

A Prayerful, Magical Catholic Family Advent & Christmas

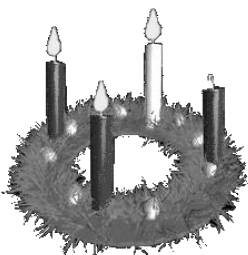
Dear Parents,

During the 4 weeks just before Christmas, Catholics traditionally celebrate Advent, the season of waiting for Jesus. Even though stores are already filled with Christmas decorations and music, this is a time we hold back, so that our celebration of the true Christmas Season, which begins December 24th and lasts until the Baptism of the Lord on the Sunday after Epiphany, can be more beautiful and meaningful.

Advent can be a time to build magical memories for your children, even without Christmas parties, decorations and lights because it has its own beautiful symbols and traditions. Here are some ideas for how you can establish Catholic family traditions and spiritual practices related to Advent and Christmas. Don't feel like you need to do them all – at least not at first!

SHOP MORE MINDFULLY – Focus your gift shopping on the people, not the things, and try not to get caught up in the rush to make things “perfect.” Take time to enjoy the season and savor the preparations. Put aside at least a small amount of your gift spending for items to be donated to the poor. Above all, try to see Advent as a special time to prepare for Christmas, not to celebrate it yet.

ADVENT WREATH – Purchase or make a simple evergreen wreath and four candles, traditionally three purple and one pink (lit on the third week) or, you can use four white or four purple candles. Decorate the wreath with purple and blue ribbons or small ornaments. Stars are especially good. Place it in the middle of your table. Beginning on the Saturday night before the First Sunday of Advent, dim the lights and light the first purple candle, using the prayer service “The Blessing of an Advent Wreath.” <http://bit.ly/1E6IDjs> Then, light that candle every evening at dinnertime, adding another candle each Saturday night until all four are lit. Be sure to eat by candlelight. Your children will love this because it makes Advent meals special. Older children can take turns lighting the candles. Pray around the wreath each night for the needs of your family, neighborhood and the world before blessing your food.



JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM – Sometime in the early weeks of December, set up your family Nativity scene, but start with just the empty stable with the empty manger in it. Put the figures of Mary, Joseph and the donkey on the other side of the room, and move them closer to the stable each evening, having them “arrive” just before Christmas Eve. Children can take turns moving the figures. If you use real straw in your stable, you can have each child add a stick of straw every day as well. (some families have them add straw for every good deed they do.) On Christmas Eve, as the sun goes down, add the baby Jesus figure to the manger, then the angels and shepherds. Be sure not to add the Three Kings just yet – they are still on their way!

ST. NICHOLAS, ST. LUCY – Celebrate the Advent Saints. On the night of December 5th have your children leave one shoe outside their bedroom door. After they are asleep, fill the shoe with candy, small treats and toys for them to find in the morning – little gifts from St. Nicholas. For December 13th, make a crown-shaped coffee cake or traditional cat-shaped buns to celebrate St. Lucy and her martyrdom. (More suggestions here: <http://bit.ly/10wnGQI>)

JESSE TREE CRAFTS – If you and your children love hands-on crafts, a simple Jesse Tree, celebrating the important ancestors of Jesus, is a great idea to make Advent special. There are many patterns for ornaments on the internet. You can find some of them here: <http://bit.ly/1uxfD3o>

MAKE YOUR CHRISTMAS TREE LIGHTING SPECIAL – Wait at least a little bit into December before putting up your tree – and consider putting it up in stages. After all, if you celebrate Christmas as it is intended, you will have at least 12 days after to keep the tree up, so there is plenty of time to enjoy it. First, just put up the tree, maybe a night or two later, add the lights (but don't turn them on just yet). Next, add the ornaments. When the tree is complete and your family has time to be together, light the tree and use "The Blessing of a Christmas Tree" prayer service. <http://bit.ly/1y567SR>

ATTEND OR ORGANIZE A POSADA – Starting on December 16, it is a Mexican tradition to re-enact the journey of the Holy Family – going from house to house, in search of a room to stay. Why not try this instead of a caroling party? Traditional refreshments include hot cocoa and cinnamon twists. More information here: <http://bit.ly/1AkTx7p>

SING ADVENT SONGS – Hold the Christmas music until later in the month. If your family loves carols, try listening to or singing traditional Advent songs: "Creator of the Stars of Night," "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" (especially beginning December 17th), "People Look East," "O Come, Divine Messiah," and "Soon and Very Soon" are some great choices. If you just like to listen, play quiet winter-themed instrumental music, such as that found on the "Winter Solstice" CD's.

SING CRADLE SONGS ON CHRISTMAS EVE – Serenade baby Jesus by singing or playing such traditional songs as "What Child is This?" "Bring a Torch, Jeanette, Isabella," or "The Friendly Beasts."

JOURNEY OF THE THREE KINGS – On Christmas Eve, after the star has appeared over the stable, the Three Kings can begin their journey to meet baby Jesus. Place them across the room, toward the east side of your Nativity scene and move them closer each day, having them arrive on Epiphany (traditionally January 6th, or celebrated in church on the second Sunday after Christmas). As with the Holy Family, children can take turns moving the figures each evening until the Kings arrive.

TAKING DOWN THE TREE AND DECORATIONS – Many families do this after Epiphany is celebrated in church, or wait until the next Sunday, the Baptism of the Lord. In some European traditions, the tree remains until "Little Christmas" on February 2 (Candlemas Day) No matter which date you choose, make this a special family time – with everyone helping as they are able. Play the last of the Christmas music – and be sure to serve hot cocoa and cookies afterwards and share the best memories of the season you have just celebrated together.

Wishing you and your family a beautiful Advent and Christmas season!

Blessings!

