

How to Celebrate Advent

THE “O” ANTIPHONS

From December 17 to 23, the “O Antiphons” are chanted during Vespers (evening prayer) in the Liturgy of the Hours. The titles of Jesus used in the antiphons are all titles of the Messiah, rooted in the prophecies of Isaiah. Easily incorporated into individual or family prayer, they are the most important of the Church’s unique prayers during these days.



December 17: *O Sapientia (O Wisdom)*

December 18: *O Adonai (O Adonai)*

December 19: *O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse)*

December 20: *O Clavis David (O Key of David)*

December 21: *O Oriens (O Morning Star)*

December 22: *O Rex Gentium (O King of the Nations)*

December 23: *O Emmanuel (O Emmanuel)*

NINE DAYS

The Latin American tradition of *Las Posadas* dramatizes the hope and expectation of Advent. Over the course of the nine nights from December 16 to 24, a man and a woman representing Joseph and Mary travel to neighborhood homes, bringing to life the search for a place for Mary to give birth (*posadas* means “inn”). They, and the crowd following them, sing hymns and carry candles. It is only the third house of the evening that finally lets them in. At that point, a celebration, often including praying the rosary, begins.

In the Philippines, *Simbang Gabi* entails nine very-early-morning Masses celebrated on those days, followed by community breakfast feasts. And, in Germany and some eastern European countries, it has been traditional to mark each night of those nine days with a procession carrying an image of either Mary or Joseph from house to house.



The Fourth Week

As Advent draws to a close, we focus more on the Nativity. The gospel readings for this Sunday may be the Annunciation, the Visitation, or Mary’s *Magnificat*, depending on the year.

The purpose of preparation is to help us experience an event more meaningfully. As Advent draws to a close, we discover how true this is. We have journeyed with the People of Israel in their hope for a Messiah. We have searched our own hearts, laying out our own yearning before the Lord, and, like Mary, looked with hope to God’s promise to save us and make us whole. And now, the time is near. A Child is born!

*Prayer Starter for Week 4:
Lord, I wait for You in trust and hope.*

SYMBOLS OF HOPE

Often, unfortunately, the Advent journey to hope can be overshadowed by repeated journeys to the mall! So, well before Advent begins, it might do us good to sit down and answer the question of who — or what — really controls our celebration of this season.

Pressure to “celebrate” Christmas according to the norms of the secular culture can be enormous. Deciding how much to spend and when to decorate, going to school and church programs, cooking, cleaning, and gift-buying all seem to push more important things into the background.

But however we deal with this pressure, it’s important to do whatever we can to live out Advent as fully as we can; Christmas is all but empty if we have not really let our hearts be formed by the profound realities of waiting, expectation, repentance, and hope.

This is easily done by taking a little time each day to pray with the Church, include whatever concrete remembrance is meaningful to us and our families, and imbue even our busy-ness with a sense of gratitude and love — the love of the Child waiting for us in the crib at Bethlehem.

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Inventory No. P426

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ISBN-13: 978-1-59276-327-6



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“Come, Lord Jesus!”

— Rev. 22:20

Advent is the season in which we prepare for the great celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas. During these four weeks, we're invited to contemplate the richness of God's gift to us in Christ, as we, along with the entire Church:

Wait. We remember humanity waiting for the coming of the Savior. We wait and pray for the Second Coming of Jesus as our Lord and Judge.

Convert. We examine our lives and listen to the call of John the Baptist, to make the ways of our hearts ready for forgiveness and love.

Hope. We remember how God has fulfilled his promises in the grace and salvation through Jesus, and we pray and celebrate in hope for ourselves and for all God has made.

MARKING TIME

We mark the time leading up to Christmas in various ways. Three of the most popular are the Advent wreath, the Advent calendar, and the Jesse Tree.

The Advent wreath has its origins in Germany in the sixteenth century. The wreath — a circle of evergreen symbolizing God's eternal love — holds four candles, three violet and one pink. Violet is the traditional penitential color of Advent, and the pink candle symbolizing joy is lit on *Gaudete* (Joyful) Sunday, the third Sunday of the season.

As we light the four candles one by one, we're reminded of how God's light has gradually illumined the world's darkness through history, culminating in Jesus, the Light of the World and the Sun of Justice.

The Advent calendar often begins on December 1, and there's a door for each day, behind which is hidden a picture or Scripture verse. Children particularly enjoy Advent calendars.



The Jesse Tree is a way of remembering the Jewish roots of the Messiah. Jesse was the father of David, from whose house the Messiah would come. A Jesse Tree — made of paper, a real branch, or some other material — is decorated day by day with symbols of God's saving activity: an ark, stone tablets, a dove, and many others.

The First Week

One of the best and the simplest ways to tune our spiritual lives to Advent is reading and praying with the Scripture readings for Sunday and daily Mass.

The readings for the First Sunday of Advent emphasize waiting. A world lost in sin and darkness waits, hopes, and yearns. We trust in God, for he has promised light — but when will it come? How?

Every one of us has some part of our lives that yearns for light, that is in deep need of reconciliation, or that feels lost. A glance at newspaper headlines tells us how great is the need of this broken world. *Come, Lord Jesus!* will probably be an easy prayer for this week.



*Prayer Starter for Week 1:
In hope, I wait for the fullness of
Your presence, Lord. Come, Lord Jesus!*

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

On December 8, we celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception: God prepared Mary to be the mother of Jesus by preserving her from original sin. This is a day to celebrate God's great love for Mary, and for all of us, in his power to save us from sin. Many prepare for this feast by praying a novena (nine days of special prayers) beginning on November 30.

The Second Week

The readings for the Second Sunday of Advent focus on John the Baptist. He stands in the desert, roughly clothed, ascetic, stark, preaching a message of power. The One is coming, he says, Repent!

John the Baptist is not the only saint we celebrate during Advent. The calendar is full of holy men and women who, like John, call us to conversion and hope through the most powerful witness of all: their lives.

St. Nicholas, December 6

St. Nicholas was the great fourth-century bishop of Myra, in what is now Turkey. His love for the poor, especially children, has linked him in tradition with gift-giving. Children traditionally receive gifts — chocolate coins, in particular — in their shoes from St. Nicholas. Reading the story of St. Nicholas and celebrating his love for Christ through service to the poor is a good antidote for the frantic consumerism of secular Christmas preparations.

St. Juan Diego, December 9

Our Lady of Guadalupe, December 12

Juan Diego remained firm in his account of the Blessed Virgin Mary's appearance to him, even in the face of doubt from his bishop. We celebrate Mary's appearance as Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of the Americas and of the unborn, on December 12.



St. Lucy, December 13

St. Lucy was a young woman martyred by the Romans in the early fourth century. A Scandinavian custom celebrates the light of her Christian witness in the tradition of a young woman of the house wearing a wreath with lit candles upon her head.

*Prayer Starter for Week 2:
Lord Jesus, I hear the call of John the Baptist.
I come to You in sorrow for my sins, open to Your grace.*

The Third Week

Rejoice!

The third week of Advent begins with *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete*, meaning "rejoice," is the first word of the opening antiphon for the Mass on this day: *Gaudete in Domino semper* (Rejoice in the Lord always). The joy of *Gaudete* Sunday shows in the use of rose as the liturgical color — for example, on the Advent wreath and the priest's vestments.

The gospel readings for this Sunday reveal to us the reason for our joy: the identity of Jesus. He is the Word made flesh, the Christ, the Son of the living God.



*Prayer Starter for Week 3:
Lord, I rejoice at the Good News of
Your coming. Make my heart ready.*

PREPARING THE WAY BY CONFESSING OUR SINS

Advent resounds with the theme of reconciliation and the call to repentance. That call is not about dwelling on our sins and being even more burdened by them, but the opposite: bringing them to God in sorrow and hope for forgiveness.

Most parishes have Advent reconciliation services and other opportunities for individual confession during the week. It is a fitting time to approach Jesus in this sacrament — and to be able to approach him in the Eucharist on Christmas with a renewed heart.

COUNTING THE DAYS

The days before Advent are marked by a heightened sense of prayer. Christmas Novenas, ancient ways of preparation, are prayed throughout the Catholic world, sometimes taking on creative and community-wide dimensions.

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