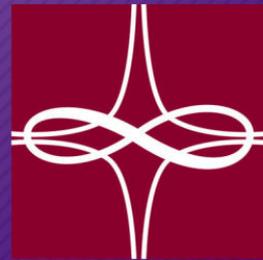


Advent *& Christmas*



Reflections
from the
Bloggers of the



**Catholic
Apostolate
Center**

Edited by Victor David
With a foreword by Fr. Frank Donio, S.A.C.



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Foreword

Very Rev. Frank S. Donio, S.A.C., D.Min.

When we published our first e-book in 2014, I wrote that it was our desire that all those who would read the book would “reflect on and strengthen their relationship with Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God, the Infinite Love.” Now it is with great joy that we release our next e-book, Advent & Christmas.

Much like our last publication, which focused on the subject of mercy, this book has a particular focus on Advent and Christmastime. As we enter into our preparations for the coming of our Lord, it is my hope that this collection of posts from our Ad Infinitum blog will inspire and encourage you to live out the lessons of these seasons into the new year and beyond. As always, I thank all those authors whose works appear in this book.

In his Christmas homily of 2016, Pope Francis said, “Christmas has above all a taste of hope because, for all the darkness in our lives, God’s light shines forth. His gentle light does not frighten us. God, who is in love with us, draws us to himself with his tenderness, by being born poor and frail in our midst, as one of us.” One lesson I wish for all of us to take away from this book, is one of hope - hope that this Christmastime ushers in a new year of peace. May this time of preparation and celebration inspire us to be instruments of charity and peace.

I hope these reflections will inspire you to live out the hopes and joys of Advent and Christmas this year and in all the years to come.

May the charity of Christ urge us on!

**~Fr. Frank Donio, S.A.C.
Director, Catholic Apostolate Center**





A Note from the Editor

The following is a selection from the hundreds of posts that have appeared on the Catholic Apostolate Center's Ad Infinitum blog that coincide with the Advent and Christmas seasons.

As you flip through the pages, you will gain inspiration from the saints, insights from the authors, and sage advice on how we can deepen our faith during Advent and better rejoice during Christmas.

As in our previous books, anytime you see something underlined or flash as you turn the page, feel free to click on the item to see the author's source or further resources he or she wishes to provide.

I hope you enjoy the following pieces and pray that they may inspire you as we prepare our hearts for the coming of the Lord.

**~Victor David
Editor**



Advent



Journeying Toward the Lord

By Nicholas Shields

Despite the overwhelming presence of Christmas decorations and holiday spirit in December, many people still gloss over Advent. They might notice the Advent wreath at Mass or the change in liturgical colors, but before they are able to ponder what any of that really means it is Christmas Day, the Son of God has been born, and they have done nothing to prepare for Him.

As a young teenager, I would find myself saying, "Father gave a great Advent homily today, I should definitely think about these themes this week," or "Advent might be a good time to start praying more regularly." Despite these thoughts, I would not think about the homily after Sunday and rarely tried to increase my prayer life during Advent. This seems typical for a lot of people. If we think about it, this is probably why we get reminded year after year of the 'true meaning of Christmas' ... because despite knowing what Christmas is about, we don't often take the proper steps to prepare our hearts and minds for the event.

And yet, Advent is the perfect time to reignite our faith and start anew. As Pope Francis said on the first Sunday of Advent in 2013, it is also a time to hope: "Just as in each of our lives we always need to begin again, to get up again, to rediscover the meaning of the goal of our lives, so also for the great human family it is always necessary to rediscover the common horizon toward which we are journeying. The horizon of hope! This is the horizon that makes for a good journey. The season of Advent, which we begin again today, restores this horizon of hope, a hope which does not disappoint for it is founded on God's Word. A hope which does not disappoint, simply because the Lord never disappoints! He is faithful! He does not disappoint!"

Pope Francis is calling us to reconnect with the beautiful mysteries of Advent, to rediscover ourselves, our faith, and the purpose of family. He is asking us to rediscover hope. Hope is not easy to have by itself, but it is easy to find when we prepare ourselves and when we seek to understand the mysteries of Christ's birth.

But preparing ourselves for the Lord's coming is easier said than done. There are many ways that we can embrace this Advent season with our parish communities, friends, and families. Consider trying out a few of these methods this year:

First of all, we can look to our parishes for Advent reflections, Bible studies, or men's and women's groups. These are valuable resources for getting us up off the couch and into exploring the Advent season. Second, we can reach out to our friends and start our own Bible studies or prayer groups. Don't have time for that? Just take turns texting short Bible passages or Advent reflections to the group each day. Pope Francis often reminds us of the importance of family. During this Advent season, we could not have a more perfect example of family than in the Holy Family journeying together towards the birth of Christ. This Advent season is a wonderful time to continue—or start—some Advent family traditions, whether that means lighting an Advent wreath each evening, opening an Advent calendar, or praying to the Holy Family as a family.

These are just a few suggestions to help you on your Advent journey. There are of course many ways to prepare for the birth of our Lord. The important thing is to prepare. Let us challenge ourselves each and every day to open our hearts to the Lord. Let us embrace this Advent season so we might be ready to receive the Son of God on Christmas morning.

Tu Scendi Dalle Stelle

By Pat Fricchione

"From starry skies descending, Thou comest, glorious King,
A manger low Thy bed, In winter's icy sting;"

~St. Alfonso Liguori

In just a few days, millions of children will wake up excited to see what is under the Christmas tree. There is a sense of pure joy and excitement that radiates from these children. I have a young Goddaughter, who was explaining to me over Thanksgiving about all the different things she hopes to receive. Her eyes lit up at just the mere thought of Christmas morning. It made me stop and wonder about my own excitement and joy for Christmas. I started to question if I had that childlike excitement for the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The more and more I thought about it, the more I realized that I have lost part of that joy.

Advent and Christmas provides the time to stop and think about how the Prince of Peace, the King of Kings, the Messiah, did not come in some powerful show of force or splendor. Rather, God chose quite the opposite. He came to us as a child, born in a manger. The human embodiment of love and mercy came to us in the form of a helpless baby. In the middle of the holiday season, you rarely take the time to stop and think about how perfect that is.

Being a godfather has taught me about the amazing ability of a child's capacity to love and forgive. Many a family function, I will walk in and my goddaughter drops what she is doing and runs over to give me a big hug. Her face lights up with joy and excitement. One can only imagine a young Jesus showing the same sort of love to Mary and Joseph.

The beauty of this simplicity has inspired the Church for two thousand years. A wonderful example of this is the Christmas Eve Mass at the Vatican. At the end of Mass, the pope carries a small statue of Jesus to be placed in nativity scene as the choir sings the carol "Tu Scendi Dalle Stelle". This carol was written by Saint Alphonso Liguori in 1732 and translated from Neapolitan into Italian by Pope Pius IX. This hymn is about Christ as a child who descends from heaven out of love for us.

"Dearest, fairest, sweetest Infant, Dire this state of poverty.

The more I care for Thee, Since Thou, O Love Divine, Will'st now so poor to be."

I think it is the perfect hymn for Advent. For these next few days, I invite you to join me in a quest to be like a child. A quest to seek the joy of Christ's birth in a pure, wholehearted, and simple way. Pope Francis tweeted, "to be friends with God means to pray with simplicity, like children talking to parents." For the next few days, as prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, let us embrace peace, love, joy, and mercy just like a child who runs to greet you with open arms and an open heart.



Emmanuel Past and Present

By Sophie Lorenzo

My Catholic grade school began everyday with students lining up in the gym for attendance and then filing out to class. One morning after Thanksgiving break, our usual routine was interrupted when the principal, a Sister of St. Joseph, came up to me. She asked, "Would you like to be Mary for an Advent Mass?" I immediately blurted out an emphatic, "No!"

The other fourth graders shot me shocked stares. It would have been a dream for many of my classmates to receive such an invitation, especially a personal one from the principal! And then, of course, they were astounded that I would dare to say no to the principal herself. "Are you sure?" she asked me again. "Well, umm, I just really don't want to. I'm sorry," I said. The disappointment spread across her face and I knew then that she was not expecting that answer either. An awkward pause came and went as teachers and students began marching to their rooms.

Finally, I said, "Well, I mean, I guess I could do that for you." The principal beamed and listed off a number of details, like who would be St. Joseph, and when we were to arrive to change into costume.

I often think back to that encounter during Advent when I reflect on Mary's "yes" and Joseph's sacrifice. Why did I refuse to help with such certainty? It was out of character for my usual fourth grade self.. Maybe that day my stubborn will and insecurities showed their true colors!

There is an irony to saying "no" to playing the part of Mary when her "yes" was prophesied by Isaiah and echoed in the message of the psalmists. The lives of St. Joseph, St. Paul, and the gospel writers were forever changed by that answer. Now, I'm grateful for changing my answer to yes for something simple. Like Mary, I received special graces to live out the big and small yeses to God in my adult life.

The readings for this Fourth Sunday of Advent focus on the message of Emmanuel. They do a good job of showing how even in our wavering human nature, God is with us. Consider the gospel from this week, where a shocked St. Joseph allows God to turn his "no" to a "yes." I like to imagine St. Joseph's shock after hearing about Mary's pregnancy. He responds to the news with a dignified "no," hoping to protect both himself and his young fiancée, until an Angel shows him the workings of the Holy Spirit in his and Mary's lives. His sacrifice and hiddenness guides us in family life, work, ministry, and sharing the the gospel message in a noisy world. His "yes" wavered and then seemed to move to a place of confidence and trust. "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home." (Mt 1:20) What reassurance! God was with him as he transitioned to being the head of the Holy Family, he became the ultimate protector of holiness.

After the Marian story from my fourth grade year to the touch points of this weekend's Gospel the message of Emmanuel lives. We prepare for Christmas this week with the demands of a commercial culture, family time, the healing of relationships, and the stress of "keeping up". God is with us, waiting as he did through Isaiah and St. Paul, and the call of St. Joseph. What will we say "yes" to this week? How will God be with us in our moments of "no."? When your fear or pride brings the word "no" to your lips, remember that God is still with you. As we await our Lord this Advent remember that he too awaits us and our emphatic "yes".

All Is Calm

By Tom Wong

There's something to be said for silence. In the absence of vocalizations or other sounds, one can focus more intently in his or her surroundings. At first, it may seem uncomfortable. At the same time, one might have difficulty focusing his or her thoughts in silence, suddenly having to contend with an onslaught of mental distractions.

Especially in today's society, one is constantly bombarded with external messages, symbols, and other stimuli in a magnitude never encountered previously. In one way or another, we have

become numb. We now find ourselves in Advent, a period of reflection, meditation, and waiting in anticipation of the nativity of our Lord. While the rest of culture may be focused on shopping for gifts and decorating for the holidays, the faithful are called to contemplate the gift of Love made incarnate in a most humble setting over two thousand years ago. Throughout the liturgical year, but especially during this time of Advent, I find that removing myself from the demands of the world and replacing them with the stillness of Bethlehem is not only refreshing, but also an effective catalyst for drawing more deeply into the mystery of the Incarnation: "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14)



How can silence help us dwell in this mystery? Sacred Scripture contains numerous accounts of how effective silence is for drawing one nearer to God and neighbor. One of my favorite biblical passages illustrates the friends of Job sharing in his miseries through their silent presence: "They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great" (Job 2:11-13). God is not just with us in moments of suffering or in moments of majestic power and glory. God's love continuously invites us to draw near to Him in our daily lives. Remember that the prophet Elijah experienced God in the sound of a gentle breeze, not in the bursts of wind, earthquake, or fire (1 Kings 19:11-13).

While silence can be beneficial to one's spiritual life, it is not the end of contemplation or meditation. Rather, the focus remains communication with God. Silence, then, is a medium for encountering God, just as music or the spoken word is employed in liturgy. There are times when words are insufficient or music fails to strike the right chords. In these cases, a silent presence can be the most appropriate expression of closeness, such as in hospice, a cemetery, nursery, hospital, or any other place where the ministry of presence is desired. Similarly, as I prepare myself for a Holy Hour of silent adoration before the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, I remind myself of the importance of placing myself before God's presence. Sometimes, a tender gaze of love can be a beautiful prayer in itself.

As we continue to wait for Christmas, let us pray to be able to free our minds from the things of this world that may distract us from seeking the Word Incarnate, Emmanuel. For it was indeed a silent night, as the carol goes, during which our Savior came into this world and the shepherds and magi adored him. In silence, our joy is not diminished, nor is our love any less potent, but through it we can continue to focus our attention and energy towards adoring the King of Kings and Lord of Lords: Jesus Christ, true God and true man.

Revisiting the Visitation: A Guide to Advent

By Lindsay Myers

For many of us, the “infancy narratives,” from Matthew and Luke are well loved, but also well worn. Gabriel’s visit to Mary, Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, the birth of Our Lord in Bethlehem — not only do we ponder these events every year during Advent and Christmas, but also every time we pray the Joyful mysteries of the rosary. But knowing the basic bullet points of the New Testament is not enough. We are called to know our Lord more deeply, more intimately.

Dei Verbum compares the gift of Scripture to the gift of the Incarnation: “for the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men.” The Holy Spirit has bundled the immensity and perfection of God into our limited and imperfect human language. Like Christ contained himself in human form, so too has the Father contained himself in our human tongue. This Advent, let us return to the infancy narratives with fresh eyes. Recognizing that we can use the Word to ignite our senses, engage our collective memory as the people of God, and to understand our Lord as both father and friend.

The Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56) is one moment from the infancy narratives that can prepare us in a special way for the coming of our Lord this Christmas. It provides us with a snapshot of Mary as a loving servant who is familiar with the Scriptures, bubbling over with joy, and confident in the promises of her God. Her example is one we can imitate even today. Spend some time with the narrative here and then consider Mary’s threefold approach to Advent:

1. With reverent joy: Mary’s spirit dances in anticipation of the Lord. She travels “in haste” to Elizabeth and upon arriving, bursts into a joyful song of praise (Luke 1:39). Her ‘bubbling over’ mimics the joy of Heaven. There’s no room for anything but praise and thanksgiving. We often picture Mary as meek and mild, but remember how young she was, how strong her faith was, and how miraculous this moment was. She must have been laughing at the goodness of her God, her heart in constant song.
2. Turn to the Scriptures: Notice that when Mary sees her cousin Elizabeth, she is immediately reminded of a Bible story. Her prayer, what we now call the “Magnificat,” imitates the structure and content of Hannah’s prayer of thanksgiving in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Mary lives and breathes the Scriptures. They inform and shape the way she sees the world. The words tumble out of her mouth like wine, splashing life and merriment into the desert sands around her. This Advent, challenge yourself to journey toward Bethlehem with some sort of scriptural program as your guide. You could pray parts of the Divine Office, pray with the Sunday mass readings using *Lectio Divina*, or explore some of our resources here at the Catholic Apostolate Center.
3. Serve our family members: One of the first things Mary does when she finds out she is pregnant is hasten to her cousin Elizabeth to help her! Even though Mary is in the early stages of pregnancy herself — and probably feeling sick and tired — she puts all of that aside. How can we serve our family members this season? While it’s always good to serve those we don’t know, our families require a special kind of patience and love from us, especially during the holidays. Ponder the ways you can serve those in your family who are forgotten or who have hurt you in the past. Reconciliation goes a long way to helping us see the face of Christ in others.

We Have Arrived

By Elaine Seckar

Luke 21:34 states, "Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy." As we kick-off the season of Advent, Christ implores us to be alert to the dangers of a drowsy heart. I was flabbergasted when I walked into a store the week after Halloween to hear Christmas music floating through the air. I absolutely love Christmas music and, when the time comes, will listen to it right up through the celebration of the Epiphany. However, I find it humorous and a bit befuddling that it seems that we begin to hear Christmas music earlier and earlier each year and yet, on December 26th, it becomes a scavenger hunt to find the familiar, heartwarming tunes on the air and in stores. As Catholics, we have not even celebrated the visit of the magi yet and the Christmas airwaves have gone silent.



The holiday season is notorious for its stress, anxiety and drain on our time and energy. Our Advent calendars become filled with shopping excursions, parties, decking the halls and busying ourselves in the kitchen. However, I find that the older I get and the more responsibilities I gain, it becomes harder to latch onto, and maintain, the wide eyed childhood wonder and awe of the Christmas season in its entirety. By the time December 26th rolls around, my heart is drowsy. In the midst of the hustle and bustle, the Word speaks to us again. Proverbs 4:23 states, "With closest custody guard your heart, for in it are the sources of life."

Let us take a moment to reflect on what has arrived for us as Catholics as we journey through this season of Advent. Our salvation was made visible with the birth of a child. Isaiah 9:5 proclaims, "For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace." The prophet Isaiah is speaking to each one of us. A child is born to US. The salvation of the world, the salvation of sinners was born to us as a helpless, dependent infant. Physiologically speaking, a newborn quickly learns to experience life and receive sustenance through one of the highest density of touch receptors in its wonderfully created body; the lips and tongue. As Catholics we are able to receive life, power, and renewal through the highest concentration of touch receptors in the body each time we receive the Eucharist.

What happens when we make an effort to guard our hearts and offer our bodies as "weapons of righteousness" to open ourselves to fully experience the breadth of receiving the flesh of Christ, the power of Christ? What kind of change would that create in us? What kind of change would it create in our families, our communities and our churches? How would this change affect our experience of the Advent and Christmas season? We have arrived. This is our Advent. It is time to

The Sleeping Christ

By Elizabeth Pawelek

Advent, the word in and of itself instills hope and builds anticipation for greatness, joy and peace. What is it are we waiting for?

It seems with the close of the year, we wait anxiously for those intimate times with our family and friends, a break from work and the routine and a time for closeness. As a student, I always found it paradoxical that finals would be during the season of Advent. The hectic study and preparation of exams easily muddles the preparation I could be doing in my own heart for the King.

The anticipation, the excess and busyness I find myself in reminds me of the Gospel story where the disciples forget the presence of the Lord in their midst:

“And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but [Jesus] was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, ‘Save us Lord; we are perishing.’ And he said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?’ Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm” (Matthew 8:23-26).

Looking without eyes of faith, the disciples found themselves in a panic and disarray. With a focus on the storm and on the circumstance that assailed them, the disciples forgot the most essential truth that was right there with them on the boat: the Sleeping Christ. The answer to their cries for help was peacefully present in their situation ready to grace them with a great calm.

What is it, again, that we are waiting for during this Advent Season? The gift we are waiting for is the sleeping babe, the sleeping Christ, in the manger. The Divine Son, who humbles Himself so greatly that He arrives in the stillness of night, in the quiet with shepherds and sheep alike. The Creator God comes in the stillness. What we are waiting for is the Prince of Peace.

My own hurriedness in finishing all of my papers and exams, finding the perfect gifts for my friends and family, making travel plans and somehow finding time to stop and recognize where I am headed resembles the experience of the disciples. I am awaiting His peace, but my actions reveal otherwise. I must intentionally make the effort to stop and breathe in what I am truly searching for this December.

May the anticipation throughout this Advent season bring us to stop and ponder the mystery of the Lord of the Universe resting in a manger who has come to encounter our hearts. May the peace of the Sleeping Christ enter our hearts, our minds, and our actions so we too may accept the true gift He wishes for us all this season: a great calm.



As We Begin Advent

By Rebecca Ruesch



The Advent season signals the beginning of the liturgical New Year. Now, I'm the kind of girl that has been secretly listening to Christmas Carols since mid-November (with headphones and lowered volume so no one knows my secret!) so Advent is one of my favorite times of year. As a little girl, I loved the buildup to Christmas and loved helping my mom prepare our house for the torrent of annual Christmas events. From decorating the tree to baking cookies, I loved it all.

When we were little, my mom modeled an activity we did in school, placing an empty manger on our mantle with a bowl of straw. She explained to my brother, sisters, and me that Advent was about preparing for Christ's birth and we had to prepare a comfortable crib for him by filling the manger with pieces of straw. She encouraged us to do kind things for those we knew, and when we did, to place a piece of straw in the manger. Throughout Advent we delighted in finding ways we could add more to the manger. The one rule that she had was that we could only place straw in the manger quietly, without bragging of our good deeds to each other, and we had to decide personally what qualified to place straw in the manger. The straw grew and grew and by Christmas the manger was full, ready for Christ. Although this activity seems small in the hustle and bustle of the Advent season, it taught my siblings and me a lot about what the season was really about.

Even as children, my mom strove to make sure that while we could get involved and excited about preparing for Christmas, we had to understand the true meaning behind the season. Advent, she always explained, was about preparing for the coming of Christ and not simply getting excited for Santa to visit. While we celebrate Advent and Christmas in many different ways, the important thing to remember is just how miraculous the Incarnation truly is. The miracle of the Incarnation is that Christ was made known to us in human form, to ultimately sacrifice Himself for us.

While this time of the year has many stresses as we try to prepare for all that is expected of us, keeping the "true meaning of Christmas" in mind throughout Advent is a good habit to get into. As you begin this Advent season, I encourage you to take some time to remember what we are preparing for. The selfless love that Christ demonstrates is what we celebrate this Advent season. Take a moment to step back and reflect on how you can prepare yourself for His coming.

The Most Important Invitation

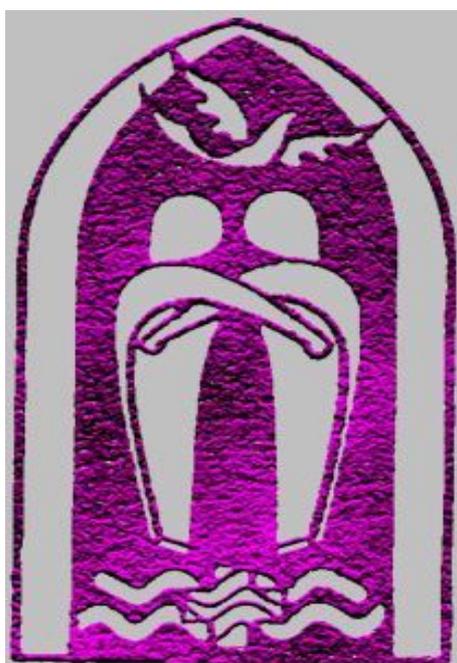
By Conor Boland

We hear in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah how, "Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; the rugged land shall be made a plain, the rough country, a broad valley. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed..." What always strikes me about this reading is how the Lord destroys every obstacle in His way, and all that stands against Him is defeated. This alone is important to remember I think, because in the midst of so much activity and stress it is easy to forget that our Lord is always the one in charge and has the power to wash away all of our blemishes and sins. Everything with imperfections is made perfect in Him.

Advent is a time of preparing ourselves for the birth of our Savior and the second coming of Christ. The Church gives us this liturgical time so that we may ensure we are ready for Christ's entrance into our midst on the Solemnity of the Nativity of our Lord and prepare for how "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." So, Advent is a time of great hope, expectation, and preparation, but how exactly can we prepare our hearts for Christ? How can the Lord wipe away my own sin, my own imperfections so that I can worthily prepare for His Coming?

Partaking in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a perfect way to prepare our hearts for Christ's coming and be ready for His arrival. We hear in the Second Letter of Peter how the Lord, "is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." The Lord never tires of extending forgiveness to us, He is ever merciful. He wants the best for all of us, even when sometimes we don't know exactly what that is. Just as in Isaiah, the Lord defeats and washes away all of our sins and imperfections with this wonderful Sacrament. Pope Francis during one of his Wednesday audiences said, "every time we go to confession, God embraces us."

With all of the different parties and events during this time of year, with all the invitations, there is one invitation that you should be certain to consider. The Lord has already extended to us the invitation, an invitation that prepares us for Christ's coming by partaking in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The question is - will you accept it?



God With Us

By Krissy Kirby

Very soon, a great man will come to visit us, bringing joy to all. Given the nature of this e-book, I'm guessing you think I'm talking about the coming of the newborn Jesus Christ. But I'm actually talking about Santa Claus! The jolly old man himself, bringing loads of goodies on his sleigh to the girls and boys on his twice-checked list. Yes, indeed. What else is special about Christmas? It is interesting to see the secular meaning of Christmas intersect with the glorious birth of our Savior to yield a sort-of confused holiday. The world seems to forget that during this season of Advent when Catholics are preparing their hearts to welcome Jesus on the 25th, many are just preparing themselves to welcome elves and anxiety. This year in particular, I have had to take a step back from all the noise and busyness, and enjoy the peace and joy of this Advent season. Can we still find God with us?



In Matthew 1:23, Joseph is visited by an angel to fulfill what the prophets had written, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us). Joseph had extraordinary faith to believe that Mary was filled with the Holy Spirit and that he would care for the One who was being sent to save the world. This was no small feat for a simple carpenter, but Joseph understood the importance of Christ's birth.

This last part of this passage, the words God with us, caught my ear when I first read it, and reminded me of a Theology class from freshman year in college. We learned that in order to redeem the world from Original Sin, God had to dwell among us on earth. God could only do that by becoming fully Divine and fully Human, and only through a stainless virgin could Jesus be stainless himself. The world has truly been saved because of a small child, born in a stable and laid in manger over 2,000 years ago. Each year we have 4 weeks to ready ourselves for his arrival again. The joy of the season is not packages, ribbons, and bows, it's realizing that God is here to love us and save us.

In my classroom, we have an elf named Chester who comes to visit during the weeks of Advent. He arrived on the first day back from Thanksgiving break, and we have found him in a new spot every morning. According to the book he brought with him called, *Elf on the Shelf*, he returns to Santa to relay messages about whether or not the kids in my class were naughty or nice each day. Based on this report, my students will have a visit from Santa on Christmas morning. What if instead of Santa visiting us with things, we visited God with full hearts and open arms? Although Chester the Elf is here throughout Advent and will disappear after Christmas, God is always with us.

Advent Song

By Alyce Shields

My entire life I have always had a yearning in my heart to become a teacher, and a few summers ago was the beginning of that dream becoming a reality. I spent all that summer soaking up every classroom management technique I was given, as well as learning the best ways to make math fun for secondary students. I entered the classroom that August, and I realized that implementing those tools was nothing less than difficult. I pray that my students learned half as much from me as I learned from them. Although this job is not easy, my students inspire me to wake up every day and teach them something about translating algebraic expressions, but even more so, about love and the goodness of life.

However, my teaching cohort met at the end of the semester to pre-plan for January, and we were reminded that inspiration is not enough to do this work. We need passion and drive to see us through this work so that we may do it well. Every. Single. Day. One professor challenged us saying, "Your teaching is a song. What song gets you going every single morning and keeps you going throughout the day? The week? The month? The year?"

I realized that our faith, too, needs a song. We need an Advent Song – a gift from the beginning that continues to fuel us throughout the day, the week, the month, the year. As Advent comes to a close, we celebrate the joy of Christ's birth, but after that, will we continue to live our Advent Song each day?

In yesterday's Gospel, we learn of Mary's Advent Song – "The Magnificat." She sings, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior..." (Luke 1:46-47). Her life was exemplified by this song. If you read beyond today's Gospel, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, also sings out, "Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, for he has visited and brought redemption to his people" (Luke 1:68). Each sing of the Lord's goodness and faithfulness, which we know endures forever.

As you reflect on the close of this Advent season, transitioning into Christmas, ask God what song will keep your heart burning and returning to him throughout the year. What will help you know the Lord each day and what will help you give Him to others? What song will fill you with joy so that you may also sing with Mary and Zechariah?



The Journey of Advent

By Lauren Scharmer

I have a very distinct memory from when I was a little girl (okay, twelve years old...) of anxiously awaiting the Christmas morning tradition of opening up Christmas presents. I was so excited that instead of waiting for the parental mandated 6:15am wake up call, I did it my way. I changed the time on my alarm clock, woke up my whole family and demanded that we start Christmas a little early. This moment of impatience several years ago plays into a much larger reality about this world that we live in – we are so anxious to get to the final destination as quickly as possible that we forget that the journey is just as important as the destination.

That is what Advent is – the journey to Christmas. The word itself comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means “coming.” In the midst of the craziness of the holiday season—peppermint mochas and Hallmark Christmas movies included—it is natural to feel like these weeks leading up to Christmas are all about the countdown, and not about the coming. Just as I was all too anxious and turned the clock forward to get my Christmas day started, it is easy to wish away these days of simple waiting and trade them in for the hustle and bustle of Christmas Day.

In an effort to more fully appreciate this journey to December 25th, it is necessary to find ways to live out this coming in our own lives. Practically, what does this mean? It means recognizing that the Advent journey requires silence, prayer and most importantly perseverance. Although everyone loves a good peppermint mocha, it is through these three things that we can ready the way for the coming of our Lord at Christmas.

Although seemingly impossible, finding silence among the chaos of these days can be done in simple ways—whether it is turning off that Josh Groban Christmas song that has been playing on repeat in the car or taking the chance to catch one’s breath between glasses of eggnog at a family Christmas party. Finding times for prayer can be as unassuming as waking up five minutes early to read that day’s Mass readings or saying a Hail Mary when we are stressed. Lastly, perseverance is not only a necessity of the Christian life, but a necessary part of a peace-filled Advent.

The most beautiful part of these days before Christmas is that the destination of our journey is not a rigged alarm, but God Himself in the unassuming form of a baby. This innocence of the baby Jesus reminds us that this season is a time for simple acts of faith, acts of faith that both allow us to appreciate the gift that is waiting for us and the journey that makes it possible.



Having Faith and Keeping Watch

By Alex Boucher

As a young adult active in the life of my parish and diocese, I am often asked why I “do what I do.” The even better question I am frequently (but usually jokingly) asked is, “What is wrong with you?!” These questions are typically posed by the “church ladies” that will often comment on my bright red hair and then go on to lament the fact that their children or grandchildren do not attend Mass on Sundays. I find these conversations to be great times for evangelization, and I try to respond with a question of my own: “When was the last time you asked them to come with you?” A blank face usually stares back at me. As Catholics, inviting someone to go to Mass with them is often a foreign concept.

For many of us (myself included), faith is a very personal thing, and the thought of wearing it on our sleeves is not necessarily the most comfortable. Perhaps the Season of Advent that we will begin on Sunday is the perfect opportunity to invite a friend, family member, or neighbor back to the practice of their faith.

As we wrestle between the Season of Advent and the secular Christmas season, it might be helpful to view our lives as Christians as a perpetual Advent, as a constant rebirth. The Advent that we seek is something new, something filled with the grace of rejuvenation through the working of the Holy Spirit. The mission of baptized Christians is to believe, practice, and teach the truths of the faith. Responding to this call in a responsible and proactive way is often the problematic or challenging part to living out the task of evangelization.

The picture of faith that we often paint for ourselves is frequently an illusion of what we desire out of our own human weakness. If faith lacks substance, Pope Benedict XVI has said that our individual faith “will not be big enough to cope with reality.” If we believe that a sign will fall from the heavens with the answers to our questions of faith, then we are missing the signs that God provides for us each and every day.

In its authenticity, true faith should be given out of love for God and with the confidence that God does not need our praise and thanksgiving. Although we trust in a God that we cannot see, we believe in the Advent of a renewing and fulfilling redeemer whose Church should be compelled to evangelize and spread the message of salvation.

My challenge to you as we go through this Season of Advent is this: Invite someone to go to Mass with you. Smile. Listen to some Christmas music. Put some pocket change in the bell ringer’s bucket for charity. “Prepare the way of the Lord” (Mk 1:3) and “be vigilant at all times” (Lk 21:36).

Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God,
the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ
with righteous deeds at his coming,
so that, gathered at his right hand,
they may be worthy to possess the heavenly Kingdom.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

-Collect, First Sunday of Advent

Don't Miss Out on Advent!

By Eileen Welch

Advent is my favorite time of year. What I love most about Advent is that it is four weeks long, and the opportunities to celebrate and prepare for Jesus' birth are abundant. But, many people forget this. Not too long ago, people lined up at midnight outside Wal-Mart and bought everything on their Christmas list in a six hour blur of big screen T.V.s and elbows. Others rushed out to buy a Christmas tree, and decked their house in every last light they could find in the attack. And, by the end of a couple days, they were "done" preparing for Christmas and back to life as usual.

My own personal version of this would be when my grandma gives me one of those "Christmas Countdown Chocolate Calendars," the ones with a piece of chocolate behind each day leading up to Christmas—and its gone by December 5th! People no longer spend all of Advent preparing for the birth of Jesus Christ, they do what needs to be done, as fast as possible, and then forget he's coming until the 23rd.

Advent is four weeks long (and so are a lot of Christmas sales!) and as difficult as it may be, we should try to keep that in mind. Instead of setting up the house or buying all the gifts in one day, spread it out! Enjoy the preparations. Do something small every day in anticipation for the birth of Christ. Make an Advent wreath with your family (or roommates!) and light a candle at dinner; say an extra prayer every evening; pray Vespers before Mass.

The most important thing is that we don't fall asleep in the wait for Jesus, that we remember every day—not just when they light the Advent wreath at Mass on Sunday or when The Grinch is on TV or Wal-Mart has a big sale—that Christ is coming and we must be ready. And keep it to one piece of chocolate a day from the Advent calendar. Your stomach will thank you and you'll have more candy toward the end of the four weeks!



Incarnate Joy

By Pam Trembley

“God became man so that man might become God” ~St. Augustine

I recently went to a parish Christmas open house. Like most Church events I go to, heads turn when they see a group of four twenty-something year-olds enter the room where the median age is 60+. The questions start flying: “Who are you?” “Why are you here?” “You go to Notre Dame- did you watch the last game?” “Are you single?” “Have you met my grandson?” The one that always gets me is some form of, “...wait, you’re 23 and you want to be a practicing Catholic?”

Many times, not wanting to get too deep too fast, I simply shrug and say “Yeah, I must be crazy but I love our faith.” This time, maybe due to the Christmas spirit in the air, I could not contain myself and I blurted out- “THE INCARNATION!” As the woman stared at me and my housemates continued the conversation, I was left thinking; how could someone not want to be Catholic when we have the doctrine of the Incarnation? How could I ever leave a faith where I am deeply loved, completely known, and have the ability to not only know God but bring about His Kingdom in the here and now?

At Christmas Mass we will hear the Word proclaimed and we will hear that this Word became flesh in the form of a babe. It is tempting for us to sit at Mass thinking of all the things we have going on that day: the food to cook, the family to visit, the last minute gift to buy for the cousin we forgot about. Yet, at Christmas Mass we are told of a unique reality, that God became human! This is RADICAL. No faith outside of Christianity professes that God took on human form out of love to unite himself with his creation.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World writes that “by his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every human. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, acted by a human choice, and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin” (Gaudium et spes §22).

Because of the Incarnation, Christ knows us completely. He knows our pain and he knows what it is like to endure the daily realities of being human. But the Incarnation goes beyond even this great gift. God, in becoming human, transforms human tasks that simply get us from point “A” to point “B,” to tasks that are doing the will of God and making God manifest. As St. Augustine puts it, “God became man so that man might become God”.

REJOICE this Christmas season for we are given the news that we can become like God! In the humble birth of a babe, the Word became flesh and our lives were transformed! Live with the knowledge that you are deeply loved and act in such a way that God is made present- this is the challenge the Incarnation gives to us. Let us accept this challenge and live our Catholic identity with great JOY knowing the truths that the doctrine of the Incarnation makes possible.

Christmas



Remembering Christ This Christmas

By Fr. Frank Donio

We have finally arrived at Christmas. In the rush of all of the “things we must do” do we stop and reflect on the one who is the true must for us, the Incarnate Son of God, Our Lord Jesus Christ? Stop for a moment and look at a Nativity scene. I mean really look. What do you see? Do you see simply art, or a depiction of a past event, or do you see the one who is the Incarnate Son of God? Our God, who created us, came to us, is with us, is for us, to save us! We are not alone in the vast universe, left adrift. No, our God came to us in a way that we would not expect of one who is all-powerful, he came in the innocent helplessness of a baby. This baby was not born in a palace or even a house, but in a borrowed spot out back where only animals lived. The first people who visited him and his parents were not friends and family, but poor shepherds. The King of Kings came as the Poorest of the Poor. He came to save us not just in the future, but now. We are to assist him in his mission as the third verse of the Christmas carol “O Holy Night” tells us:

Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother;
And in His name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,
Let all within us praise His holy name.

Like the shepherds and all who have gone before us in faith, our encounter with the Prince of Peace offers us the opportunity to be freed from all that oppresses us in life and the mandate to help others to find this freedom. As Pope Francis teaches us:

“The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew... I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since “no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord.” (Evangelii Gaudium, 1, 3).

This Christmas and always, our prayer as the team of the Catholic Apostolate Center is that your encounter with Christ today and every day brings such joy that you must share it with all!

Blessed Christmas!

Wonderful, Counselor, The Prince of Peace

By Victor David

Some time ago, I wrote about the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah. I mentioned how often times we hear that piece performed around Christmastime, although that portion of the Messiah is actually about Easter and the Resurrection. Now that the Nativity has arrived, perhaps it might be interesting to look at what Handel did use to interpret the Birth of Christ.

"For Unto Us a Child is Born" is taken from the words of the prophet Isaiah (Is 9:6):

For unto us a Child is born
Unto us a Son is given
And the government
Shall be upon His shoulder
And his name shall be called
Wonderful
Counselor
The Mighty God
The Everlasting Father
The Prince of Peace

In that one verse, the prophet presents so much insight into the aforementioned Child to be born. He will be a son, he shall reign over a great dominion, and he shall bring peace. Well, only one child fits that description: Jesus Christ.

When Isaiah tells of a son being given to the faithful, he is not just talking about the neighbor's kid. He foretells of a son presented as a gift to all who believe. And indeed, in Christ, we have not only a child but also the moment when the word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14). And through that word, humanity is redeemed. Through Christ, death no longer has power. The gates of heaven are opened to all that would follow he who is called the Son of God.

"The kingdom of heaven is at hand," declared John the Baptist (Mt 3:2). Yes, we believe that at the end of time Christ will establish his kingdom for all eternity (CCC 1042). But in the meantime, his kingdom exists on earth in the form of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church (CCC 763). Founded by Jesus with a mission to manifest the will of God, the Church waits in hopeful anticipation for the establishment of Christ's eternal reign.

It is very appropriate, then, for Isaiah to foretell a Prince of Peace. Not only would Jesus go on to proclaim a kingdom of love but also, when he returns, establish a heavenly domain that knows no end. At Christmas, we celebrate both a beginning and an end. We celebrate the very beginning of Christ ruling the hearts and minds of the faithful while also looking toward the end when he will come again and his "kingdom will have no end."

"The People in Darkness..."

By Alex Boucher

Each year, I look forward to attending Midnight Mass on Christmas. As we continue on in the great octave of Christmas, I would like to look back on the readings and texts from the "Mass During the Night," more commonly known as Midnight Mass.

"O God, [you] have made this most sacred night radiant with the splendor of the true light..." (Collect, Christmas Mass During the Night). Sometimes I scratch my head trying to make sense of the "opening prayer" used during the Mass. The Collect that we prayed during Midnight Mass, though, is quite fitting for this particular celebration of the Eucharist. This "most sacred night" is indeed "radiant with the splendor of the true light," the light of Christ, the light that brightens not only the darkness of the night sky but also the darkness of our world, the darkness that often creeps its way into our own lives and our own hearts.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Is 9:1). The words that the prophet Isaiah addressed to us in the first reading from this Mass are so filled with meaning for us, especially as we fumble and flounder in the darkness of our world and in our own lives. For upon us all, "a light has shone" (Is 9:1). We often walk in darkness: the darkness of our own worries and anxieties, the darkness of our own sins and shortcomings, the darkness of loneliness and isolation. Whatever burdens us, Isaiah invites us to be brought from darkness into God's most marvelous light, which is found in the person of Jesus Christ.

Isaiah tells us that "upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone" (Is 9:1). The light that shone in the time of Isaiah is the same light that shone on the "shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock" (Lk 2:8). As the shepherds were keeping watch, "the angel of the Lord appeared to them" (Lk 2:9). On that holy night in Bethlehem, only the humble shepherds were aware of the Word becoming flesh—of Jesus being born of the Virgin Mary.

Our Holy Father, reflecting on these beautiful words, talks about light—the permeating theme of the great solemnity that we celebrate at Christmas. Our Holy Father says, "The people who walked—caught up in their activities and routines, amid their successes and failures, their worries and expectations—have seen a great light. The people who walked—with all their joys and hopes, their disappointments and regrets—have seen a great light. In every age, the People of God are called to contemplate this light. ... A light meant to shine on every corner of this city, on our fellow citizens, on every part of our lives" (Homily of Pope Francis, 25 September 2015).

As we continue to celebrate the great Nativity of the Lord—Christmas—we rejoice with Isaiah: "For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace" (Is 9:5). The Lord is forever faithful. We are called to "[proclaim] the marvels of the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Eternal Father, the Prince of Peace" (Homily of Pope Francis, 25 September 2015). We do this by serving as beacons of light amidst the darkness of our world, radiating the light, the "abundant joy" (Is 9:2), the love, the "blessed hope" (Ti 2:13) of Jesus Christ. Let us join our hearts and voices this Christmas night and proclaim: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Lk 2:14).

Feast of the Holy Innocents

By Amy Winkler

"For already at the beginning of their lives they pass on. The end of the present life is for them the beginning of glory. These then, whom Herod's cruelty tore as sucklings from their mothers' bosom, are justly hailed as "infant martyr flowers"; they were the Church's first blossoms, matured by the frost of persecution during the cold winter of unbelief." -St. Augustine

Twinkling lights adorn front porches; snowflakes fall softly to the earth; jingle bells sound from every street corner; and children's voices sing praise in memory of the Savior's birth as Christmas comes bustling into our lives. And as I watch and listen, I'm reminded that there are many voices that won't be joining that chorus, at least not audibly. Christmas is one of my favorite times of year, but it also brings much sadness along with it as I remember my little brother who once again will not be joining us to celebrate this joyous feast. This pain is manifested in a deep way as much joy is to be shared by many.

I don't always associate Christmas as a time to bear my cross and follow Christ; after all, this is a joyous occasion. It's a time to celebrate Jesus' birth, not to mourn his death. This year I can't help but think of the cross as I find myself remembering the deep sorrow and loneliness of losing someone so dear to me. Questions flood my mind of why my little brother, so innocent and so little, had to suffer stillbirth and die. As I reflect on this experience of powerlessness, I am reminded of those mothers who two thousand years ago lost their sons as Herod viciously sought to destroy Jesus. During the Christmas Season, our Church has a beautiful tradition of honoring those early martyrs, the Holy Innocents. Just as my own parents were devastated at the loss of my brother, I know that these mothers and fathers, too, felt the almost unbearable sorrow and sense of helplessness of losing a child.

This senseless loss is my cross, as I can imagine it is a struggle for anyone who has lost a loved one, and yet Jesus doesn't leave me alone for long. Words of St. Augustine come rushing into my head, comforting me: "For almighty God...because he is supremely good, would never allow any evil whatsoever to exist in his works if he were not so all-powerful and good as to cause good to emerge from evil itself." [1] Hope. Reassurance. The cycle of death and life revealed. And then I realize why Christmas is so dear to me. Christmas manifests the time to celebrate life and to remember that good is ever being born into this world. Through his Beloved Son, God lovingly demonstrates His desire for good to triumph. As St. Augustine reminded me, God not only desires good but God always brings good out of evil situations, even though we might not always recognize it.

My mind is amazed as I ponder the mystery of the Incarnation. Gratitude fills my heart as I feel Christ with me amidst my joy and my sorrow. The beautiful gift of a child, of the God incarnate, sent to us to share in our life and to bring good out of evil in a truly ring; incense lifts gracefully to the heavens; angels proclaim Good News of great joy; the Body of Christ is broken and shared; and I know in my heart that my little brother lives.



Becoming a Holy Family

By Evan Ponton

The story of Christmas illustrates that there are no perfect families (or parishes) but we can hope to be a holy one. Part of becoming a holy family at Christmas means turning our attention to the spiritually lost among our family and friends. Here are a few things to keep in mind as we look to welcome disconnected Catholics to our churches and homes this season.

Make Room for the Lost and Lonely

For some people walking through the church doors, the Christmas season is a difficult and lonely time, a reminder of the families they don't have. How do we show hospitality to those without a human family? If you are on a church staff or volunteer, slow down and consider the place you are making for those who feel lost and alone. You could, for example, make sure that the elderly and handicapped are able to find seating appropriate to their needs. Or, personally invite those who are alone to join in any parish fellowship that might be happening after Mass. The goal is not to expose or make a scene around these types of parishioners, but to consider their needs and communicate that they are valued.

Make Occasional Visitors Feel Loved, Not Judged

For those coming to church at Christmas for the first time in a long time, many already carry a mild feeling of guilt that they don't go to church regularly and expect to feel a little judged. Let us welcome these occasional visitors with open arms and encourage them to return by modeling the joy of the Lord through our actions. Joy is persuasive. If we let the love of Christ beam through us this Christmas season it might just be enough to help these occasional visitors desire more frequent encounters with our Lord in the Mass.

Give a Gift to the Poor

The Christmas gift-giving tradition began with St. Nicholas giving a gift to a poor family. While many church budgets are spread thin during this time of year, consider making room in your budget to help the church provide a gift to a local charity or foreign mission. Not only is this celebrating the authentic tradition of Christmas presents, it a sign of generosity that encourages church communities to remember their brothers and sisters whose basic material needs often go unmet. For those who feel unwelcome or unworthy of joining the Church, communal Christian charity is a great way to demonstrate that we want them with us on Sundays and that we will work together to make sure their needs are provided for.

Evangelize Through Beauty

The Advent and Christmas seasons are rich with light and melody, in both a sacred and worldly sense. Beauty has the effect of lessening our defenses and heightening our receptivity to the message of Jesus. What are the elements of beauty present in your church and home? How can you enhance them? Consider playing some soft sacred music in your home during the holidays or decorating your home with a nativity scene or poinsettia plant. It doesn't take much, just something small to celebrate what a miraculous time Christmas is for all Christians.

Jesus was born in an "irregular" family situation - not a perfect family by worldly standards, but a holy family in God's plan for the world. Would we Christians today recognize and welcome this same Jesus? He is among us. He is knocking at the doors of our hearts, homes, and churches in the form of family, friends, and strangers in need of peace and hope. Let us welcome Jesus in!

What's Next?

By Nicholas Shields

Just a few days after December 25th, the hubbub of Christmas seems to have come and gone and we are getting back to work. On Christmas Day, we were overwhelmed with the joy of the birth of Christ and the excitement of sharing in God's love for the world. This feeling does not necessarily wear off right away, it can stick with us for many weeks to come and leaves us wondering "what's next?"



Every time I hear these words I think of the show *The West Wing*, where President Bartlet's signature phrase is "what's next?". This phrase brings continuity to the story line as the characters continually dedicate their lives to serving the nation. As I think about it now, we can use this simple little phrase to help ground us as we move beyond the Christmas season. The new year is just a few days away and many of us are thinking about what our new year's resolutions are going to be: from dieting, to posting an inspirational photo on Instagram every day, to reconnecting with old friends. While these are great ideas for the coming year, instead of just focusing on ourselves, let us also try to ask "what's next" for our faith and our relationship with Christ. We can do this in a few simple steps:

1. Stop and Evaluate – Christmas is drawing to a close and we are already a month into the new liturgical year. Find a quiet place sometime this week and take a moment to reflect on the status of your relationship with Christ. Have you made any changes to your spiritual life? Are your actions, decisions, and livelihood benefiting your relationship with Christ?
2. Make a Plan – Think about starting spiritual direction or even a prayer group or bible study with your peers. Alternatively, focus on your prayer life with daily prayer, weekly adoration, or daily Mass. Read books that can help you learn about your faith and develop your relationship with Christ. Look for role models to aspire to – like the Holy Family, whose feast day we celebrated just this week.
3. Take Action – This is the hard part, but the most important. Commit to your plan and carry it out throughout the liturgical year and the new year. Find someone to hold you accountable or set daily reminders in your phone

Our relationship with Christ is critical and now is the perfect time to evaluate it. We have so many resources available to us: our priests and parishes, our friends and bible study groups, the saints and the Holy Family, and many more. Asking ourselves "what's next," gives us the opportunity to recommit ourselves to God, to dive deeper into our faith, and to live out our lives as apostles. Let us use the momentum of the new year and the joy of the Christmas season to motivate ourselves into keeping our faith alive and healthy.

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(in order of appearance)

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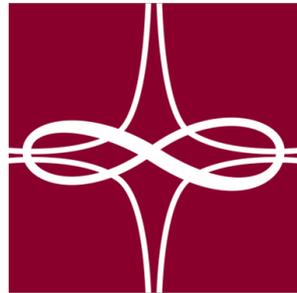
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