

Growing in FAITH

Discovering **hope** and **joy** in the Catholic faith.

Special Advent Edition

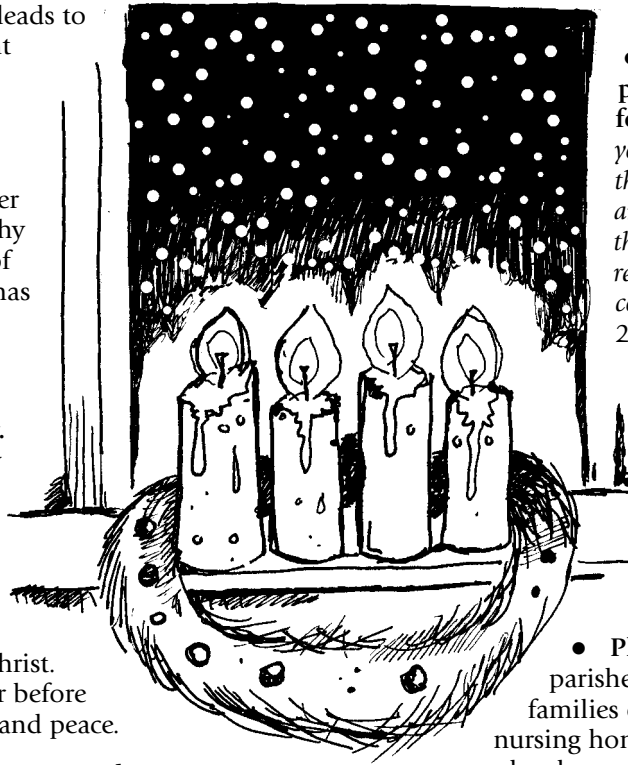
A good Advent makes a great Christmas

It is said that a good beginning leads to a good outcome. Then a true Advent observance is a great step toward a wonderful Christmas. And a good Advent can also bring you spiritual renewal along the way.

Waiting can often produce greater joy when the wait is finally over. Why not consider adopting one or two of these ideas to increase your Christmas joy through a fruitful Advent wait?

Pray the Wait.

- **Commit random acts of prayer.** Pray while you wait in line. Pray in the car. Pray when you're put on hold. Pray on your way to work. Keep your prayer simple and heartfelt.
- **Make a visit to the tabernacle** in your church to the Body of Christ. Spending time in reverent prayer before the Eucharist will bring healing and peace.
- **Ask God's advice for how much to spend on Christmas gifts.** It is hard to fully prepare for the Savior when you are racking up debt. Celebrate joyfully, simply, and responsibly.
- **St. Augustine first said that singing is praying twice.** Hum along with the carols in the elevator. Sing hymns joyfully at Mass. Listen to Handel's Messiah or other sacred music of the season. Use song to boost your prayer - even if it's just singing in the shower.
- **Before you speak or act, pray that you will bear God's image** in all that you say or do. In this way, we won't be strangers, but rather will be ready and waiting to welcome him.
- **"Hail Mary" your way through Advent.** Consider the Blessed Mother's example of faith. Learn to see through her eyes, listen with her ears, and trust with her heart.



Anticipate with hope.

- **This is a good time to make peace with one another, and be forgiving.** Jesus said, "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 25:23-25).
- **December is the loneliest month of the year.** Make a list of people you know who live alone, are new to your area, or who have lost a loved one this year. Include them in your family events, invite them to Mass, or pay them a visit.
- **Plan a service project.** Many parishes gather gifts for disadvantaged families or forgotten folks in nursing homes. Find out what your local community is doing or begin your own service traditions.
- **Commit to being a soldier in the war for peace.** Avoid quarreling or gossip, and work for a spirit of unity.
- **Do a thorough examination of your conscience** so that you can recognize patterns of sin that need to be changed. If you need help, ask for the priest's advice when you go to Confession.
- **You may not be able to wait until Christmas Eve to decorate your home,** but why not decorate slowly throughout Advent to measure progress through the season?
- **Advertise your faith in Jesus' birth.** Put on a joyful appearance, no matter what is going on in your day. Remind yourself of the coming miracle and what it means for each of us.



However you choose to observe Advent, remember the gifts of the first Christmas -- justice, peace, and freedom. They are God's Christmas gifts to us all.

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.

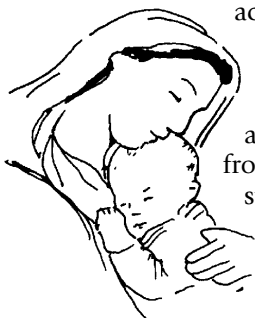
Gabrielle remembers, "One year when my father lost his job, we had no money for gifts but lots of people to give to. So my mother came up with the idea of baking. We went to the library and researched special recipes and decided upon a couple for cookies and one for sweet bread. We spent the next few 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!"

Honor St. Nicholas

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.