

How should we prepare for Christmas?

Avoiding the commercialization of Christmas is a real challenge. For Catholics, the liturgical season of Advent helps us focus on the spiritual preparation for Christmas and on the coming of Our Lord. (Advent comes from the Latin *adventus*, meaning “coming.”) The catechism stresses the two-fold meaning of this “coming”: “When 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” (No. 524). Therefore, on one hand, the faithful reflect back on Our Lord’s first coming when He humbled Himself, becoming incarnate and entered our time and space to free us from sin. On the other hand, we recall in the creed that Our Lord will come again to judge the living and the dead and that we must be ready to meet Him.

So here are some good suggestions to prepare for Christmas.

First, make an Advent wreath. The wreath is a circle, which has no beginning or end: God is eternal, and His love for us is everlasting. The wreath is made of fresh plant material, because Christ came to give us new, everlasting life through His passion, death and resurrection. Three candles are purple, symbolizing penance, preparation and sacrifice; the pink candle symbolizes the same but highlights the third Sunday of Advent, Gaudete Sunday, when we rejoice because our preparation is now half-way finished and Christ will soon come. The light represents Christ, who entered this world to scatter the darkness of evil and show us the way of righteousness. The progression of lighting candles shows our increasing readiness to meet Our Lord. Make the Advent wreath the centerpiece of the dinner table. Light it at dinner time, and say the special prayers along with grace before meals. This daily practice will help each member of the family keep focused on the true meaning of Christmas

Second, pray. Hopefully prayer already is part of the daily routine, but if not, make it one. Schedule a regular time for prayer. Also, pray the rosary, individually or as a family. Ponder the various events in the life of Our Lord, and the example of Mary, “the handmaid of the Lord,” who gave of herself to receive the gift of the Savior. For little children, who have a shorter attention span, maybe just pray a decade each night, looking at one mystery; over the four weeks of Advent, all the mysteries will have been prayed.

Third, read Sacred Scripture. This liturgical year, the Sunday Gospel passages will be taken primarily from St. Matthew. However, do not just read the Gospel; rather, spend a few minutes reflecting upon it, inserting oneself into the passage, and allowing the Holy Spirit to speak in the quiet of one’s heart.

Fourth, take the time for confession. Do a thorough examination of conscience. If it has been a while since the last confession, find a good examination of conscience, and over the course of the week — praying for help from the Holy Spirit — write down those sins that come to mind. Bring that examination to confession, receive absolution, and do the prescribed penance. Remember Psalm 51: “A heart contrite and humbled, O God, you will not spurn.”

Fifth, teach. For children especially, read to them the stories of St. Francis and the first Christmas crèche, St. Boniface and the first Christmas tree, or St. Nicholas who is Santa Claus. There are other good stories about the religious significance of Christmas greenery, poinsettias and window candles.

Sixth, preach. To preach, one does not have to stand before a crowd or on the corner shouting Bible verses. There are subtle ways to preach Christmas: Most of us send some kind of greeting card — use religious cards and religious stamps and sign them with “May God bless you” or “I’ll be praying for you at Christmas.” When greeting people, say, “Merry Christmas,” not “Happy holidays” or “Seasons greetings”; people of goodwill will not be offended.

At social gatherings, preach by actions. St. Paul warns us to be temperate and not overindulge. We do not want to act in a way unbecoming of a Christian; a Christmas party should not be a bacchanalia. The topics of religion and politics inevitably emerge; some know-it-all will make derogatory comments about our church, usually out of ignorance. Defend the faith, speak the truth clearly and teach with love. We all know the hot topics, so be prepared. The angels announced good news on Christmas; we too are to be the messengers of the Gospel.

Finally, give. Give of yourself by doing good works. Good works help heal the hurts caused by sin, including our own. Remember the Advent calendars from Germany, where a door is opened each day, showing a little picture, and ends at Christmas? Start with a blank calendar. Each day, do a good work — say a prayer for a person, help a neighbor in need or make a sacrifice for a special intention. Whatever the good work, write it in the blank space. At the end of Advent, one will have a beautiful gift for the Lord.

Or, for families with children, set up the crèche with all of the figures except baby Jesus. Write the good work on a piece of paper and place it on the floor of the crèche or in Christ’s crib; then on Christmas, Jesus, Mary and Joseph will have a home filled with our love.

Or, clean out the closets of old clothes or toys, and give them to a charity. St. Francis said, “It is in giving that we receive,” and through our charitable works, we will receive the love of Christ Himself.

So, **prepare this Advent to receive Christ as though He were coming for the first time.** Make this Christmas a celebration of the birth of Our Savior and the great gift of faith we have received. By striving to live in the presence of Christ during Advent, we will receive the best present of all — Our Savior.

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