



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

*A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania*

## **ADVENT and CHRISTMASTIME – Liturgical Seasons**

Your home is the school of holiness for your children. You are the primary educator, and the Gospel is the curriculum. If a report card was issued on the basis of how faithfully you transmit a sense of the sacred, knowledge of God, and formation in faith and morals that go beyond current societal trends, what grade would be awarded? Notice, please, that the stated criteria is based on how **faithfully** you cultivate spiritual heritage; not how **effectively**. That is because God is concerned with your intention, effort, and motivation. You cannot control results. Take comfort in that and in the advice of Mother Teresa, “You are called to be faithful; you are not called to be successful.” You are the first herald of the Gospel to your children, and your challenge is to bring them to Jesus in the midst of a de-Christianized culture. This newsletter explores possibilities for evangelizing your family within the context of the liturgical season of Advent and Christmastime.

### **Advent and Christmastime**

The seasons of the liturgical year are like a miniseries of salvation history. The story opens on the first Sunday of Advent and it concludes on the feast of Christ the King. The six-episode story makes present the ancient longing for the Messiah (**Advent**); the fulfillment of God’s promise to send a savior (**Christmas**); the public life and ministry of Jesus (**Ordinary Time I**) that led to his passion and death (**Lent**); the resurrection and ascension of Jesus (**Easter**); and the fulfilled promise of the Father and Son to send the Holy Spirit to guide us until the end of the world when Christ will come again in glory (**Pentecost/Ordinary Time II**).

The name of the first season, Advent, emerged from the Medieval Latin *adventus*, meaning arrival. During this sacred season of four weeks, Christians renew their personal longing for the arrival of Emmanuel, God is with us, and they apply to their hearts the cry of the Baptist, “Prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight a highway for our God!” (Mk. 1:1-8). Expectation, preparation, and anticipation characterize the scriptures of the season. A mounting sense of joy is ritualized on the third Sunday, Gaudete Sunday (Rejoice Sunday), when the violet-blues of the season are replaced with pink, and the Entrance Antiphon for Mass proclaims:

“Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice! The Lord is near” (Phil. 4:4,5). A seven-day countdown for Christmas begins at the evening vespers prayer of December 17 when the first of the “**O Antiphons**” (ancient titles for the Savior) is prayed. Each day’s antiphon increases the air of expectation: O Wisdom, O Adonai, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, O Radiant Dawn, O King of all Nations, and finally, O Emmanuel. Christmas celebrates that “in the fullness of time God sent His Son . . . so that we might receive adoption” (Gal. 4:4). The divine promise was fulfilled and the name of the promise was Jesus, *God saves* (Mt.1:21). Jesus is the reason for the seasons of Advent and Christmastime; not commercialism, partying, or social overload! You may be powerless to reform the culture in which you live, but you can: (1) reserve Advent space and time within your heart and home; (2) plan ways to appreciate “The Promise” for the 12 days of Christmas, Christmas Eve to Epiphany; and (3) plan special family observances for Holy Family Sunday, solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (Jan. 1), Epiphany, and the Baptism of the Lord.

Advent and Christmastime are seasons of **Hebrew scripture prophecies** (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah), **New Testament prophets** (Jesus, John the Baptist), **valiant women** (Mary, Elizabeth), **righteous dreamers** (Joseph), **heavenly messengers** (Gabriel,

Bethlehem angels), **reflective visionaries** (Magi from the east), **intrigue** (Herod), and **martyrdom** (the Holy Innocents). We are invited to enter into this sacred history, to relive sights and sounds and wonders that occurred two millennia ago, and to respond to them in the present. Create ways to let the richness of these seasons have a shaping influence in the soulful formation of your family. Resources are plentiful at religious goods stores and Internet sites like [www.creativecommunications.com](http://www.creativecommunications.com) or [www.domestic-church.com](http://www.domestic-church.com). The remainder of this newsletter suggests practices that contribute to spiritual formation by raising awareness of God.

**Environment – Use the surroundings or conditions of daily living to influence a sense of the sacred.**

- Meal Table Centerpiece—Advent wreath with an empty crib/manger in the center. On Christmas put the infant figurine in the crib and replace the purple/pink candles with white.
- Family Mirror Message—“Jesus is the reason for the season.”
- Bedtime Readiness—15 minutes prior to lights out, dim lights and play soothing Advent/Christmas music.
- Advent Table Tents—Purchase one or make your own.
- “O Antiphon” panels on a mini-easel.

**Family Customs – Establish habitual practices to influence a sense of the sacred.**

- Advent Chain—As a family cut out paper strips which can be linked to form a chain, one for each day of Advent. On each one, write a practice, sacrifice, or prayer observance. All family members live the link for a day, and then it is connected with the previous link.
- Advent Calendar—a family calendar or age-appropriate individual calendars.
- Jesse Tree—Each day read about a biblical character from Adam and Eve to Joseph and Mary. Build the family tree of Jesus.
- Build a spiritual crib—List the items, facilities, etc. that would be needed for a newborn baby today. Estimate the cost of such things. Then assign a “spiritual pricetag” to each item, i.e., Weekday Mass = hospital costs; doing another’s chore = one outfit; a decade of the rosary = 10 feedings. Use Advent days to do this spiritual shopping.
- Blessing of the Christmas Creche.

**Rituals – Develop spiritual practices or behaviors that are repeated so regularly that they become second-nature and expected.**

- Advent table blessing and Advent wreath prayer
- St. Nicholas Day, Dec. 6—Pick a family prayer partner for whom you pray and do kind acts.
- Court of the Infant King—Determine an annual time to “build” the family Christmas Creche. Each person picks a figurine, explains to the family how he/she can imitate a quality of the person during the year, and places the figure into the scene during a reading of the Gospel story.
- Review the Faith—The Catholic Information Network ([www.cin.org](http://www.cin.org)) reports: “ ‘The Twelve Days of Christmas’ was written in England as one of the ‘catechism songs’ to help young Catholics learn the tenets of their faith.” Combine decoration with a discussion that elaborates on the verses. For instance, “two turtle doves” represents the Old and New Testaments. Use a Bible to read the names of the different books in each of the Testaments. Teach, review, elaborate upon, or illustrate the following beliefs:

A partridge in a pear tree = Jesus Christ  
2 turtle doves = Old and New Testaments  
3 French hens = theological virtues: faith, hope, charity  
4 calling birds = four Gospels/Evangelists  
5 golden rings = first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch)  
6 geese a-laying = six days of creation  
7 swans a-swimming = seven gifts of the Holy Spirit; the seven Sacraments  
8 maids a-milking = eight beatitudes  
9 ladies dancing = nine fruits of the Holy Spirit (later theology named 12 fruits)  
10 lords a-leaping = Ten Commandments  
11 pipers piping = eleven faithful apostles  
12 drummers drumming = twelve points of doctrine in the Apostles’ Creed

- Celebrate Epiphany with a family king. Have the children repeat from memory the twelve beliefs that were referenced in the song. Award one point for each correct piece of information that your children recall. Highest scorer becomes king and can decide how the family will celebrate Epiphany, i.e., a pizza supper, family video, hike, or favorite dessert.

**Family Eucharist and Sacraments – Create family spiritual practices and special occasions for worship that become annual family events.**

- Participate in the Parish communal prayer service or attend Reconciliation as a family, then go out for ice cream.
- Celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception, whether or not it is obligatory. Pray the litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary sometime that day.
- Make Gaudete (Pink) Sunday a special family memory.

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