

Living Advent and celebrating Christmas in a secularized, materialistic society

Nine suggestions on how to re-capture a proper celebration of the Advent-Christmas cycle of the Church's year.

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Detail from "Visitation" (1530) by Mariotto Albertinelli (1474–1515) [Wikipedia Commons]

Editor's note: *The following homily was preached by the Reverend Peter M. J. Stravinskias, Ph.D., S.T.D., on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 16, 2018, at the Church of the Holy Innocents, Manhattan.*

Today we find ourselves on the downside of the holy Season of Advent as the Church gives us the treat of Gaudete Sunday (named such from the first word of the Introit or Entrance Antiphon for the Mass of the day, in turn originating in St. Paul's exhortation to the Phillipians). The Church, "expert in humanity," at Pope Paul VI put it, gives her children a bit of a respite from the drabness of Advent by allowing us to feast our eyes on altar flowers and rose vestments and by giving our ears the pleasure of organ music.

This morning I would like to offer some reflections on how a Catholic can experience a spiritually fulfilling Advent and Christmas in the secularized and materialistic society we inhabit. Given the vantage point of the "downside," some of my advice will be retrospective (but useful for future Advents), while some will be prospective – looking toward the goal of a truly joyful Christian Christmas.

When the average Catholic is asked about the meaning of Advent, he generally says it is concerned with the coming of Jesus as the Babe of Bethlehem and is correct, but only one-third so. What do I mean? Traditionally, Advent directs our attention to *three* comings of Christ: The first half of the season looks toward His glorious Second Advent as Judge of the Universe, ushering in the Kingdom of His Father in all its fullness, while the second half is focused on His historical coming in the mystery of the Incarnation. There is another coming, however, which we expect – one which links the other two – and that is His coming among us through the Church's sacraments. In other words,

as we look back on His coming as Man and look forward to His coming as Judge, we experience His presence in veiled and sacramental ways. The sacraments prolong or continue His Incarnation, making available to us the benefits of that saving event and giving us the strength we need to look forward to His final appearance with joy and confidence, rather than fear and trembling.

With the total destruction of Advent and the near-total destruction of Christmas due to their commercialization over the past forty years or more, it might be helpful to offer some suggestions on how to re-capture a proper celebration of the Advent-Christmas cycle of the Church's year. Let us try to make the most of it.

Use Advent well and wisely. That means spiritual preparation. If you cannot attend daily Mass, at least meditate on the Scripture readings assigned to the Masses of the season. *My Advent Meditations: Helps to 'Wait in Joyful Hope'* would be of some value. Since the Church's "particular voice" for the season is Isaiah, try to read a chapter a day of that prophetic book. Make friends with the key figures of the season: John the Baptist and his parents for the first half; Our Lady and St. Joseph for the second half. Having lived the first Advent two millennia ago, they can provide us with valuable examples for us who seek to do so today.

No Christmas parties during Advent. The first battle I always had to wage in taking over a new parish was my adamant refusal to allow Christmas parties during Advent. Parish societies were uniformly annoyed by the ban and routinely complained that "everyone has their Christmas parties before Christmas; no one has them after!" To which, I routinely replied: "Then everyone will come to yours since there will be no competition!"

There is, however, a more fundamental rationale, namely, that there is still a quasi-penitential character to Advent as a time of preparation, first of all, for the Final Judgment and then for the coming of the Christ Child. Both demand self-examination, self-denial, and penance (hence, the need for a good pre-Christmas visit to the confessional). The Church signals this attitude with purple vestments and abstaining from the *Gloria* (except for feasts and solemnities). Furthermore, there has always been a Catholic intuition that feasting ought to be preceded by fasting; in fact, the feasting takes on its deepest meaning only when preceded by fasting. Any partying can rightly be done for: St. Nicholas Day, with its delightful traditions for children (December 6); the Immaculate Conception, our national patroness (December 8); Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of the Americas and so dear to our Mexican brothers and sisters in the Faith (December 12). Operating in this manner holds to a proper liturgical spirit, which demonstrates that we Catholics march to the beat of a different drummer.

Bring Advent into your home, the domestic church. For years now, the Advent wreath has become rather common in Christian homes. Make the construction of the wreath a genuine spiritual and family activity. Use it on the dinner table or the coffee table as a focal point for family prayer during the season. Introduce the Jesse Tree and keep an Advent calendar, especially if there are little children in the family, capitalizing on their keen sense of anticipation – a real virtue and

asset in one's ability to celebrate Advent properly.

Advocate for a return of Christ to Christmas in the public arena. That can entail many different and creative possibilities. During my years of work for the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, I was perhaps proudest of getting a nativity scene displayed in New York's Central Park for the first time in history. To paraphrase Frank Sinatra's song, "If it can happen there, it can happen anywhere!" If it's too late to lobby for such a display on public property this year, at least put one up on your own property and surely encourage your parish priest to have one in front of the church, if that has not heretofore been the case. Make sure that local retail stores are selling nativity scenes and religious Christmas cards; if they're not available, ask the manager why not. Return any "Happy Holiday" greetings with "Merry Christmas," following the lead of that very successful campaign of the Knights of Columbus in the 1950s to "put Christ back into Christmas."

Decorate at the right time. Don't follow the example of Madison Avenue with the absurdity of putting up Christmas decorations right after Halloween or just before Thanksgiving. Again, let's remember: They are *Christmas* decorations, not *Advent* decorations. And so, I always suggest doing both outdoor decorations and the Christmas tree the first night of the "O Antiphons." And what are they? Glad you asked!

Beginning on December 17 (tomorrow!), in proximate preparation for the Lord's historical coming at Bethlehem, the Church has recourse to wonderful biblical prophecies which describe the coming Messiah as Wisdom, Adonai, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Dawn from on High, King, and Emmanuel. These titles are incorporated into antiphons used to frame Mary's *Magnificat* during the praying of Vespers in the week leading up to Christmas. Everyone should recognize them as the titles for the verses of the old-time Advent favorite, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*.

And speaking of hymns, no Christmas carols until Christmas! We are most fortunate to have a panoply of beautiful Advent hymns in the English language. Did you ever notice how you can't find a radio station playing a Christmas carol after 5 p.m. on Christmas Day? No wonder – since they've been playing them since Thanksgiving.

Encourage and support religious entertainment for the Advent/Christmas cycle. If your community sponsors a performance of Handel's *Messiah*, make sure you're there for it; if it doesn't, ask why there isn't one. Approach your parish music director to put on a service of Lessons and Carols on the Fourth Sunday of Advent; it would even make a great ecumenical celebration, especially with Lutherans and Episcopalians.

Make the necessary Christmas preparations holy. We Catholics are not dour Puritans or Scrooges, who shun a genuine Christmas spirit; nor should we do "Christmas things" grudgingly. Shopping for gifts for family and friends should be done happily. Let's remember that we give gifts at Christmas in imitation of our Heavenly Father, Who began the whole process by giving us the inestimable gift of His Only Son.

While generosity is called for, extravagance is not. Give religious gifts like spiritual books, subscriptions to reliable Catholic periodicals, Christian art for home decoration, as well as spiritual bouquets. When family members ask you what you want, don't be afraid to ask for something that really matters to you, like suggesting that your fallen-away son or daughter make a long-overdue confession before Christmas and get back on track with their life in Christ's Church. When writing Christmas cards (or email versions of them), make a point of praying for the people to whom you are writing.

And remember the poor, not with perfunctory or token gifts, but gifts imbued with a true sacrificial dimension. So much of popular Christmas lore brings to mind the poverty of the Christ-Child, born in a stable. A lovely French carol, *Jésus-Christ s'habille en pauvres* (Jesus Christ comes in the guise of the poor), recounts how a poor family share their humble Christmas dinner with someone who is even poorer than they, finally to discover that their Guest was none other than the Lord Himself (the haunting melody of that carol comes into English hymnody as *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence*).

Make the Sacred Liturgy the high point of your Christmas celebration. All too often of late, even practicing Catholics have developed the unseemly habit of "squeezing" Holy Mass into a convenient slot amid the other observances of the day. How many priests bemoan the fact that the vigil Masses of Christmas at four and five in the afternoon are jammed, while the Midnight Mass (if one is even scheduled) and the morning Masses are depressingly empty! Of course, this is a pastoral challenge for parish priests, who ought not conform to demands for Masses of convenience, which have the effect of voiding the feast of its centrality and significance. Only when Holy Mass is honored, do the other aspects of the day have any real meaning; indeed, then the opening of presents, the visiting of friends, the Christmas banquet all become "sacraments" of *the* Sacrament. Nor should we forget that for us Catholics, Christmas happens every day as the great mystery of the Incarnation is re-presented as Emmanuel once more "pitches His tent among us."

Keep Christmas alive for the duration of the liturgical season. The Christmas season ends with the feast of the Lord's Baptism (this year, January 13). So keep up the tree and outdoor decorations until then; don't stop singing those Christmas carols until then; and have all the Christmas parties you want then (be sure to have a really big splash for the Solemnity of the Epiphany on January 6). Undoubtedly, not a few friends or neighbors will ask you why you're behaving in that way, which will give you an opportunity to catechize or evangelize on the meaning of the feast.

Some of you are probably asking yourselves why I would devote so much energy to this discussion. Well, let me confess that I really love Advent and Christmas. And, oh yes, transparency and full disclosure require me to admit that Christmas is my birthday, so there's a bit of an ulterior motive. A much more pressing reason exists, though, and it is this: Trying to return our society to a Christian appreciation of Christmas may seem like trying to turn around a Mack truck on a single-lane highway, but it is do-able and worth trying to do because it can be the first sally in the much-needed effort to return our nation to its religious and Christian roots. Such an effort would gladden the Heart of the Christ-Child.

With St. Paul, then, I want to urge you once more: *Gaudete in Domino semper; iterum dico, gaudete!* (Rejoice in the Lord always; I say it again, rejoice!).

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