



## Advent and Christmas Handbook

There are many directives and ideas found in a wide range of ecclesiastical documents and liturgical books regarding the observance of the Advent and Christmas seasons. The purpose of this handbook is to collect them in one place, alongside suggestions for carrying them out. Particular reference is made to the *Directory for Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, which contains a wealth of ideas for bringing together liturgy and life.<sup>1</sup>

At times there is tension between popular piety and the liturgy, as well as between the wider culture and its observances of our Christian feasts. Since the liturgy is the source and summit of our Christian lives, its movements should inform all that we do; other activities should flow from the liturgy, and lead us back to it. Because of this, it is important in our Catholic celebrations to resist or transform cultural practices which threaten or contradict the meaning of the liturgical seasons. It is also important to help popular piety and liturgical practice converge, so that the liturgy can inform pious practice, and pious practice can be a way of truly expanding upon the primary experience of the liturgy.

### Advent

*"The coming of God's Son to earth is an event of such immensity that God willed to prepare for it over centuries...When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Savior's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming...."*<sup>2</sup> (CCC 522, 524)

*"Advent is a time of waiting, conversion and of hope:*

*Waiting-memory of the first, humble coming of the Lord in our mortal flesh; waiting-supplication for his final, glorious coming as Lord of History and universal Judge;*

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccdds\\_doc\\_20020513\\_vrs-direttorio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vrs-direttorio_en.html). Hereafter, DPPL.

<sup>2</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 522, 524.

*Conversion, to which the Liturgy at this time often refers quoting the prophets, especially John the Baptist, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'*

*Joyful hope that the salvation already accomplished by Christ and the reality of grace in the world, will mature and reach their fulness, thereby granting us what is promised by faith, and 'we shall become like him for we shall see him as he really is' (John 3:2)."*<sup>3</sup>

1. Advent begins from Evening Prayer I on Saturday evening before the First Sunday of Advent and ends before Evening Prayer I on Christmas Eve.
2. "Advent has a twofold character, for it is a time of preparation for the Solemnities of Christmas, in which the First Coming of the Son of God to humanity is remembered, and likewise a time when, by remembrance of this, minds and hearts are led to look forward to Christ's Second Coming at the end of time. For these two reasons, Advent is a period of devout and expectant delight."<sup>4</sup>

*Parishes should consider how their practices during this time contribute to the observance of Advent or give in to the wider cultural immediate celebration of Christmas without the requisite preparation.*

## Moderation in Environment and Music during the Advent Season

3. "[T]he use of the organ and other musical instruments should be marked by a *moderation* suited to the character of this time of year, without expressing in anticipation the full joy of the Nativity of the Lord."<sup>5</sup>

*In traditional liturgical practice, instruments were silent during the seasons of Advent and Lent. This is no longer the rule, but its spirit can inform our practice today. As with Lent, leading up to Easter, we have various ways of simplifying our practice, of 'fasting' in our liturgical expression so that the experience of the 'Feast' is that much more enjoyable. There is also a sense of 'good stewardship' of resources. In order to have a lavish feast, it is necessary to 'save up' in the period beforehand.*

4. The Gloria is omitted on the Sundays of Advent, but still sung on feasts and solemnities, or when called for by a Ritual Mass, or another similarly solemn occasion.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> DPPL, 96.

<sup>4</sup> *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and Calendar*, 39.

<sup>5</sup> *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)*, 313. Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> GIRM, 53.

5. "During Advent the floral decoration of the altar should be marked by a moderation suited to the character of this time of year, without expressing in anticipation the full joy of the Nativity of the Lord."<sup>7</sup>

*While speaking specifically of floral decoration, this principle should inform all decisions about liturgical environment during the Advent season - we must avoid 'expressing in anticipation' the full joy of Christmas.*

## Liturgical Colors

6. The liturgical color for Advent is purple. Blue is not an approved liturgical color in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Rose vestments may be used on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent.

## The Advent Wreath

7. "The blessing of an Advent Wreath takes place on the First Sunday of Advent or on the evening before the First Sunday of Advent. The blessing may be celebrated during Mass, a celebration of the word of God, or Evening Prayer."<sup>9</sup>
8. "If the Advent Wreath is to be used in church, it should be of sufficient size to be visible to the congregation. It may be suspended from the ceiling or placed on a stand. If it is placed in the presbyterium, it should not interfere with the celebration of the liturgy, nor should it obscure the altar, lectern, or chair."<sup>10</sup>
9. "When the Advent Wreath is used in a church, on the Second and succeeding Sundays of Advent the candles are lighted either before Mass begins or immediately before the opening prayer; no additional rites or prayers are used."<sup>11</sup>

## Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

10. The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, December 8<sup>th</sup>, is the patronal feast of the United States, and is observed as a Holy Day of Obligation.

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<sup>7</sup> GIRM, 305.

<sup>8</sup> This should be understood as referring to the main/base color of the vestment, not to decorative elements.

<sup>9</sup> *Book of Blessings*, 1509.

<sup>10</sup> *Book of Blessings*, 1512.

<sup>11</sup> *Book of Blessings*, 1513.

## Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

11. December 12 is the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. It has the rank of Feast in the United States, rather than Solemnity as in other places such as Mexico. Feasts are celebrated liturgically within the limits of the 24-hour day; however, it is possible to celebrate a Votive Mass of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the evening of December 11<sup>th</sup> (when it falls on a weekday) if “some real necessity or pastoral advantage calls for it, in the estimation of the rector of the church or the Priest Celebrant himself” in a celebration with the people.<sup>12</sup>

## Advent/Christmas Concerts

12. “In a sacred place only those things are to be permitted which serve to exercise or promote worship, piety, and religion. Anything out of harmony with the holiness of the place is forbidden. The Ordinary may, however, for individual cases, permit other uses, provided they are not contrary to the sacred character of the place.”<sup>13</sup>
13. While it has become common to have ‘Christmas’ concerts during Advent, thought should be given to holding one sometime during the Christmas season, or changing the character of one during Advent to something like ‘Advent Lessons and Carols’.<sup>14</sup>

## The Christmas Novena

14. “The Christmas novena began as a means of communicating the riches of the Liturgy to the faithful who were unable easily to grasp it. It has played a very effective role and can continue to play such a role. At the same time, in current conditions where the faithful have easier access to the Liturgy, it would seem desirable that Vespers from the 17-23 of December should be more solemn by adopting the use of the ‘major antiphons’, and by inviting the faithful to participate at the celebration. Such a celebration, held either before or after which the popular devotions to which the faithful are particularly attached, would be an ideal ‘Christmas novena’ in full conformity with the Liturgy and mindful of the needs of the faithful. Some elements, such as the homily, the use of incense, and the intercessions, could also be expanded within the celebration of Vespers.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> GIRM, 376.

<sup>13</sup> Canon 1210.

<sup>14</sup> Suggestions for such a service may be found on the diocesan website.

<sup>15</sup> DPPL, 103. The “major antiphons” referred to are the ‘O’ Antiphons, which are sung at the Magnificat at Vespers from December 17-23.

# Christmas

*Christmas is one of the most important days of the Church year, second only to Easter itself. It is the feast of the incarnation, the feast of God becoming flesh (the Latin "in carne" means "enfleshment"). It is a uniquely Christian teaching, the Divine choosing to become one of us. Because of this belief, God is not only Transcendent, but also wholly Immanent, Emmanuel (God-with-us). While remaining Transcendent (meaning we must rise above our present condition to reach Him), He is at the same time Immanent (meaning He is with us as we rise toward Him). Every Eucharist is like Christmas where the bread and wine are transformed into His flesh, His Body and Blood, and, in a sense, He is born anew on the altar.<sup>16</sup>*

15. The celebration of Christmas begins with Evening Prayer I of the Nativity of the Lord on the evening of December 24<sup>th</sup>.
16. The Christmas Octave runs from December 26<sup>th</sup> until January 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>17</sup>
17. Ordinary Time begins on the Monday following the Baptism of the Lord (or on the following day when the Baptism is transferred to a weekday).

## Nativity Scenes and Christmas Decorations

18. "The blessing of the Christmas manger or nativity scene, according to pastoral circumstances, may take place on the Vigil of Christmas or at another more suitable time."<sup>18</sup> "If the manger is set up in the church, it must not be placed in the presbyterium. A place should be chosen that is suitable for prayer and devotion and is easily accessible by the faithful."<sup>19</sup> "The practice of placing the manger under or on the altar is not proper since it devalues the nature of the altar and makes it only a setting for the crib."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> USCCB, Christmas 2018. <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year/christmas/index.cfm>

<sup>17</sup> For those who choose to take on the weekly Friday penance/abstinence, the Friday of the Octave of Christmas is traditionally considered a penitential day, as it is ranked as a Feast, not a Solemnity.

<sup>18</sup> *Book of Blessings*, 1542.

<sup>19</sup> *Book of Blessings*, 1544.

<sup>20</sup> BCL Newsletter, October/November 1989.

19. "According to custom, the Christmas tree is set up just before Christmas and may remain in place until the solemnity of Epiphany. Although the primary place for the Christmas tree is the home, at times one or more may also be placed in the church. In such a case, the decoration of the trees should be appropriate to their use in the church, and care should be taken that they do not interfere with the requirements of liturgical space."<sup>21</sup>

*It is inappropriate to decorate for the fullness of Christmas in the church any time before December 24<sup>th</sup>. While there are no hard and fast rules regarding the display of the Nativity scene, custom dictates that if it is set up in the church before Christmas Eve, at least the figure of the Infant Jesus should not be placed until after the Vigil of the Nativity, ideally before or after Midnight Mass. In some places the choice is made to leave out the three Magi until the celebration of Epiphany.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the Christmas tree(s), if present before Christmas, might not be decorated, or fully decorated, until December 24<sup>th</sup>.*

## Liturgical Celebration of Christmas

20. "Where possible, the Church desires that the faithful should prepare for the celebration of Midnight Mass on the 24 December with the Office of Readings. Where such is not possible, it may be opportune to arrange a vigil of hymns, readings, and elements drawn from popular piety."<sup>23</sup>
21. Christmas has four sets of proper texts: the Vigil Mass, the Mass during the Night (Midnight Mass), Mass at Dawn, and Mass during the Day. Permission is given in the Lectionary to use the readings from any of the Christmas Masses at any of the others. This same permission does not extend to the proper prayers of the Mass, which should be chosen according to the time at which the particular celebration takes place.<sup>24</sup>

*While it is often convenient to use the same readings at all the Masses, or especially to replace the vigil and day readings with those of the Mass during the Night, serious consideration should be given to the richness of the liturgical tradition in offering these various sets of readings and how they unfold the mystery of the Incarnation. In particular, thought should be given to the Gospel reading of the Mass during the Day, the Prologue to the Gospel of John. Normally this is the reading for the Second Sunday after Christmas, but since the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Christmas is*

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<sup>21</sup> *Book of Blessings*, 1572. Another customary time to remove the tree would be at the Baptism of the Lord, which marks the liturgical end of the Christmas season.

<sup>22</sup> They might even 'travel' through the church or parish buildings, before finally coming to the manger at Epiphany.

<sup>23</sup> DPPL, 110.

<sup>24</sup> See *Notitiae* 10 (1974): 80, n. 1.

*permanently impeded in the United States by the transfer of Epiphany, if John 1 is not used at Christmas, it is **never** heard by the Sunday assembly in the reformed liturgy.*

22. The Scriptural readings at Mass are to be proclaimed as they are found in the Lectionary, each reading by a single lector. Except for the proclamation of the Passion of the Lord on Palm Sunday and Good Friday, it is not permitted to separate a reading into parts to be read by one or more persons.<sup>25</sup> This also means that the Gospel reading may never be turned into a drama by the acting out of the story during the reading, nor by replacing the Gospel Proclamation with a nativity play/pageant. Pageants, as a popular devotion, are properly done outside of the liturgical action, such as before Mass, or at another time altogether.
23. "Above all on Christmas, the Gloria should be sung and not recited."<sup>26</sup>
24. While the nighttime celebration of Christmas is popularly known as 'Midnight' Mass, it is not required that it begin at midnight.<sup>27</sup> However, as the first Mass of Christmas Day (as opposed to the Vigil), "[t]he Mass 'on the night of the Nativity' is to be celebrated *around* midnight to preserve the true significance of the time."<sup>28</sup> Since it is the first Mass of Christmas Day, ideally it would end around or after midnight, though even this is not strictly required.
25. The announcement of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ from the *Roman Martyrology* may be sung before the beginning of the Mass during the Night, or during a vigil Office of Readings or other celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours that evening, or at another convenient time; but it is not appropriately a part of the Mass itself.<sup>29</sup> The music and text may be found in Appendix I of the Roman Missal (Appendix II in the *Misal Romano*).
26. During the Creed at the Masses of Christmas, during the words "and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man", all **kneel** instead of bowing the head.<sup>30</sup> For the solemnity of this moment, so that it doesn't go by too quickly so as to seem perfunctory, it might be expedient to sing the Creed, if the congregation is familiar (or could be made familiar) with this practice.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> GIRM, 109.

<sup>26</sup> USCCB, *Liturgical Notes for Christmas*. <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year/christmas/liturgical-notes-for-christmas.cfm>

<sup>27</sup> The Latin is, *Missa in nocte*, literally, "Mass in the Night".

<sup>28</sup> *Notitiae* 10 (1974): 80, n. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Roman Missal, Appendix I, *The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ*

<sup>30</sup> This is also the case during the Annunciation on March 25<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> The chant can be found in the vernacular in the Missal.

## Observances During the Octave of Christmas

27. **Feast of the Holy Innocents**- “In our own times, children suffer innumerable forms of violence which threaten their lives, dignity, and right to education. On this day, it is appropriate to recall the vast host of children not yet born who have been killed under the cover of laws permitting abortion, which is an abominable crime. Mindful of these specific problems, popular piety in many places has inspired acts of worship as well as displays of charity which provide assistance to pregnant mothers, encourage adoption and the promotion of the education of children.”<sup>32</sup>
28. **Feast of the Holy Family**- This feast is an opportune time to have a blessing of families, of children, of engaged couples, etc.<sup>33</sup>
29. **December 31<sup>st</sup>**- Sentiments regarding the end of the civil year, and cultural practices of meditating upon the passage of time, as well as giving thanks for the past year, and looking forward to change in the new, “have given rise to two pious exercises: prolonged exposition of the Blessed Sacrament...and the singing of the *Te Deum* as an act of community praise and thanksgiving to God for the graces received from Him as the year draws to a close. In some places...31 December is marked by a vigil of prayer which concludes with the celebration of the Holy Mass....a vigil offering of the new year to the Lord.”<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that an official sung version of the *Te Deum* in English is now available in the *Divine Office Hymnal*.
- Parishes could consider these and similar ways of marking the end of the year with a spiritual and liturgical character. A plenary indulgence is conceded to those who pray the Te Deum in a church on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December, with the usual conditions.*<sup>35</sup>
30. **The Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God** on January 1<sup>st</sup>, is a holy day of obligation in the United States when it does not fall on a Saturday or Monday. Before or after Masses on this day, it would be appropriate to sing the *Veni Creator Spiritus*, or an adaptation of it, “so that on January 1<sup>st</sup> the faithful can pray that the Spirit may direct their thoughts and actions, and those of the community during the course of the year.”<sup>36</sup> “A plenary indulgence is conceded to those who devoutly assist at the recitation or solemn singing of the *Veni Creator* on the first day of the year to implore divine assistance for the course

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<sup>32</sup> DPPL, 113.

<sup>33</sup> DPPL, 112.

<sup>34</sup> DPPL, 114.

<sup>35</sup> *Manual of Indulgences*, no. 26 § 2.

<sup>36</sup> DPPL, 116. Besides vernacular translations of the chant itself, there are also many hymn settings of this chant- “Come Holy Ghost” and “Ven, Creator”, for example.



of the whole year.”<sup>37</sup>

## Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord

31. The Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord is celebrated in the U.S. on the first Sunday after January 1st. The *Announcement of Easter and the Moveable Feasts* may be sung following the Gospel, by a deacon or cantor, on this day.<sup>38</sup> “Its revival in many places would be opportune since it served to make the connection between the Epiphany and Easter, and orientate all feasts towards the greatest Christian solemnity.”<sup>39</sup>
32. There is a tradition of blessing chalk on the feast of the Epiphany for the faithful to use to bless their homes for the new year. The chalk is used to write above the front door: “20+C+M+B+XX”, signifying the traditional names of the three Magi (Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar)<sup>40</sup>, or alternatively, *Christus mansionem benedicat*, “may Christ bless this house”. The “Order for the Blessing of Food or Drink or Other Elements Connected with Devotion” given in Ch. 59 of the *Book of Blessings* (*Capítulo XLII* in the Spanish-language *Bendicional*) would be appropriate for blessing the chalk, using the blessing prayer given for option F or G.
33. It is particularly appropriate to use the option of the Sprinkling Rite at Mass on the Solemnity of the Baptism of the Lord.

## The Presentation of the Lord

34. While no longer part of the Christmas season, the Feast of the Presentation on February 2<sup>nd</sup> takes us back to the mindset of Christmas for a moment- as the 40<sup>th</sup> day following Christmas, we remember the presentation of Jesus in the temple, and Joseph and Mary’s fulfillment of the Law, as well as the prophecies of Simeon and Anna. The faithful could be encouraged to bring candles to be blessed.
35. Music for the procession can be found in the Roman Missal, though other hymns, such as *In His Temple Now Behold Him*, or those which take inspiration from Psalm 27 (“The Lord is my light”) could appropriately be used.

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<sup>37</sup> *Manual of Indulgences*, no. 26 § 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Roman Missal*, Appendix I, *Misal Romano*, Apendice II.

<sup>39</sup> DPPL, 118.

<sup>40</sup> The XX should be replaced by the last two digits of the current year. In Spanish-speaking countries where this tradition is followed, C is sometimes replaced with G, for Gaspar, the Spanish form of the name.

## Reflection on Christmas

*To keep watch, to set out, to risk, to recount the beauty: all these are acts of love. The Good Shepherd, who at Christmas comes to give his life to the sheep, will later, at Easter, ask Peter and, through him all of us, the ultimate question: "Do you love me?" (Jn 21:15). The future of the flock will depend on how that question is answered. [At Christmas] we too are asked to respond to Jesus with the words: "I love you". The answer given by each is essential for the whole flock.*

*"Let us go now to Bethlehem" (Lk 2:15). With these words, the shepherds set out. We too, Lord, want to go up to Bethlehem. Today too, the road is uphill: the heights of our selfishness need to be surmounted, and we must not lose our footing or slide into worldliness and consumerism.*

*I want to come to Bethlehem, Lord, because there you await me. I want to realize that you, lying in a manger, are the bread of my life. I need the tender fragrance of your love so that I, in turn, can be bread broken for the world. Take me upon your shoulders, Good Shepherd; loved by you, I will be able to love my brothers and sisters and to take them by the hand. Then it will be Christmas, when I can say to you: "Lord you know everything; you know that I love you" (cf. Jn 21:17).<sup>41</sup>*

Further resources can be found at <https://stocktondiocese.org/advent-and-christmas>

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<sup>41</sup> Pope Francis, *Christmas Homily* 2018.