



# COUNCIL FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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# IDEAS FOR ADVENT

Most of us have *too* much help getting ready for Christmas: stores and advertisements remind us to give gifts and send Christmas cards and to do all this in advance ("Only ..... shopping days until Christmas!" sound familiar?) Taking children to see Santa Claus (usually in the busiest department of stores otherwise overcrowded) has to be scheduled amid everything else. Yet few of us would know it was Christmas without *some* of this activity. Does this mean we simply have to brace ourselves again this year for the hectic preparations that will once again squeeze out of view our vision of Christmas as a season of joy, love, and brotherhood?

We would like to offer some suggestions that families (or your church school class) might like to consider as Christmas approaches this year: (Note: families with very young children might want to shorten the periods of some of the following activities since young children may tire of them more quickly).

First, the Church, too, realizes that we need time to get ready to celebrate, and so it has set aside a period of about 50 days or six weeks for us to do just that. This period is called ADVENT: our wait for the Coming of Jesus Christ into the world. We wait just as did the men and women of Old Testament times for God's gift of His Son. It is a good time to remind ourselves of *why* Jesus Christ has come: of God's love for us, a love which is expressed in God's desire that we should know Him and that we should be united to Him through a life of love, peace, joy, kindness, self-control, patience, faithfulness, goodness, and gentleness. Our immediate reaction to this should be the awareness of the simple fact that we need to be *re*-united to God because of the many ways through which our life -- our actions, words, and thoughts have separated us from God. Advent then is a time of *spiritual* preparation too.

One way of emphasizing the meaning of Christmas and the ideas to be remembered through the preparation period is by making an advent wreath. The advent wreath symbolically represents religious ideas and explaining these ideas as the wreath is being made focuses the family's attention on the religious meaning of the Feast. The wreath also serves as a means of marking the time of the Feast. The family (or the church school class) can begin

with a large styrofoam circle from the 5 & 10 store. Evergreens are inserted into the styrofoam, along with six candles (purple, or white with a purple ribbon), one for one for each of the weeks of Advent. A seventh candle (pink, or white with a pink ribbon) can be placed in the very center for the Feast (January 6) itself, to be lit on the eve of the Feast (January 5).

As the wreath is being put together, discuss the significance of each part. The circle of the wreath symbolizes eternity and God because both are endless. The evergreens symbolize eternal life. It is through Jesus Christ that we are given the gifts of eternal life, and that is why we celebrate his birth and are so happy at this time of year. The candles also mean something special. Candles give us light. Jesus is like a light shining in the darkness, leading us to a better way of living and to eternal life after death. Six of the candles are purple because purple is the color of repentance, for being sorry for the things we've done wrong. We have to look at our lives, what we are doing wrong, and how we can improve. Being sorry for what we've done wrong and trying to do better make our hearts and spirits ready to receive the gifts of Jesus. One candle is pink because that's the color for joy and hope. We feel joy as Christmas comes nearer because we think of Jesus bringing us hope for eternal life.

When the wreath is finished, the parents can also explain about the lighting of the candles. One candle should be lit each week. One candle should be lit at the beginning of the period, November 25, and one new one each Sunday. The children should be allowed to light the candles each week, beginning with the youngest child. The family should pray together before the candles are lit, perhaps with the candle-lighter for the week adding a special, spontaneous prayer.

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**CAUTION:** Make a firm rule at the beginning that children are *not* to light the candles unless an adult is present. If evergreens are used, take care that the candles do not burn too close to them. Finally, make certain that the full seven-week order of candle lighters is agreed upon *in advance*; this avoids last-minute "discussions" about whose turn it is or should be.

The first three Sundays in the advent period can be devoted to focusing on the meaning of gift giving. Many of us often think of gifts in terms of things rather than actions. On the first Sunday, the parents might get out the family's manger set and tell the beginning of the Nativity story, using pieces from the set. The manger can be set in one part of the living room, which we will call Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph can be set at a distance from the manger, journeying towards Bethlehem; the figures can be moved a little closer to Bethlehem each day until Christmas Eve; the stories of the Annunciation and the journey of Mary and Joseph told. The parents can ask what sort of gifts we can give God in return for the gifts He has given us. When the discussion turns to "doing" things for God, parents can suggest that each member of the family give a special gift to God during the pre-Christmas period. Each member of the family, parents included, should decide on a gift of "doing" that will be done *every day* during the pre-Christmas period. It might be a chore that helps mom or dad around the home or it might be a personal trait that needs work -- like not fighting with a brother or sister or perhaps working up to potential in school. Each person should then find a "gift" box, and parents should explain that each member of the family will get a token put *into his or her box providing that the agreed-upon gift is done that day* (the token can be a bean or some kind of marker; what it is is less important than what it signifies). On Christmas Eve the boxes, hopefully filled with tokens, will be wrapped and placed under the tree as special gifts to God.

The second-Sunday exploration of gift giving might emphasize the idea of gift giving as love through sharing with people outside the family. The suggestion might be made that each member of the family share with the less fortunate members of the community. Children can go through their toys and games, selecting those that they wish to give to a home for children in the area. Teenagers and parents can go through their possessions for books, clothing, etc. to give to others. The week that follows this Sunday could be designated "Fix-Up Week", with children (with some help) repairing and repainting their toys and teenagers and parents mending and/or washing their gift clothing before everything is boxed and made ready to be given away.

The third Sunday, still emphasizing the idea of gift giving, might be grab bag day. For this grab bag, the name of each member of the family is placed in a box, and it is explained that the gift to be given to the person whose name is drawn is doing something special

for that person each day during the pre-Christmas period. However, family members may *not* tell whose names they have drawn. On Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, each person reveals the name of the person he or she drew by giving that person a small gift.

The fourth Sunday can be Christmas-card-making day. Parents can suggest that the religious meaning of Christmas be kept in mind during the card making with religious subjects used for decoration and religious greetings used inside. Using original drawings or pasting pictures from other sources, children can make their own Christmas cards to send to family members and friends. Inside the children can write or if too young dictate their own special and personal greetings to family and friends.

The fifth Sunday can begin Christmas-decoration-making week. One project that the entire family can work on together is a religious banner, perhaps of the Nativity scene. Other Christmas decorations can be made for the house or the family Christmas tree.

The sixth Sunday can be the beginning of a house-cleaning week. Certainly mothers who are busy with preparing holiday foods will need extra help this week at home with cleaning. But the real "house" to be given a final cleaning is **OURSELVES**: this final week of preparation should be preparation for confession and receiving Holy Communion. With the Armenian calendar which celebrates Our Lord's Birth and Baptism on January 6th, the New Year (January 1st) falls during this last week of Advent. The New Year is a time for new resolutions. These resolutions should coincide with our own determination to leave behind those habits which are obstacle to love. Hence, as we begin to make a new beginning with a New Year, we are also preparing to renew our life in Christ.

It is now up to you ..... suggestions are fine, but you will have to decide with your family (or teachers, with your class) what will make meaningful your Advent celebration. You may not wish to try all of these projects, or you may wish to re-arrange the schedule. The important thing is that you *do* something and that you *decide* to do it **NOW** *before* you are lost in the commotion of what we all dread! Advent is a time of repentance, but is also a time of celebration: we know that the God that calls us to repentance has promised to those who return to Him His Love and His Kingdom. None of us refuse to open a present with our name on it, waiting under the Christmas tree for us on Christmas morning. Let us not refuse *the* Gift promised and given to those who identify themselves by His name.



Adapted from an article by Miss Donna Bobin  
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