

Aggie Catholics: Advent 2011

Advent is the *forgotten* liturgical season. With all the business of Thanksgiving and then the build-up of Christmas, we have forgotten, as a culture, how to celebrate Advent. Yes, we realize it when we go to church and see the purple (and then pink) candles lit on the Advent wreath. Some of us might even have an Advent wreath at home. But, we miss out on what the season truly can bring to us if we don't slow down.

I have prepared a long list of resources at the end of this post, but first a reflection I wrote a while back.

The Spirit of Advent - A Reflection on The Advent Season

The Advent season brings with it a number of joys, expectations and opportunities to celebrate. It also brings with it crass consumerism, exploitation of the true meaning of Christmas and an opportunity for self-indulgence. We should be careful, this holiday season, to truly celebrate the most monumental moment in human history – the Incarnation of Christ.

Advent is a season of preparation for the birth of the Lord. Just as the Israelites awaited the birth of the Messiah for generations upon generations, so we await the coming of our king – Jesus. Many Israelites waited to see the day of salvation when the Anointed One would be crowned king and save the nation from captivity, a worldly salvation. But, the day never arrived during their earthly life, because Christ brought a spiritual kingdom. We, on the other hand, have been blessed to live in this Kingdom of God – the age of the Church. So, our anticipation of salvation must be re-lived every year as a commemoration of Christ becoming man. But, we too can be caught up in believing that our salvation is of an earthly form.

Think of a mall or large store in the weeks of Advent, decorated with Christmas decorations since Halloween, crowded with many people searching for presents for friends and family. They may be shopping for items for the office “holiday party” or for something to decorate their homes with. Unfortunately, this really has nothing to do with Advent, as the church understands it. Our culture has inculcated in us a desire to give and receive objects, to celebrate with eggnog and by putting up Santa in our yards. While these things are not bad in and of themselves, they certainly can serve as a distraction for us.

I recently heard that “this season is about loved ones and celebrations”. While spending time with friends and family is a good thing, for Catholics the season of Advent is not *all* about celebrating. More than celebrations, Advent is an opportunity to make the spiritual preparation for God-becoming-man a sacred opportunity to grow in faith, hope, and love. We need to stop, which is difficult enough in our busyness, and reflect on the fact that the supreme being, the omnipotent One, the Alpha and Omega, the Lion of Judah, the Morningstar, the Messiah, King, and our Lord and Savior – GOD – humbled Himself to take on our fallen nature in order that we might be raised up with him to the heavenly heights of the divine.

Instead we settle for mistletoe, stockings, and Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer.

I would like to propose some practical ways in which we might turn this season into one of hopeful preparation and penance. But first, we must remember that while the Advent season is a penitential one, it isn't quite as somber as Lent, because of the Joy that accompanies the expectation of Christ's birth.

Suggestion #1 – Pray throughout the season. Simple and common sense for a Christian, it is also the most important part of making the season truly sacred. Without this prayerful connection to God, we cannot expect the season to be a spiritual success. Advent traditional prayer activities include the Advent wreath, Jesse Tree, and Posadas. You can also use an Advent devotional to help as a daily prayer guide. Of course the Eucharist and the Mass should be the center of any prayer life.

Suggestion #2 – Give your self as a gift to the less fortunate. There are ample opportunities to serve those less fortunate than ourselves. Spend an afternoon at a shelter or food bank. Help build a Habitat for Humanity house. Buy a gift for a needy child or family using the giving tree. Help St. Vincent de Paul



distribute food and gifts to families in need. Visit the elderly or sick in a nursing home or hospital. These are the kind of gifts that require true sacrifice, but also have an eternal reward.

Suggestion #3 – Try to spread the real meaning of the season. This suggestion might be the most difficult for some. This means we don't go overboard with Christmas until Advent is over. You might try some simple suggestions to help anticipate Christmas.

- If you have a manger scene at home, don't put Jesus into it until the morning of Christmas. We have started a tradition of having the three wise men wander throughout our house until Epiphany. The children look forward to "finding" where the three statues.
- Progressively decorate. Remember that our Christmas lights and decorations are a symbol of the "light of the world" – Jesus – coming into the darkness. He isn't here until Christmas, so try to postpone the lights until then.
- Allow yourself to slow down. Try not to rush through Advent in order to "get to the good stuff" of Christmas.
- Donate money to your local charity in the name of a loved one. Give this as a gift instead of another item from the store.

Whatever you do to make Advent a special time of preparation, remember that nothing is as important as nurturing the relationship you have with Jesus. Simeon and Anna waited their entire lives for the Messiah to come, and when they finally met the babe in the Temple, they were filled with the greatest joy imaginable. Let us await Christ in Advent in order that our hearts may also be able to overflow with gratitude and then truly say, as Simeon did -

*Lord, now you let your servant go in peace;
your word has been fulfilled:
My own eyes have seen the salvation
which you have prepared in the sight of every people.
A light to reveal you to the nations,
and the glory of your people Israel. – Luke 2: 29-32*