



The Legend of the Poinsettia

A poor Mexican girl had no present to give the baby Jesus at Christmas, so she picked a few weeds and tied them into a bouquet. When she knelt down to place her offering at the crèche, they became bright red flowers. From that day on, they were known as the *Flores de Noche Buena*, or “Flowers of the Holy Night.” The shape is said to represent the Star of Bethlehem and the red color of the leaves symbolizes the blood of Christ.

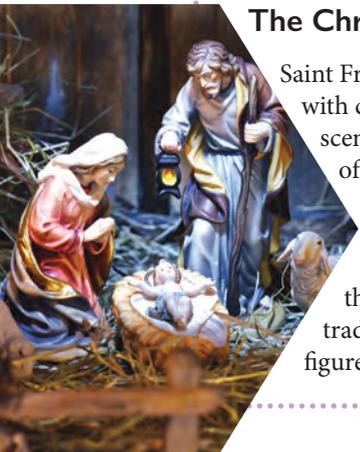
SIGNS OF THE TIME

Some of the major signs of the season are decorations and lights, especially those on the outside of the house. As you decorate your house, think about how lights are more than just pretty objects. Lights, especially candles, have been used for centuries at Christmas time as a symbol of the star that showed the shepherds and wise men where to find the Christ Child. Your lights can serve as a witness to the “light of the world” that is both coming and has already arrived.

One of the greatest gifts of the season is that each household develops their own traditions about when to put up a tree, stockings, and other decorations. Some people like to do a little bit over the weeks; others prefer to make decorating a major part of Christmas Eve. (And in case you feel as if putting up decorations early is somehow improper, the Vatican puts up its Christmas scene, consisting of trees and a crèche, in very early December!)

The Christmas Crèche

Saint Francis of Assisi is credited with creating the first nativity scene. Invest in having a crèche of your own. Some people put theirs under the tree, others make a special scene on a table. Some families make the crèche into an ongoing tradition by adding a new figure each year.



FESTIVE FOODS

Many families have special foods that they serve only at Christmas. As you prepare these treats, use the time to recall — and pray for — all those family members who have gone before us in death.

You might want to begin building some new and flavorful traditions. One idea from the Anglican tradition is to begin your holiday baking on the last Sunday before Advent. This Sunday is called “Stir-up Sunday” because traditional fruit cakes were mixed on this day and left to “mellow” until Christmas. The name comes from the collect of the day: “Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people.” Put a new twist on the tradition by making and freezing batches of cookie dough to be baked later in the month.

THE COMING OF THE LIGHT

Advent is a time of hope and light. It is a time when we reaffirm that “nothing is impossible with God,” not even a virgin bringing forth a child. This Advent, find hope as you recommit yourself to spiritual renewal. This Advent, look for the Light in everything you do, from shopping for presents, to mailing cards, to making special food, to decorating the house.

This Advent, prepare your home and your heart for the coming of Emmanuel, God-with-Us, Jesus Christ.

O Morning Star,
splendor of light eternal and sun of righteousness:
Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and
the shadow of death.

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ADVENT

PREPARING YOUR

HEART AND HOME

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“When we let the world know that there is more to the holiday than presents and decorations, we fulfill our mission as Christians to evangelize the world.”

Imagine expecting a new baby. For months, you prepare to welcome this addition, but in the last month, the preparations really step up. You make sure that the crib is clean, the diapers are in place, the car seat is installed, and family and friends are ready to meet the new baby.

That sense of joyful preparation combined with anticipation is the attitude we bring to Advent as we await the arrival of Christ the Lord. Christmas is the high point, but using the days leading up to December 25 to prepare both spiritually and materially is what Advent is all about!



START WITH THE SPIRITUAL

What sets Advent apart from the usual secular preparations for Christmas is the spiritual dimension; Advent is a time of both prayer and penance. As Catholics, we are called to exercise a more disciplined approach to our spiritual lives during the four weeks of Advent and to pay special attention to our words and deeds as we wait patiently for the coming of Christ.



PRAYER AND PENANCE

Waiting is a challenge, but instead of just counting down the days, we are called to use Advent as a time to deepen our relationship with God. Here are a few ideas that don't take much time, but can reap enormous spiritual benefits:

- » Read a Psalm as a bedtime prayer.
- » Go to confession.
- » Pray the Rosary, especially on the special Marian feasts of the Immaculate Conception (December 8) and Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12).
- » Say the traditional Advent novena — nine days of prayer for a holy Christmas, beginning on the feast of St. Andrew, November 30.
- » Make a “good deed” crèche — put a slip of paper, acting as a piece of straw, in the manger each time you do a good deed so that the bed will be filled with “holy softness” for the Christ Child.
- » Spend some time in Eucharistic Adoration.
- » Go to daily Mass.
- » Give up a daily expense, such as coffee, and donate the money you save to your local food bank.

A MONTH OF TRADITIONS

Fortunately, the Church provides us with numerous traditions and feast days that are intended to help us experience this holy season of Advent. While you may put out an Advent wreath each year, trying a new tradition or two can help bring fresh energy to the season.



Advent Wreath

An evergreen wreath with three purple candles and one pink candle. The candles are lit each Sunday of Advent, with the pink candle used on the third Sunday — Gaudete Sunday.



Saint Barbara Branches

A twig cut from a fruit tree (especially cherry) on Barbara's feast day, December 3, is placed in a vase and kept in a warm, well-lit place. If it blooms before Christmas, good luck is said to come to the family.



Jesse Tree

A bare branch is decorated with symbols related to biblical events from creation to Christmas, representing the history of salvation.



Advent Calendar

Customarily made of paper, the calendar has windows that are opened each day from December 1 to Christmas Eve to reveal a sign or symbol of the season.



Saint Nicholas Day

Traditionally, children put their shoes outside their bedroom doors on the night of December 5 for the saint, who is the prototype for Santa Claus, to fill with candy or small treats.



Immaculate Conception Observance

Catholics attend Mass on December 8 for this holy day of obligation honoring Mary's sinless nature.



Saint Lucy Day

On this feast day, December 13, the youngest daughter of the family wears a crown of candles and serves rolls and cookies to the family at dawn.



O Antiphons

These are traditional prayers said the last seven days of Advent and begin with “O” — O Wisdom, O Lord, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, O Day Spring, O King, O God with Us.



SHARE THE JOY

There's no better time of year to share the joy that comes with being Catholic than during Advent. As Pope Francis said:

“If you happen to be with an atheist who tells you that he does not believe in God, you can read him the whole library, where it says that God exists, and where it is proven that God exists, and he will not believe. [However] if in the presence of this same atheist you witness to a consistent, Christian life, something will begin to work in his heart.... It will be your witness that brings him the restlessness on which the Holy Spirit works.” (Homily, February 27, 2014)

When we let the world know that there is more to the holiday than presents and decorations, we fulfill our mission as Christians to evangelize the world. Advent is the ideal time to do just that! Some ideas include:

- » Send Christmas cards with religious motifs.
- » Give someone an ornament with the Nativity scene.
- » Have a Mass said for someone and send them the Mass card with your Christmas card.
- » Gift a poinsettia and include the traditional story of its origin.



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