

DISCOVER

the Joy of Christ



How Do You Prepare Your Heart for Christmas?

Taking time during Advent to prepare ourselves spiritually can result in a truly meaningful Christmas Day and Christmas Season - the celebration of the birth of the most important Person in all of history: Jesus Christ. What are the traditional customs of our Catholic Faith that provide us with important ways to prepare our hearts to welcome the Christ Child?

Advent, which means *coming*, is the four weeks leading up to Christmas. This time is to be different than our ordinary routine. Yet it is not meant to be a time of celebration, as that really begins on Christmas Eve. The time of Advent is to be spent preparing our hearts spiritually for the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who came to save us from sin and eternal death. However, this focus of spiritual preparation and joyful anticipation can be difficult to maintain in the hectic hustle and bustle of the materialistic side of this sacred season.

An important point for Advent is to keep everything simple. That is, do not try to do too much shopping or baking, but take time for quiet prayer and for simply being with family members. Most of us don't need more gifts, but rather more time with each other. It is an opportunity to gather the family and prepare together by remembering the darkness that pervaded the time of the people of God as they awaited the birth of the Savior.

The Advent wreath, with its rich symbolism, helps us to stay focused on this time of preparation. A wreath can be assembled by simply using evergreen limbs from a tree in the yard and four candles. The wreath made of evergreens - which retain their green, vibrant life throughout the year - signifies continuous life. The circle of the wreath, which has no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul, and the everlasting life found in Christ Who was victorious over sin and death through His own passion, death, and Resurrection.

The four candles represent the four weeks of Advent. A tradition is that each week represents one thousand years, the 4,000 years from Adam and Eve until the Birth of the Savior. The light of the candles shines in the darkness, which is most evident during this time of the year which is darker due to shorter daylight hours. We use candles in the Advent wreath and put lights on a Christmas tree and possibly on and around our homes, signifying the coming of Christ Who is the Light of the world. After all, Christ is "the Light that came into the world" to dispel the darkness of sin and to radiate the truth and love of God (See John 3:19-21).

The Advent wreath contains three purple candles and one rose candle. The purple candles in particular symbolize the prayer,

penance, and preparatory sacrifices and goods works undertaken at this time. The rose candle is lit on the third Sunday, the day of rejoicing, because the faithful have arrived at the midpoint of Advent, when their preparation is now half over and they are close to Christmas. The progressive lighting of the candles symbolizes the expectation and hope surrounding our Lord's first coming into the world and the anticipation of His second coming to judge the living and the dead. In family practice, the Advent wreath is most appropriately lit at dinner time after the blessing of the food.

It is also important to set aside specific times of quiet prayer during Advent. It can be especially fruitful to read beforehand the Bible passages for the upcoming Sunday Mass, which focus on the coming of Christ, pondering the words and allowing the Holy Spirit to make a connection between the reading and your own life.

The words of Advent hymns provide the story of the first Christmas and stir our hearts with their beautiful melodies. Some of the best-known Advent hymns are O Come, O Come Emmanuel; O Come, Divine Messiah; On Jordan's Bank; Lo, How a Rose Ere Blooming and Creator of the Stars of Night. The words can be downloaded from the internet and used for a time of peaceful meditation.

Confession

Receiving the Sacrament of Confession during Advent frees us from the effects of sin, such as selfishness, anger, lack of forgiveness, guilt, bitterness. As our hearts are purified, there is more room for Christ to bring us His joy.

Acts of Charity also need to part of our preparations for Christmas. We can give to our favorite charity; pray for the persecuted Christians in the Middle East and even donate so that they will have housing in time for winter; visit an elderly neighbor or someone in assisted living; send a Christmas card to a friend or neighbor who is sick; give extra time and show kindness to the person that we find hardest to love; donate unused clothing and toys and above all spend more time with family.

The preparation of our heart for Christmas will make the coming of Emmanuel - God with us - mean so much more. Receiving the Christ Child in Holy Communion will be the highlight of our Christmas Day.

