Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux
Office of Worship

Liturgical Notes for the Advent-Christmas Season 2019-2020

The Two-fold Character of Advent

“Advent has a twofold character: as a season to prepare for Christmas when Christ’s first coming to us is remembered; as a season when that remembrance directs the mind and heart to await Christ’s Second Coming at the end of time. Advent is thus a period for devout and joyful expectation” (*Universal Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar* #39, hereafter *Universal Norms*).

The Advent Wreath

When is it blessed? The blessing of it takes place on the 1st Sunday of Advent, or on the evening before the 1st Sunday of Advent. The blessing may take place during Mass, a celebration of the word of God, or Evening Prayer (*Book of Blessings* #1509). The *Order of Blessing within Mass* places the blessing of the Advent wreath in the context of the Universal Prayer (General Intercessions). The prayer of blessing is the conclusion to the Universal Prayer. The wreath may be sprinkled with holy water, and it is at this time that the first (violet) candle is lit.

Color of Candles on the Advent Wreath. The wreath, constructed of a circle of evergreen branches may have inserted into it either 1) three violet and one rose candle, 2) four violet candles or 3) four white candles (*Book of Blessings* #1510).

Size of the Advent Wreath in a Church. “It should be of sufficient size to be visible to the congregation. It may be suspended from the ceiling, or placed on a stand. If it is placed in the presbytery, it should not interfere with the celebration of the liturgy, nor should it obscure the altar, lectern, or chair” (*Book of Blessings* #1512).

Lighting the Wreath on Succeeding Sundays of Advent. This is done either before Mass begins or immediately before the opening prayer, and without any added prayers or rites.

Environment and Art during Advent and Christmas

Advent is a season of joyful expectation, yet, the word “expectation” conveys the idea that we are not yet at our destiny. Liturgical environment in the Church during Advent should depict this concept. How do we prepare the environment to say two things: 1) we are moving toward our celebration of the Lord’s Nativity and 2) we are anticipating the return of Christ? We have already mentioned the Advent Wreath, which, by its very nature is a symbol of expectation, since the candles are lit progressively. The key to Advent environment is “keep it simple.” There should be a big contrast between Advent and Christmas.

Simple Color: blue-purple fabric hung or draped over liturgical furnishings would be appropriate. Please be reminded that if a violet cloth drapes the altar there should also be a white altar linen and a corporal. Some may even be placed in the nave itself or near its entrance. During the Christmas season gold or white or a combination of these colors should replace the violet. However, be aware that we have a solemnity (Immaculate Conception) and an important feast (Our Lady of Guadalupe) during which the colors need to shift from violet to white.

Plants: Undecorated Norfolk Pines or evergreens may be placed in the sanctuary and nave. The evergreens in the sanctuary could be then decorated appropriately for Christmas. When decorating them for Christmas keep to the seasonal interchangeable colors of gold and white. Some violet colored plants, but not many, could be placed in the sanctuary during Advent. And, of course, everyone loves the poinsettias at Christmas. While the abundance of plants should be greater in Christmas than in Advent, still we need to be careful not to overdo it. Accentuate the areas of focus during the Mass, the altar and the ambo. Again, the sanctuary and nave can be pulled together by the placing of the same kind of plants in both.

Living Plants: The following quote from *Built of Living Stones* (USCCB) is important in the preparation of liturgical environment. “The use of living flowers and plants, rather than artificial greens, serves as a reminder of the gift of life God has given to the human community.”

Between Advent and Christmas: We need to strive as much as possible not to have Christmas decor in the Church on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. With Christmas falling on a Wednesday this year, you may have a little more time to create a liturgical environment for Christmas Eve. If you do find yourself challenged because you can only get volunteers on the weekend, it is important that we try to maintain the sense of expectancy on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. The secular world will have been celebrating a secular kind of Christmas (whatever that is!) for several weeks, and by the Sunday before Christmas in a lot of minds Christmas is already present. How can we do our best not to play into secularism?

Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance during Advent

Although Advent is not a penitential season in the sense that Lent is, one aspect of our preparation for Christ’s return and our celebration of his first coming is repentance, even as John the Baptist exhorts us on the 2nd Sunday of Advent. Parishes may want to offer a Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution.

On December 18, 2019, from 6:00 to 8:00...
Jerusalem and Micah were paralleled in Micah 4:1-4. Isaiah of Jerusalem, whose prophetic ministry spans from 742-700 BC, its Sitz-im-Leben is most likely the beginning of Hezekiah’s reign, in which Isaiah saw the promise of a new day of fidelity to the God of Israel. Paired with the Gospel reading this reading from Isaiah encourages us to anticipate the “Day of the Lord,” the parousia, as a day of hope, despite the tumult that will precede it. Jesus’ admonition to “be prepared, for at an hour you do not know the Son of Man will come” should be anticipated with joy and hope, virtues which are at the heart of the Advent mystery.

The Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Advent comes from the Eschatological/Apocalyptic Discourse (Matthew 24-25), the last of the five great discourses in Matthew. As chapter 24 begins, Jesus first leaves the Temple, then predicts its destruction, which occurred in 70 AD. After leaving the Temple, Jesus directs his teaching to his disciples only. The change of spatial setting and the audience of his final speech are significant in that he is now addressing the people that will produce fruit for the Kingdom of God (Matt 21:43). He has formally made a break with official Judaism, although Jews will be among the new people of God. Apocalyptic in form, chapter 24 depicts a struggle between the cosmic powers of good and evil, a struggle which plays out in terrestrial life. In 24:37 Jesus compares the coming time to the days just before the great flood (Genesis 6:9-7:5). Whereas those who do not prepare for the flood are destroyed, Noah, who is faithful to the Lord’s commands and is vigilant is saved. Jesus uses Noah as an image of the need for preparedness in view of the tribulations the disciples would face. The point is: tumultuous times are coming; read the signs of the times and be prepared. In the end, the Son of Man will return to cement God’s ultimate victory over the forces of evil. Those who live in anticipation of his victorious parousia will experience salvation; others will not.

The first reading (Isaiah 2:1-5) is paralleled in Micah 4:1-4. Isaiah of Jerusalem and Micah were contemporaries. It is hard to say to which prophet the oracle should be attributed or if both got it from a common source. This passage differs from the judgment oracles in Isaiah 2-4 and points to a time of universal salvation. If it is original to Isaiah of Jerusalem, whose prophetic ministry spans from 742-700 BC, its Sitz-im-Leben is most likely the beginning of Hezekiah’s reign, in which Isaiah saw the promise of a new day of fidelity to the God of Israel. Paired with the Gospel reading this reading from Isaiah encourages us to anticipate the “Day of the Lord,” the parousia, as a day of hope, despite the tumult that will precede it. Jesus’ admonition to “be prepared, for at an hour you do not know the Son of Man will come” should be anticipated with joy and hope, virtues which are at the heart of the Advent mystery.

The second reading (Romans 13:11-14) comes from the hortatory section (12:1-15:13) of Romans, where Paul develops practical implications of his earlier theological exposition. Paul has made the case that justification comes about by grace alone and is accessed through faith. It cannot be achieved by our self-generated attempts to adhere to the Law. By means of grace and faith we have been reconciled with God. In the hortatory section, Paul exhorts that our status as justified and reconciled people should be manifest in our daily lives. In Romans 13:11-14, Paul asserts that there is a sense of urgency to put his moral exhortation into practice: the time is near! He uses the transition of day into night and our consequent need to wake from sleep as a metaphor for the time in which we find ourselves. Wakefulness = watchfulness, and our watchfulness is accomplished by conducting ourselves according “behavior during the day,” when all can be seen.

In the turmoil that Christians both as a group and as individuals face in the midst of the struggle between good and evil, we need not be discouraged. Advent reminds us that the raging of evil, which makes life difficult for us, is simply a sign of its being overcome. We maintain a sense of hope in the coming of the Son of Man to bring his Kingdom to its completion.

Sundays 1 and 2 of Advent

1st Sunday. Flowing out of the end of the previous liturgical year, Advent begins with a focus on the Second Coming of Christ. Therefore, liturgical preparation for the First Sunday of Advent should be oriented accordingly.

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The first reading (Isaiah 11:1-10) anticipates the coming of a king of Judah who shows himself to be wholly devoted to using his God-given authority to carry out God's will. Consequently, he will establish justice among the people, and hostility both among the Israelites and between the Israelites and other peoples will cease. When that happens even the Gentiles will seek association with the God of Israel and peace and justice will reign on the earth. The image of this ideal king stands in contrast to Judahite rulers such as Ahaz who depended on their own resources or looked to help from other nations rather than depending on God in the face of military threats, and whose reigns were riddled with tumult and injustice.

The first coming of Jesus introduced a new age. To encounter Jesus and to be a part of the Kingdom he inaugurates, repentance is necessary. The same is true if one is to be prepared for his coming again to bring it to completion.

The second reading is again from the hortatory section of Romans. Rom 15:1-3 is an exhortation to “the strong” to put up with inconvenience, deprivation, even suffering for the sake of “the weak.” Paul uses Christ as an example of one who did so. Through endurance and mutual encouragement, harmony can prevail in the community. They are to welcome one another as Christ welcomed them.

Music: This is not the time to use the most popular of Advent Hymns, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” as I will explain below.

Advent Prefaces

Preface I of Advent captures the twofold character of Advent, in that it mentions both comings of Christ and their interconnection. This preface is used exclusively from the First Sunday of Advent through December 16th.

Preface II of Advent. Even though the caption for the preface characterizes it as envisioning the “twofold expectation of Christ” the wording of it more precisely focuses our anticipation on the celebration of Christ’s first coming. However, the Thanksgiving of the preface connects the two comings in its final sentence when it articulates part of the cause of our gratitude as “already we rejoice at the mystery of his Nativity, so that he may find us watchful in prayer” [at his Second Coming]. This preface is used exclusively from December 17th-24th. It is not used prior to December 17th.

Gaudete Sunday (3rd Sunday of Advent).

Gaudete Sunday captures Advent’s anticipatory joy. The title comes from the first word of the Latin introit to the Mass of the 3rd Sunday of Advent, an introit wherein we are urged to “rejoice.” Gaudete Sunday marks the midpoint of Advent as we move ever closer to our celebration of Christ’s First Coming. The note of joy is also reflected in the Collect and in the first two readings this year. In our liturgical preparation we will want to highlight this aspect of Advent.

Rose colored vestments may be worn on this Sunday.

The Advent chord of joy is struck in the first reading. Isaiah 35:1-10 is in the form of an oracle of salvation, many of which are found in Deutero Isaiah (chapters 40-55). In fact, some Biblical scholars think that Isaiah 35:1-10 is actually an oracle of Deutero Isaiah that was mistakenly edited into Isaiah of Jerusalem’s corpus (1-39). One fact that might lend credence to this opinion is that Isaiah 35:10 is a doublet of 51:11. The salvation oracle usually contains an exhortation by God to “fear not,” for whatever the fearful situation the addressees are experiencing, God is about to intervene to relieve their distress. The addressees here are characterized as having “feeble hands” and “weak knees” (35:3). God is coming with vindication and divine recompense (35:4). God’s specific intervention will consist of healing those with physical disabilities, and removing obstacles to safe passage (such as wild beasts and desert terrain). Isaiah 35:8 depicts a “highway” (maslûl), which echoes the “highway” (mēsillâh, 40:3) Deutero Isaiah calls for that the Lord and the exiles might pass upon unhindered. If the Sitz-im-Leben of Isaiah 35:1-10 is the end of the Babylonian Exile, the images of healing and removal of obstacles would symbolize the restoration of the exiles, not only physically as they return to their land, but spiritually and emotionally as well.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus uses the wording of Isaiah 35:5-6 in response to the messengers from the imprisoned John the Baptist who inquires whether or not Jesus is the Messiah or that another should be sought. Jesus cites the healings he is doing as a sign of the Messianic times, although Isaiah 35:1-10, in the literal sense, has nothing to do with Messianism.

In any event, these two readings reflect Advent joy in the sense that the negative experiences which burden human life are being overturned by Jesus’ ministry. Therein may be found a reason for hope.

In the second reading, James exhorts the community members to “be patient” or “to persevere.” He gives two instances in which forbearance is needed: 1) dealing with persecution and 2) dealing with the everyday difficulties in community relations. Why is perseverance the proper response to these situations? The coming of the Lord is near. Thus they should not render themselves in an unready state for meeting the Lord by compromising their Christian virtues in the light of difficulties.

The message of James resonates with us as well in our own time. We must always live in anticipation of the Lord’s advent.

December 17-24

According to Universal Norms #41, “The weekdays from 17 December to 24 December inclusive serve to prepare more directly for the Lord’s birth.” A liturgical feature of these days is that, since the Middle Ages, the “O Antiphons” are sung. The antiphons reflect the anticipation of God’s definitive and progressive intervention to save his people by the use of titles for the Savior drawn from the Old Testament. The antiphons on each day of this period of Advent have the following
order:

December 17: O Wisdom.
December 18: O Leader.
December 19: O Root of Jesse’s Stem.
December 20: O Key of David.
December 21: O Radiant Dawn.
December 23: O Emmanuel.

These antiphons have been preserved in the Gospel acclamations at Masses for these days and in the antiphons for the Magnificat in the Liturgy of the Hours for the same period.

It would be advisable to highlight the antiphons during this most proximate period of anticipation of our celebration of Christ’s first coming.

During this period from December 17-24, the hymn “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” is most appropriate, for its verses are based on the O Antiphons.

4th Sunday of Advent

This Sunday is nestled within the theological ambience of December 17-24. It is focused intensely on our anticipation of the celebration of Christ’s Nativity. However, the Collect for the Mass reflects the concept of the connection between Christ’s Nativity and his Passion as two events in a continuous act of salvation. The heart of every Mass is the Paschal Mystery. Even in the Christmas Masses we are mindful of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ.

We want to be careful in our liturgical preparation to ensure that our focus on Christmas is still anticipatory and not actualized. With Christmas being on a Wednesday this year, parishes have a little more time prepare the liturgical environment for Christmas between Christmas and the 4th Sunday of Advent.

Reenactments: Never, at any time during the liturgies for Advent or Christmas, should there be any kind of “reenactment of the Christmas story” (as is sometimes done with children). It is important that the imparting of the Divine Word in these liturgical celebrations be offered in the form of the proclaimed Word of the Sacred Scriptures which carry our tradition. The form of the Scripture readings contained in the Lectionary is the only authorized form of communication of the Sacred Word of God during the liturgy. Moreover, such reenactments tend to harmonize the various traditions of the Evangelists and rob them of their uniqueness.

The Gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Cycle A, is a duplicate of the short form of the Christmas Vigil Mass Gospel. Following the genealogy from Abraham to Jesus, Matthew narrates the birth of Jesus as understood from Joseph’s experience. Joseph seeks to adhere to the Jewish law by invoking Deuteronomy 24:1, which offers a more compassionate solution to the finding of an indecency in one who is either betrothed or married than does Deuteronomy 22:20-21. However, his intended action is interrupted by a divine revelation in a dream (a typical Old Testament mode for divine revelations) wherein Joseph is instructed to complete the marriage contract he initiated with Mary. The birth of the child is to result, as Matthew sees it, in the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. Matthew chooses this particular passage to shape his Christology, because for him Jesus is God-with-us. Through Jesus, God is always present to his Church.

The first reading constitutes the prophetic passage that Matthew uses to shape his Christological image of Jesus as Emmanuel. For Isaiah, however, the child he predicts to Ahaz will be born is more than likely Ahaz’ son, Hezekiah. The latter can aptly be referred to as “God-with-us” because Hezekiah, at least in part, carried out his reign as the agent of Yahweh, especially by re-sanctifying the Temple by means of removing the Assyrian god images his father, Ahaz, had put into it to appease the Assyrians. Hezekiah embarked upon a purification of Israelite faith, but ended up falling back on his own means and ignoring Isaiah’s advice when the powerful Assyrian military leader, Sennacherib later threatened Judah and Jerusalem.

In the second reading, Paul, seeking to win the favor of the Roman Christians as he passes through Rome to bring the Gospel to the “ends of the earth,” introduces himself in a unique way. After stating his name he mentions his appointed mission to announce the “gospel of God.” This gospel is not Paul’s concoction, but was anticipated by the prophets and finds its culmination in Jesus. The good news entails the birth of Jesus, descended from David (a connection to the Gospel reading) and his establishment in power through the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Through his proclamation of the gospel Paul hopes to bring about the “obedience of faith” especially among the Gentiles. Later he will argue that faith disposes one to grace which justifies a person.

This reading reinforces the connection between Christmas and Easter.

The Christmas Season

Next to the yearly celebration of the paschal mystery, the Church holds most sacred the memorial of Christ’s birth and early manifestations. This is the purpose of the Christmas season (Universal Norms #32)

Christmas as a Celebration of Divine Light
It is important that we celebrate Christmas as the fulfillment of Advent expectation and hope.

Celebrated near the Winter Solstice, the Christmas texts characterize the birth of Christ as a divine intervention whereby God’s salvific light dispels the darkness of hopelessness and sin. We see this especially in the Collects for the Masses During the Night and at Dawn.

Although not mentioned specifically in the Collect for Mass during the Day, the concept of the intervening Divine Light is found in the Gospel reading from John’s Prologue. “What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:3b-5).

With that said, it is important to note that Christmas is a Christological feast. Each Mass, with its prayers and readings, is meant to make a theological statement about the person of Jesus Christ. Even the warm narrative of Christ’s birth in Luke 2:1-14 (Mass during the Night) is not about “baby Jesus,” but about who Jesus is according to Luke.

Eucharistic Prayer during the Masses of Christmas and Its Octave: Any of the 4 common Eucharistic Prayers may be used for the Christmas Masses. However, Eucharistic Prayer I is especially pertinent to the liturgical celebrations of Christmas and its octave in that it contains a special form of the Communicantes for Christmas.

**The Anticipated (Vigil) Mass**

The Anticipated Mass of Christmas theologically stands on the threshold between Advent and Christmas.

The Collect recalls the Advent expectation of the coming of the Redeemer in the form of God’s Only Begotten Son.

It also recalls the anticipation of Christ’s Second Coming when it prays that as we welcome our Redeemer we will also “merit to face him confidently when he comes as our judge.”

The Gospel reading for this Mass gives the presider a choice of a long form (including the Matthean genealogy) or a short form (which limits the reading to the narrative of Joseph’s struggle and then faithful decision to complete his marriage contract with Mary).

The Matthean Genealogy (1:1-17) depicts Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish regal Messianic expectation and reflects God’s gradually unfolding plan of salvation, which culminates in Jesus.

Jesus is once again depicted in the context of salvation history in the second reading. Paul builds up to the significance of Jesus by recalling the patriarchs (who were called by God) the Exodus, the rise of the monarchy under Saul, and the solidification of the nation under David, who deposed Saul. Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection represent God’s definitive act in his unfolding plan. Ultimately, Jesus is the savior.

While participation in the Vigil fulfills one’s obligation for the Solemnity of the Nativity, it is important to remember that this Mass actually anticipates the celebration of Christmas. Consider the Gospel acclamation: “Tomorrow the wickedness of the earth will be destroyed: the Savior of the world will reign over us.”

**Mass during the Night**

In the past this Mass was traditionally called “Midnight Mass,” and, as many of us remember, was actually celebrated at midnight on Christmas morning.

Recently it has been the practice, in many parishes and even in Rome, to celebrate this Mass during the night on Christmas Eve. When should this Mass be celebrated? First, the third edition of the Roman Missal in English translates the title of the Mass more precisely from the Latin as “Mass during the Night.”

Secondly, there is no specific liturgical law which requires that the Mass be celebrated during the night on the morning of December 25th. Thirdly, I offer the following reflection from Liturgy Training Publications’ *Pastoral Liturgy* (http://www.pastoralliturgy.org/resources/0709TimingMidnightMass.php):

> “Which one is ‘Midnight Mass,’ then, and does it matter if a Mass is at midnight? Not really. The formulary is called Mass “during the night,” not “at midnight.” If celebrating at 10:30 or 11 p.m. meets pastoral need (like the needs of families for a more reasonable hour), as long as such pastoral need is genuine, it can be a reasonable decision. However, it at least needs to be during the night, and late enough that one can see it as genuinely beginning the celebration of Christmas Day.”

**Chanting the Nativity of the Lord from the Roman Martyrology (Appendix I of the Roman Missal):** This chant (or recitation of it) may be used before Mass during the Night is begun. It may not replace any part of the Mass.

**Pastoral Note:** Unfortunately, this text, though valuable as a text from ancient Christian tradition, uses a pre-critical chronology of events.

In the Gospel reading for Mass during the Night, the angels announcement of Jesus’ birth is characterized as “tidings of joy.” This phrase anticipates Jesus’ statement that his Spirit-inspired mission is to bring glad tidings to the poor.

If Jesus is compared to King Solomon in the Gospel reading ("swaddling clothes"), the first reading points to a king who would establish justice and put an end to war. This king’s birth is light in the darkness of the miseries of slavery and military battles. Isaiah does not identify the king, but many commentators see Isaiah 9:1-6 as a prophecy of the emergence of Hezekiah, who undid many of his father’s (Ahaz’) misdeeds and sought to return Judah to fidelity to the Lord. For Christians, Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy.
Masses on Christmas Day

On Christmas Day the Roman Missal and Lectionary provide texts for two more Masses: one at dawn and one “during the day.”

Mass at Dawn: The Collect carries forward the theme of “light” from the Mass during the Night. Jesus Christ is radiant light, which, as we can see from the next clause in the paragraph, is a metaphor for mental enlightenment.

In the Gospel reading the shepherds are significant players. They receive the divine message from the angel, verify what they are told by viewing the newborn child and then announce what “they had heard and seen” (Luke 2:20). Luke comments that what they witnessed was in accord with what was told them. In other words, we have here a depiction of prophecy and fulfillment, a major theme in Luke’s Gospel.

The first reading (Isaiah 62:11-12) addresses the people’s difficulties in reestablishing themselves during the early post-exilic period. God will manifest himself as Savior, and the indignity that Israel suffered during the exile will be replaced with positive characterizations of them. In Jesus’ birth, God echoes the process of our restoration.

Titus 3:4-7 was probably chosen as a Christmas Day text because it mentions the appearance of “the kindness and generous love of God our savior.” “Appearance,” of course, is a key Christmas word, inasmuch as God and everything about him is manifested in the birth of his Son. But the epiphany depicted here has to do with God. However, Jesus Christ is the visible manifestation of God’s saving and merciful activity.

Hebrews 1:1-6 depicts Jesus as the visible manifestation of God’s creative and salvific word. The author compares the definitive word spoken in the Christ event to the provisional words of the prophets. The author abruptly moves from the image of Christ just mentioned to his redemptive mission, described in priestly terms as “purification.” Having accomplished this purpose, he takes his “seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” Again, we have a cultic image here of the high priest entering the Holy of Holies to fulfill his priestly obligations. The author may have in mind a passage such as Isaiah 55:10-11: “Yet just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down And do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, Giving seed to the one who sows and bread to the one who eats, So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; It shall not return to me empty, but shall do what pleases me, achieving the end for which I sent it.”

The Christmas “Nativity Scene”

Where is it to be placed? “If the manger is set up in the church, it must not be placed in the presbyterium. A place should be chosen that is suitable for prayer and devotion and is easily accessible by the faithful” (Book of Blessings # 1544).

When is it to be blessed? “The Blessing of the Christmas manger or nativity scene, according to pastoral circumstances, may take place on the Vigil of Christmas or at another more suitable time.” The Ordo specifies “a more suitable time” as “during another service, e. g., a service of lessons and carols” or during a celebration of the word of God.

The Order of Blessing within Mass takes place at the end of the Universal Prayer (General Intercessions) and has appropriate intercessions to accompany the ritual.

Feast of the Holy Family

Pope Saint John Paul II, in a homily delivered Sunday, 31 December 1978, reflects on the Holy Family as follows:

“The family of Nazareth, which the Church, especially in today’s liturgy, puts before the eyes of all families, really constitutes that culminating point of reference for the holiness of every human family. The history of this Family is described very concisely in the pages of the Gospel. We get to know only a few fundamental moments in the life of every family. However what we learn is sufficient to be able to involve the fundamental moments in the life of every family, and to show that dimension, to which all men who live a family life are called: fathers, mothers, parents, children. The Gospel shows us, very clearly, the educative aspect of the family. ‘He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them’ (Lk 2:51).”

Choice of Readings: This year the Cycle A readings are to be used. These readings may also be used in Cycles B and C Order for the Blessing of Families and Members of Families: This feast provides an appropriate occasion to use the “Order for the Blessing of A Family,” Book of Blessings #62-67. The rite of blessing is in the form of the Universal Prayer with intercessions appropriate to the liturgy and with the concluding prayer serving as the prayer of blessing.
Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God
January 1, 2020

Objection and Masses: January 1, 2020 is a Wednesday, therefore this year the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God is a Holyday of Obligation.

January 1 is also recognized as the World Day of Prayer for Peace, first declared by Pope Paul VI. Pope Francis usually publishes reflection for this observance in advance of the day.

Solemnity of the Epiphany of our Lord

Date: Traditionally situated on January 6th, in the United States the solemnity is commuted to the Sunday between January 1 and the Feast of the Lord’s Baptism.

Choice of Mass: While there is only one set of readings for this solemnity, the Roman Missal provides a specific set of prayers for an anticipated (vigil) Mass.

Eucharistic Prayer: As is the case with Christmas, a special form of the Communicantes for the Epiphany is included in Eucharistic Prayer I. Eucharistic Prayers II-IV, however, may be used.

Proclamation: In Appendix I of the Roman Missal is “The Announcement of Easter and the Moveable Feasts.” In accord with ancient tradition, this proclamation may be used at Mass on the Solemnity of the Epiphany. It may be done either after the Gospel reading or within the context of the homily and, if used, it is chanted by a deacon or cantor.

Wait, Don’t Take Down the Christmas Decorations and Stop Singing Christmas Carols Just Yet!: Perhaps since in the liturgical calendar prior to its reform at Vatican II Epiphany marked the end of the Christmas season there is a temptation to stop celebrating the Christmas season. However, the liturgy should look and sound like Christmas through the feast of the Lord’s Baptism.

Universal vs. Particular Calendars: In the Ecclesiastical Province of Louisiana Our Lady of Prompt Succor (January 8, 2020) is elevated to a solemnity, inasmuch as, under this title, Our Lady is the patroness of the State of Louisiana. The solemnity in the particular calendar, then, takes precedence over the universal calendar for January 8th, which in 2020 is Wednesday after Epiphany.

Masses for the Day: Mass may be taken from the Proper or Common of the Blessed Virgin Mary, especially no. III, or from the Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary #42, “Our Lady, Help of Christians.

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

Culmination of the Christmas Season: the Christmas season ends with vespers on the afternoon of January 12, 2020, the Feast of the Lord’s Baptism. This feast marks the transition between our worship in the context of the Christmas mystery and our liturgical encounter of Jesus Christ in his public ministry.

The Gospel reading for this feast in Cycle A is Matthew’s account of the baptism of Jesus by John. Matthew has a unique interchange between John and Jesus wherein the former protests to baptizing Jesus, because, according to his thinking, it should be the other way around. But Jesus counters that John should comply because they must “fulfill all righteousness.” This phrase is somewhat obscure, but “righteousness” or “justice” is a primary theme of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). In fact, he exhorts his disciples to seek a righteousness that surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees. Righteousness in the context of Jesus’ baptism seems to imply that it is God’s will that Jesus be baptized by John.

This act inaugurates Jesus’ public ministry. The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus is a symbol of his anointed status. The characterization of Jesus as God’s “beloved son” echoes Isaiah 42:1, the servant of God with whom God is well-pleased. Although God’s divine son, he will exercise service by suffering and dying.

Reflection

Christ, light of light is born today, and since he is born to us, he is born in us as light and therefore we who believe are born today to new light. That is to say our souls are born to new life and new grace by receiving him who is the truth. Christ, invisible in his own nature has become visible in our nature. What else can this mean, except that first he has become visible as man; and secondly, he has become visible in his Church? He wills to be visible in us, to live in us, work in us, and save us through his secret action in our own hearts and the hearts of our brothers. So we must receive the light of the newborn savior by faith, in order to manifest it by our witness in common praise and by the works of our charity towards one another.

We are born in Christ today...Can it be surprising that we feel in our hearts the exultation of the divine light which streams into our spirit from the presence of the newborn Savior and transforms us from glory to glory in his image? This is the mystery of light which shines upon us today.

–Thomas Merton, Through the Year with Thomas Merton