

Advent Traditions for Families

Advent is a time to prepare for the coming of the Lord - we prepare for the celebration of His coming as a baby 2000 years ago at Christmas, we prepare for His second coming at the end of time, and we prepare for His coming into our hearts today, especially in the Most Holy Eucharist. So, Advent is a time of preparation, of hopeful watchfulness. We do this by seeking a deeper conversion in our hearts, through prayer, penance, and sacrifice. Purple is the color of the season, because it is not only the royal color of Christ the King, it is also the color of penance. And so, in a way similar to the season of Lent, we spend this season in acts of penance and prayer.

There are many ways to enter into the season of Advent. One way is to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation - seeking forgiveness for our sins and reconciliation with God is an important way to prepare for Him. We might also go to daily Mass periodically, in addition to Sunday Mass. Praying the Liturgy of the Hours is another way to prepare for the Lord - this prayer of the Church can be found in a book called "The Liturgy of the Hours" or a shorter version in a book called "Christian Prayer."

We can also plan to do something extra in the way of prayer during Advent - perhaps that is praying the Liturgy of the Hours, or using an Advent meditation booklet. Fasting and penance are also encouraged during this season: we could give up TV, candy, the internet, etc. Almsgiving and works of mercy are also a part of this season - we can give to the poor or volunteer our time in service, do kind deeds for members of our family or community.

We can also celebrate the season by our decorations and music: Decorate with Advent purple, and save the big decorations for Christmas Eve. Some people choose to put up the Advent wreath and the Christmas tree, but wait to put the ornaments on until Dec. 24. Some use purple during Advent and change it to red and gold on Christmas Eve. We can listen to Advent music, and save the Christmas music for the Christmas season. Some also put out the Nativity Scene, but wait to put the baby Jesus and the shepherds there until Christmas day, and wait to bring the Magi to the scene until the Epiphany (Jan. 6).

The celebration of Christmas lasts until the Baptism of the Lord (the Sunday after January 6 - Epiphany), so we can leave our decorations up until then, and continue playing Christmas music all through the season of Christmas. Some families choose to celebrate the 12 days of Christmas (Christmas to the Epiphany), and open small gifts throughout or save them until the day the Magi arrived with their gifts for the baby Jesus (Epiphany).

Here are a few ways to celebrate Advent and Christmas (explanations of each are found in the additional handouts):

- Advent Calendar
- Advent Wreath
- Preparing the Manger
- Advent Angels
- Jesse Tree
- O Antiphons & Christmas Novenas
- Saints and Feasts of Advent & Christmas
- Christmas Lights Tradition
- Las Posadas
- Birthday party for Jesus on Christmas Day

Preparations of Advent

Advent Calendar

A newer, 19th century German tradition is that of setting up an Advent Calendar. Advent calendars are calendars, made mostly for children, to count down the days 'til Christmas, from 1 December to 24 December inclusive. For each of the twenty-four days on the calendar is either a "window" that reveals something when opened, or a pouch which might hold one or more of the following: a trinket, piece of candy, coin, picture, Bible verse, or even a "treasure hunt-like" instruction, for example, the parent might hide a small toy or Bible verse under the child's bed and leave an instruction behind the window or inside the pouch for that day that says, "Look under your bed and see what you can find."

The children are only allowed to open one "window" or pouch on each day.

Advent calendars can be store-bought, homemade, two dimensional, three dimensional, hung from walls or laid upon tables. They can be created from paper, cloth, wood or whatever your imagination dictates. They can be shaped into anything from Christmas trees to rectangles to elaborate houses, churches or village scenes. In elaborate Advent calendars, the windows might open up to reveal domestic scenes, people at Mass, a grocer selling fruit -- what have you. Some might have light, crepe paper windows that are illuminated when the calendar is set in front of a light source.

One could easily make an Advent calendar by sewing 24 pouches onto a piece of fabric that can be hung on a wall - perhaps 4 rows of 6 pouches. Each of the pieces of fabric used for the pouches could be embroidered or appliquéd with symbols of Christmas or the number of the days left until Christmas, starting with 24 and ending with 1.

Advent Wreath

With the Advent wreath, we prepare for the coming of the True Light into the World. A circular wreath represents the eternity and constant presence of God. The greenery represents the eternal life He promises us in Christ. The candles represent our waiting for the Messiah and His coming into the world as the Light of the World, filling our darkness with His marvelous Light. Ask a priest to bless the wreath.

The first week of Advent, one candle is lit, the second week, two candles, the third week, three, the fourth week, four. Three candles are violet (weeks 1, 2 and 4). Violet is the color of this liturgical season, representing the spirit of penance and prayer by which we prepare for His coming. Violet is also the color of royalty, representing the kingship of Christ. The candle for the third week is rose, for "Gaudete Sunday." *Gaudete* is a Latin word from the entrance antiphon of this Sunday's Mass, meaning "rejoice," and this week marks our joyful anticipation, our *rejoicing* at the coming of Christ. During the Christmas season, a fifth white candle in the center of the wreath is lit. This is the Christ candle, representing His Presence among us.

Preparing the Manger

As we prepare our hearts to receive Christ, we can prepare for his coming at Christmas by doing works of charity throughout Advent. Set up an empty manger, where the Christ-child will lay at Christmas. Each night, every family member can share some good deed or sacrifice or prayer that they completed that day. For each one, the family member can put a piece of hay (or yellow construction paper, or yellow ribbon) in the manger. This way, we prepare for Christ to come by our good deeds.

Advent Angels

Another way to prepare for his coming at Christmas by doing works of charity is by drawing "Advent Angels". Advent is a good time for each family member to choose a secret "Christkindl" or Christ Child for whom he or she will perform little acts of love — such as a prayer, a small gift, a sacrifice, a note or a piece of candy — throughout Advent.