



# Advent & 12 Days of Christmas

Making the Most of the Season

*by Marcellino D'Ambrosio ("Dr. Italy")*

# A WAKE-UP CALL

*Have you ever had one of those days when you just wish God would show up, snap his fingers and work miracles? The people of Israel had about 500 years' worth of days like that, groaning under the oppression of one tyrant after another. The book of Isaiah gives voice to these sentiments: "O that you would rip open the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you!" (Is 63:19).*

*The problem is that he answered their prayer. He showed up, in person, working miracles beyond anyone's wildest expectations. But they failed to recognize him. In fact, they crucified him.*

*How could this have happened? The analysis of Jesus is that they were asleep on the job (Mark 13:33-37). Sure, they busied themselves with a variety of activities, including pious practices. But constant movement can lull you to sleep, like a baby on a long car ride. Asleep means unconscious. Unaware. Lethargic. "There is none who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to cling to you" (Is. 64:50).*

*Lip service is not enough. Making God a manageable part of one's life is not enough. He demands to be worshiped, which is to say that He must take center stage, be at the top of the priority list. We are not just to believe He exists, but to avidly pursue Him.*

# Advent

# ADVENT MEANS COMING

*He promises to come again. But this time it won't be in a hidden way. He won't be wearing swaddling clothes, but judge's robes. Advent first and foremost is a time to remember that he's coming back and that we must be better prepared for his second coming than the Israelites were for his first.*

*So what has our society done with Advent? It has turned it into the shopping days before Christmas. As if we weren't already distracted enough from the things of God, now it's time to totally drown out the still, small, voice with the "fa-la-la-la-la" of Christmas carols. Between the frenzy at the mall and the party at the office, it is easy to get anesthetized, numbed to the true reason for the season.*

# BUSY–NESS

*Have you heard the joke about the young priest who rushes into the pastor's office and says "The Lord has been spotted walking up the aisle of the church. What do we do?" The pastor looks up with alarm and says: "For God's sake, Father, look busy! Look busy!"*

*Jesus in Mark's gospel (13:33-37) makes it clear that it won't be a pretty sight if he shows up only to find us spiritually snoozing. The proper approach to Advent is not a question, though, of just being busy, but being busy with the right things, busy pursuing God and doing his will.*

# PRACTICAL TIPS

## *Before or at the start of Advent*

**1** ***Planning Christmas Parties*** - Christmas parties at work, school, neighborhood and home are certainly a good thing. The problem is that they usually don't occur during the twelve days of Christmas (Dec 25-Jan 5) or Epiphany (traditionally January 6) but during Advent. The Christian approach is always first the fast, then the feast. The world's approach is first the feast, then the hangover. We shouldn't be grinchies or Puritans and refuse to attend Christmas parties before Dec 25. But if we have a say in planning a Christmas party for family, neighbors, Catholic school or parish, why not try to make it a Three Kings party and celebrate Epiphany? Or a Twelve days of Christmas party after the 25th?

**2** ***Advent Angel*** – you may be familiar with the Advent Angel tradition whereby everyone in a class, or family, or small discipleship group picks a name from a hat and intercedes for the person picked, doing acts of kindness and service in hidden ways. It is an awesome way for both children and adults to prepare the way of the Lord during Advent. Here's a little twist from our family tradition – set up a manger scene at the beginning of Advent, minus the baby Jesus. Buy a bag of Decorative Nativity Straw (at least one such, FloraCraft, can be easily bought online) and put it in bowl beside the manger. Each time an Advent angel prays a prayer or does a good deed for their special intention, he or she may put a piece of straw in the manger scene. This is highly motivating for kids but even fun for adults!

# PRACTICAL TIPS

## *Before or at the start of Advent*

- 3 **Jesse Tree** – The ancient custom of the Jesse tree helps us retrace the people and moments in salvation history leading up to the first coming of Christ. Before Advent, set up a tree or branches with or without leaves. For the ornaments, you can either buy a Jesse Tree kit or just craft them yourself. Traditionally, there is one ornament for each day of Advent. You start at the base of the tree with Adam and Eve. At the top of the tree at the very end of the season comes a crib representing the baby Jesus. There's a brief scripture reading for every symbol. If you read these readings and contemplate them and the symbols to which they are linked, by December 25th you and your family, class or small group will have a much deeper understanding of the history of salvation and the meaning of Christmas! For a list of ornaments and readings, see **Jesse Tree Advent Tradition**
- 4 **Advent Wreath** – so often, several days after Advent has started, we are still scrambling to find the Advent wreath we packed away last January. And then we realize that we don't have fresh Advent candles! Let's be ready this time to hit the ground running on the first Sunday of Advent. But this year, let's also discover and use in our home or school the official liturgical blessing of an Advent wreath which can be led by a layperson. You can find this brief service in the Shorter Book of Blessings (if you don't have one, get one) or online at **Blessing of the Advent Wreath**

# PRACTICAL TIPS

## *Before or at the start of Advent*

- 5 **Prayer Resources** – procure resources before the start of the season that will enrich your experience of Advent. First and foremost, put yourself in a position to feast on the great sources provided by the liturgy. If you have a smartphone, be sure you've installed an app which provides you with the Mass readings of the day, but also the Liturgy of the Hours, particularly the Office of Readings which is especially rich during Advent. Several apps which qualify are iBreviary, Laudate, and Universalis. If you don't use a smartphone, these apps have websites that contain the same texts. If you prefer paper, get a **Daily Roman Missal** or the **Magnificat** for the daily Mass readings. The only way to get the Office of Readings in book form is to buy the four-volume set of the **Liturgy of the Hours** (Catholic Book Publishing Co). Consider it a lifetime investment in your spiritual life.
- 6 **Music** – some radio stations begin playing Christmas music the day after Thanksgiving. Switch the station! And if you select your own recorded music via iTunes, Spotify or another service, avoid Christmas playlists.

# WHAT TO DO DURING ADVENT

**Music** – Try putting Christmas music on hold until at least the third if not fourth Sunday of Advent. The first few weeks of Advent are really more about longing for Christ's second coming than dwelling on his first coming. Gregorian chant is awesome Advent music. So is Handel's *Messiah*, which was specifically written as an Oratorio to be performed during Advent. Want a special Advent treat? Plan to go with friends or family to a local live performance of Handel's *Messiah*. And before you leave, look up the lyrics, which are all Scripture quotes, and print out a copy for each of the concert-goers. Make of it not just an aesthetic experience of great music, but a contemplative experience of the mystery of Advent.

**Fasting** – In our society, it is very difficult to fast from all treats during Advent, since anticipatory Christmas goodies are served everywhere you go. Perhaps the most effective fasting during this season would be to fast from noise, franticness and media. Try to cut back on news, sports, entertainment, politics, frantic errands, and other avoidable distractions, to open up some more space for prayer.

**Manger** – if you take advantage of the Advent angel suggestion above, you'll need to set up the manger before the first Sunday of Advent. In this case, bless it with the Manger Scene Blessing found in the Book of Blessings reproduced online at [\*\*Blessing of the Christmas Manger or Nativity Scene\*\*](#)



# WHAT TO DO DURING ADVENT

***Christmas Tree*** – in more traditional Catholic society, the Christmas tree was often not set up and decorated until Christmas Eve. Consider this, especially if you have a Jesse Tree, which you would replace with the Christmas tree. If not, at least try to delay the setting up of the tree until the third or fourth week of Advent. And perhaps you could at least consider not lighting the lights until Christmas Eve. Whenever you do set it up and decorate it, gather the family or class and use the Blessing of the Christmas Tree service found in the *Book of Blessings* online at [Blessing a Christmas Tree](#)

***Advent is a season of Hope*** – as Israel longed for the coming of the Messiah, so we joyfully anticipate and yearn for his Second Coming. Hope, however, is the most neglected of the theological virtues. Dedicate your Advent to strengthening the virtue of hope. On the first day of Advent, read the two pages dedicated to this virtue in the *Catechism* (CCC 1817-1821). Then read two paragraphs per day for the rest of the season from Pope Emeritus Benedict's Encyclical on Hope, *Spe Salvi*. You can buy a paper copy or read it free online on the Vatican website: [Spe Salvi](#)

# WHAT TO DO DURING ADVENT

**Rosary** – essentially, the rosary is entering into our mother's prayer. Mary "pondered all these things in her heart." During Advent, use the book called the *Scriptural Rosary* which makes meditation easier by inserting a short scripture verse between each Hail Mary. You can purchase a copy in your local Catholic bookstore or online [here](#). The first three weeks of Advent focus on the second coming, heavenly glory, and the preparation for the coming of the kingdom through the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. It's a good time to favor the Luminous and Glorious mysteries with the Sorrowful reserved for Fridays. During the fourth week of Advent, favor the Joyful mysteries. If your class, small group, or family does not have time to do a full scriptural rosary together, consider praying just one decade at a time. Kids, by the way, love to read the scripture verses between the Hail Mary's and thus, lead the group in prayer.

**Liturgy of the Hours** – If you are not currently praying the Office of Readings, determine to pray it daily throughout Advent. Though morning (Lauds) and evening (Vespers) prayer are the most important of the hours, the Office of Readings inserts you into the Catholic Tradition in a particularly wonderful way since it gives you a full page from the bible and a page from non-biblical Catholic authors, usually the Fathers of the Church. These are seasonal, so the biblical and patristic readings will provide you with an incredibly rich contemplation of the themes of Advent. If you followed tip #5 for what to do before Advent begins, you are already set up to do the Office of Readings.

# WHAT TO DO DURING ADVENT

**Daily Mass** – if you can get to Mass daily, great. If not, be sure to read the daily Mass readings together with your class or family, or in your personal prayer time. These readings are seasonal. These Mass readings together with the Office of Readings provide us with the Church's official Advent Bible study.

**Confession** – The Baptist's cry was "Prepare the Way of the Lord!" Valleys must be filled in – mountains must be brought low. Plan to receive the sacrament of penance and reconciliation sometime during the season, preceded by a good examination of conscience. And why not invite someone to go with you?

**Christmas Shopping List** – What if, this year, the Christmas gifts you buy for at least some on your list, actually have the potential to bring them closer to Jesus, the reason for the season? Some of the people on the list are not super religious? Still, they might like literature. Or a movie! Fiction like the *Chronicles of Narnia* (CS Lewis) and the *Lord of the Rings* (JRR Tolkien) are powerful ways to get people thinking about virtue and the most important things of life. Or stories of inspiring people who just happened to be disciples of Jesus – *A Man for All Seasons* (about St. Thomas More), *Unbroken* (about a WWII hero), *The Judge* (about Ronald Reagan's closest aid, Bill Clark). This sort of Christmas shopping fits into the meaning of Advent, preparing the way of the Lord!

# WHAT TO DO DURING ADVENT

***The “O” Antiphons of Advent*** - In the final days of Advent, the Church has an incredibly rich and beautiful tradition in the Liturgy of the Hours: from December 17th to the 23rd, the antiphons for the Magnificat at Evening Prayer (Vespers) are collectively called the “O” Antiphons. Each evening, the antiphon draws from Old Testament imagery and messianic titles to proclaim the coming of Christ, but also to express our urgent longing with the imperative “O Come!”. You may be familiar with these antiphons without even realizing it - the verses of the traditional Advent hymn O Come, O Come, Emmanuel are taken from the O Antiphons. There are several ways to explore and celebrate the deep theological meaning in these antiphons, not just for adults but for children as well. A fun project can be creating an “O” Antiphon House, or “O” Antiphon ornaments (you can put them on your Jesse Tree if you are using one). We’ve linked some online resources below for these activities.

## ***O Antiphon Resources:***

***O Antiphon House***

***O Antiphon Ornaments & Printables***

# Antiphons

## **December 17th: O Sapientia** (O Wisdom)

*O Wisdom, O Holy Word of God, you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care. Come and show your people the way to salvation. (Isaiah 11:2-3; Wisdom 8:1; Proverbs 9:1)*

## **December 18th: O Adonai** (O Mighty Lord)

*O Sacred Lord of Ancient Israel, who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush, who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain: come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free. (Exodus 3:1-8; 20:1-20; Deuteronomy 26:5-9)*

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

*O Flower of Jesse's Stem, you have been raised up as a sign for all peoples; kings stand silent in your presence; the nations bow down in worship before you. Come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid. (Isaiah 11:1-4; 45:23; 52:13; Luke 1:32-33)*

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

*O Key of David, O Royal Power of Israel controlling at your will the gate of heaven: come, break down the prison walls of death for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death; and lead your captive people into freedom. (Isaiah 22:22; 42:6-7; Luke 4:16-19)*

## **December 21st: O Oriens** (O Dawn)

*O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, Sun of Justice: come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death. (Malachi 3:20; Isaiah 9:1; Psalm 107:14)*

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

*O King of All the Nations, the only joy of every human heart; O Keystone of the mighty arch of man, come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust. (Isaiah 28:16; Genesis 2:7; Matthew 21:42; 1 Peter 2:4-5)*

## **December 23rd: O Emmanuel** (O Emmanuel = "God with Us")

*O Emmanuel, King and Lawgiver, Desire of the Nations, Savior of all People, come and set us free, Lord our God. (Isaiah 7:14; Malachi 3:1; Matthew 1:21-23).*

# 12 Days of Christmas



# 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

On December 25th we exuberantly celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, usually with family, friends, feasting, gifting, and general merry-making. And on Dec. 26th we...start taking down all the decorations? Dismantle the tree, consign the Christmas carols until same-time-next- year? Or maybe if we're truly keen on Christmas, we'll celebrate the whole Christmas Octave, through Jan. 1st, and leave the un-decorating until Jan. 2nd?

If you thought Christmas was "over" after Dec. 25th, think again! The party is just getting started. The Church has designated an entire *season* for Christmas, not just one day, and not even just the eight days of the Octave! The liturgical season of Christmas goes until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which falls after the Feast of Epiphany (when the Wise Men show up). But since celebrating the "12 Days of Christmas" came into fashion in medieval times - and there's even a catchy song about it - I'd like to offer some suggestions for making the most of these 12 days (Dec. 25 - Jan. 5) that lead up to the traditional Feast of Epiphany on Jan. 6th.\* But no need to stop there - by all means, celebrate to the Baptism of the Lord!

\*the feast of Epiphany has been moved in the U.S. and many countries to the first Sunday after Jan. 1st - so the exact length of time between Christmas and Epiphany may not be 12 days every year

# WHAT TO DO DURING THE 12 DAYS

***Deeper Meaning of Christmas*** – We all know the elements of the Christmas story: Caesar's census and Herod, shepherds and Magi, ox, ass, swaddling clothes and manger, a stable and no room at the inn, Bethlehem and the Prince of Peace. But underneath each of these people, places, and things, there is deeper meaning that often goes unnoticed. To explore the meaning behind these signs, click here to read my post on [\*\*The Deeper Meaning of Christmas\*\*](#).

***Catholic Gift-Giving*** - So what do we do with America's gift-giving extravaganza at Christmas? It's Jesus' birthday, but the presents under the tree are the real focus, especially for the kids. The first is unwrapped and then another and another, faster and faster. It resembles a school of sharks going into a feeding frenzy. Almost instantly the thrill is gone and the room is filled with crumpled wrapping paper (but it took so long to wrap them all!).

Rather than following the Grinch and eliminating the gifts, in our family we set rules to make them more meaningful. First, we try to select at least some gifts and stocking-stuffers that will help people develop their relationship with Jesus: books, CDs, videos, rosaries, etc. Then, on Christmas morning, before we go to the tree, we gather at the manger, sing a carol, read a brief scripture, and thank God for Jesus, the greatest gift of all. Then we open one gift at a time, with everyone paying attention to what others get (this teaches patience!). And we don't open everything on the 25th. Rather, we leave some presents wrapped and under the tree for the other 11 days of Christmas (another lesson in patience!). We get more prayers, readings and carols around the manger this way. For friends and family we would consider sharing gifts that would help people unpack God's spiritual gifts, gifts that would actually have something to do with Jesus.



# WHAT TO DO DURING THE 12 DAYS

In some countries, it is even traditional to give small gifts or filled stockings on Christmas Day, and save the larger presents for "Three Kings Day" - or Jan. 6, traditional Epiphany. After all, Epiphany is when we hear in Scripture about all the gifts given to the newborn King!

So, we have three options on gift-giving: a) just acquiesce to the society's way; b) say "bah-humbug!" with Scrooge and the Puritans; or c) take the traditional Catholic approach and press the custom into the service of the Gospel. I say Catholics have more fun.

***Extend the Jesse Tree*** - instead of putting the Jesse Tree away when Advent ends, how about converting it (or just adding to it, if you have enough room) for the 12 Days of Christmas? There are several feast days during this time that you can commemorate with an ornament: feasts of St. Stephen - the first martyr of the Church, St. John the Evangelist, the Holy Innocents, the Holy Family. And of course, the great Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, on January 1st! There's also the Star, the Three Wise Men, their gifts, and so on.

***The Key to the 12 Days*** - there is a tradition that the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" had a historical hidden meaning, with the gifts of the 12 days secretly signifying a teaching of the Catholic faith. Written as a catechism song, it was intended to teach children about their faith at a time in England when it was illegal to practice Catholicism. It certainly doesn't hurt to use this fun carol as a teaching song in these modern times as well! To see the key to hidden meaning of the 12 gifts of the carol, check out the post: [\*\*The Key to the 12 Days\*\*](#)

# WHAT TO DO DURING THE 12 DAYS

***Twelfth Night*** – you might be familiar with the Shakespeare play of the same name, but did you know that "twelfth night" refers to the Vigil of the Feast of Epiphany, or the evening of Jan. 5th? Since Epiphany is a movable feast in many countries now, the Vigil might not always fall on Jan. 5th, but that's no reason not to celebrate in a big way! In Tudor England, the "twelfth night" of Christmas was traditionally celebrated with feasting, caroling, wassail-drinking - even masquerade balls. Basically, they wanted to make sure to send the last night of Christmas (on their calendars) out in style! In modern times, some countries like Spain and Mexico have grand "3 Kings" parades on this evening.

While hosting a ball or costume party might be a little much for some, you can still make it a point to celebrate the eve of Epiphany in a meaningful way. It may be something simpler, such as a "Twelfth Night Tea," a special meal, a special gift for a loved one saved for this day, and of course carol-singing doesn't cost anything. And if you have little ones at home, you could organize a small 3 Kings parade around your house, led by someone holding up a pole or stick with a large Star of Bethlehem affixed to it.

***Epiphany*** - The Solemn feast of the Epiphany of the Lord traditionally occurs on January 6th, following the twelve days of Christmas. The word epiphany means "manifestation" or "appearance," and this feast commemorates three scriptural events: the visit of the Magi to the stable of Bethlehem following the nativity of Jesus, Christ's Baptism in the Jordan, and his first miracle at the wedding feast at Cana.

In some countries and cultures, Epiphany is called "Three Kings Day," even though the Wise Men (or Magi) that show up from the East are not referred to as kings in the Gospel of Matthew. To learn why we usually depict them as kings in our manger scenes, check out my post on the [\*\*Three Magi Kings & Their Strange Gifts\*\*](#).

# WHAT TO DO DURING THE 12 DAYS

The gifts presented to the infant Jesus have a very important meaning, revealing who and what this young King of Kings really is. You can find out more about what the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh signify in the post mentioned above, but big clues are also found in the verses of the Christmas carol "We Three Kings of Orient Are."

*Born a king on Bethlehem's plain, gold I bring to crown him again...*

*Frankincense to offer have I, incense owns a Deity nigh...*

*Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume, breathes a life of gathering gloom...*

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You can view all the lyrics here: [\*\*We Three Kings of Orient Are\*\*](#)

There are special blessings that happen on Epiphany, including a special blessing of holy water, and a traditional blessing of homes that is done with blessed chalk. While the water and chalk are blessed by priests, the Epiphany home blessing can be done by anyone, though it is usually led by the head of household. In the blessing, the letters and symbols below are inscribed with chalk above the main doorway (you can do this for back doors as well if you wish):

**20 + C + M + B + 24**

The "20" is the millennium and century, the "C" stands for the first Wise Man, Caspar, the "M" for Melchior, the "B" for Balthasar, and the "24" represents the decade and year. The initials also stand for the Latin phrase "*Christus mansionem benedicat*" ("Christ bless this house").

# WHAT TO DO DURING THE 12 DAYS

So where did the names of the three Wise Men come from? In the early Church, Epiphany was second only to the Easter Vigil as the time to celebrate the sacrament of baptism. Blessed water from those baptisms was used to bless the dwellings of the faithful, and it became customary to write over the doorposts of blessed homes “C+M+B” standing for the “Christus mansionem benedicat” mentioned above. Since the three kings were also remembered at the same time, and there is reference to the names in an early 6th century Greek manuscript, it became traditional in the Western Church to use CMB to stand for the Wise Men's initials—Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

For the full prayers of the house blessing, click the link below:

**[Epiphany Home Blessing](#)**

Here is a beautiful excerpt from the blessing:

*O God, who by the guidance of a star didst on this day manifest Thine only-begotten Son to the Gentiles, mercifully grant that we who know Thee by faith may also attain the vision of Thy glorious majesty. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

May we keep the light of Christ burning in our hearts all the year through, and imitate the obedience of the Star that led the seekers to the Son of God, the Light of the Nations.

# IN CLOSING

*That God the Son loved us enough to unite himself forever to a human nature, entering into our fallen world to redeem it, is absolutely mind-boggling. May our celebration of this rich season of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany lead us to become more like him who did not shrink from becoming like us in everything but sin.*

*Before you know it, Ash Wednesday will be upon us. Be sure to come back to the Crossroads Initiative for a free resource that will help make this coming Lent your best ever!*

*Yours in Christ's Service,*

*Marcellino D'Ambrosio  
(aka "Dr. Italy")*

Making the Most  
of the Season

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*For more great resources to feed your faith,  
visit the website of the Crossroads Initiative  
<http://www.dritaly.com>*

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*We'd love your friends, family and fellow parishioners to have this free Advent Cheat sheet. But we'd ask you not to share the document with them. Rather ask them to go to [www.DrItaly.com](http://www.DrItaly.com) and sign up for our weekly email newsletter, since this is a special free gift exclusively for subscribers. Thanks so much for your support!*