wait. He came to earth when it was inconvenient, and He comes into our lives and hearts in the same way. Grace comes into our lives in the middle of the chores, the busy-ness, and the obligations of living as a modern layperson in the Church.

I pray that amongst all the busy-ness of our preparations, we find the time and the space to sit with Him in the silence of our hearts. This is where He speaks to us, in stolen quiet moments. In this season, especially, He is with us.

October Beatifications

By Brenda Lenertz

Carlo Acutis

Carlo Acutis, a 15-year old computer whiz, is now "Blessed." In February, Pope Francis attributed a miracle to the teen, and his beatification ceremony took place on October 10 in Assisi, Italy. Pope Francis called him a role model for young people today. Further miracles attributed to prayers to Carlo will be studied by the Vatican, and if a second miracle is certified, he will be declared a saint in the Catholic church.

Born in 1991, Carlo grew up in Milan, Italy. From the

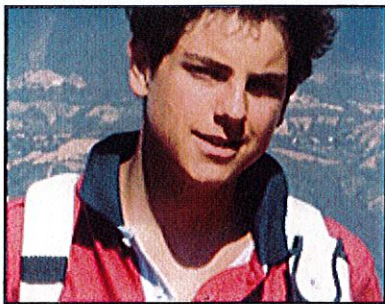


Photo credit: CNS photo/courtesy Sainthood Cause of Carlo Acutis.

time of his First Communion, the Eucharist was the center of his life. He called it "my highway to heaven" and said, "Our goal must be the infinite and not the finite. The infinity is our homeland. We are always expected in Heaven." Carlo was well-loved and known for his sense of humor, volunteering to help the less fortunate and defending schoolmates who were being bullied.

Carlo loved playing video games and sports, especially soccer. Gifted

with everything related to the world of computers, both his friends and adults with computer engineering degrees considered him a genius. He used his coding talent to set up websites for priests. At the age of ten, he began to create an online exhibit about religious miracles from around the world. His website cataloging and promoting Eucharistic miracles continues to be used by people across the globe. You can find his website at

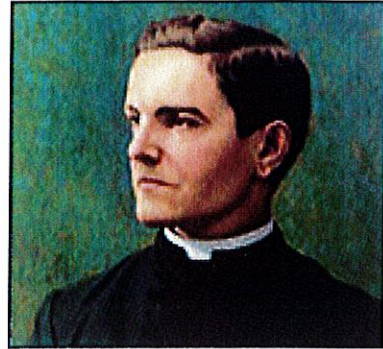
-www.miracolieucaistici.org.

Carlo Acutis died at the age of 15 from leukemia. His mother is amazed at how Carlo's fame has spread. "It's a mystery. I sense the finger of God," she said. "Losing your son is the most terrible thing, but we are happy he is helping people discover their faith." Carlos is a true witness that holiness can be attained by people of any age.

Fr. Michael McGivney

Pope Francis has approved a miracle attributed to the intercession of Fr. Michael McGivney. He will be the first U.S. parish priest to be beatified. The miracle recognized for his beatification was that of an unborn child in the U.S. who, in 2015, was healed in-utero of a fatal condition after prayers by his family to Fr. McGivney.

Born to Irish immigrant parents, Fr. McGivney was ordained in Baltimore in 1877, ministering to a heavily Irish-American and immigrant community in the then-Diocese of Hartford. It was a time of great anti-Catholic



CNS file photo

sentiment, and McGivney worked tirelessly to keep his flock close to the faith. With a group of the leading Catholic men of New Haven, he founded the Knights of Columbus in 1882 to provide spiritual support for Catholic men and financial resources for widows and orphans. The Knights of Columbus have grown to become one of the largest Catholic organizations in the world, known for their charitable efforts.

Father McGivney spent his entire priesthood in parish ministry. He died of pneumonia in 1890—two days after his 38th birthday—after falling ill during the "Russian flu" pandemic.

Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson stated, "Today, his spirit continues to shape the extraordinary charitable work of Knights as they continue to serve those on the margins of society as he served widows and orphans in the 1880's."