



Orantes

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PREPARING FOR ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

Over the past six years, this Newsletter has published numerous articles on preparing for Advent and Christmas. For the convenience of our readers, this special edition reprints each of those articles in order to assist pastors and pastoral ministers in preparing for these seasons of joyful hope, comfort and joy!

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ADVENT

The Theology of Advent

At the heart of the Advent mystery is a tension, described precisely in the *Roman Missal*: 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.¹ This twofold notion of preparation and longing provides the vocabulary for the liturgical prayers of Advent.

The first Preface for Advent, for example, is a poetic restatement of the twofold character:

For he assumed at his first coming
the lowliness of human flesh,
and so fulfilled the design you formed long ago,
and opened for us the way to eternal salvation,
that, when he comes again in glory and majesty
and all is at last made manifest,
we who watch for that day
may inherit the great promise
in which now we dare to hope.

The context for this twofold expectation is provided on the First Sunday of Advent in the Office of Readings by the *Catechetical Instruction* of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem:

We do not preach only one coming of Christ, but a second as well, much more glorious than the first. The first coming was marked by patience; the second will bring the crown of a divine kingdom....

At the first coming he was wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger. At his second coming he will be clothed in light as in a garment. In the first coming he endured the cross, despising the shame; in the second coming he will be in glory, escorted by an army of angels. We look then beyond the first coming and await the second. At the first coming

¹ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 39.

we said: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. At the second we shall say it again; we shall go out with the angels to meet the Lord and cry out in adoration: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord...

These two comings are also referred to by Paul in writing to Titus: The grace of God the Savior has appeared to all men, instructing us to put aside impiety and worldly desires and live temperately, uprightly, and religiously in this present age, waiting for the joyful hope, the appearance of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Notice how he speaks of a first coming for which he gives thanks, and a second, the one we still await...

The Collect for the First Sunday of Advent focuses on the second coming of the Lord, asking God to give us “the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming, so that, gathered at his right hand, they may be worthy to possess the heavenly Kingdom.”²

The Collect for the Second Sunday intensifies this longing for the Lord to return in glory, asking that “no earthly undertaking hinder those who set out in haste to meet your Son.”

The Collect for Gaudete Sunday begins a shift to anticipating the Incarnation, asking that those who “await the feast of the Lord’s Nativity” may “attain the joys of so great a salvation and...celebrate them always with solemn worship and glad rejoicing.”

Finally, the Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, made familiar by its use in the *Angelus*, continues this focus on the Nativity of the Lord, whose celebration will occur within a week. The Collect also places the Nativity within the context of the Paschal Mystery, asking that we who celebrate the Incarnation “may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection.”

The Second Preface of Advent is also focused on the Nativity, recalling the Messianic prophecies, the Virgin Mother’s longing and the Baptist’s announcement of his coming. The prayer concludes by asking that we might be “watchful in prayer and exultant in his praise” as we prepare to celebrate the great Christmas solemnity.

These theological strains are also reflected in traditional liturgical practices proper to the Advent season. Because this season of joyful hope and waiting has, by definition, an “unfinished” aspect, the use of a blue-hued purple, the color of the horizon just before the sunrise, has been adopted for vesture, altar cloths, banners, etc.

² Cat. 15, 1-3: PG 33, 870-874.

Likewise, while the season is characterized by a quickening anticipation of the coming of the Lord, its preparatory nature has resulted in a certain character of restraint. This is clearly reflected in the rubric of the Roman Missal requiring that “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.”³

³ GIRM, no. 305.

The Advent Wreath

Most Churches observe the traditional lighting of the candles of an Advent Wreath. The *Book of Blessings* assigns the blessing of the wreath to the First Sunday of Advent (or the Saturday evening before).⁴

Does the Blessing have to take place during Mass?

No. The blessing may take place “during Mass, a celebration of the word of God, or Evening Prayer.”⁵

What colors are the candles?

While different colored candles are used in different countries, in the United States, three of the candles are usually of violet and the one lit on Gaudete Sunday is rose.⁶

Where should the wreath be placed?

The wreath may be hung from the ceiling or placed on a stand, but should be of “sufficient size to be visible to the congregation.” If located in the sanctuary, the Advent Wreath should not “obscure the altar, lectern, or chair.”⁷

Is there a rite for lighting the candles each week?

No. The wreath is blessed only on the First Sunday of Advent. On subsequent Sundays “the candles are lighted either before Mass begins or immediately before the opening prayer; no additional rites or prayers are used.”⁸

When is the Advent Wreath blessed at Mass?

When celebrated during Mass, the blessing takes place at the conclusion of the General Intercessions.

How does the blessing begin?

Four sample intercessions are provided by the *Book of Blessings*.⁹

That the keeping of Advent
may open our hearts to God's love;

⁴ BOB, no. 1509.

⁵ BOB, nos. 1510 and 1511.

⁶ BOB, nos. 1510 and 1511.

⁷ BOB, no. 1512.

⁸ BOB, no. 1513.

That the light of Christ
may penetrate the darkness of sin;

That this wreath may constantly remind us
to prepare for the coming of Christ;

That the Christmas season may fill us with peace and joy
as we strive to follow the example of Jesus;

What is the difference between the two forms of the Prayer of Blessing of the Advent Wreath?

After the Intercessions, the celebrant extends his hands and prays one of two prayers.

The first prayer focuses on the Second Coming of the Lord in glory. Echoing the embolism to the Lord's prayer ("we wait in joyful hope") the prayer asks that the Church await the Lord "who enlightens our hearts and dispels the darkness of ignorance and sin." It then asks that the light of this wreath may reflect the splendor of Christ."

The second prayer focuses on our preparation for the celebration of the Nativity of the Emmanuel, "the hope of the peoples...the wisdom that teaches and guides us...the Savior of every nation." The prayer concludes by asking that the light of the wreath "be a sign of Christ's promise to bring us salvation. May he come quickly and not delay."

After the Prayer of Blessing, the first candle is lit.

The “O” Antiphons

The Magnificat antiphons in the Roman Liturgy of the Hours for the Last Week in Advent (December 17-23) are traditionally referred to as the “O” Antiphons. They date from sometime before the eighth century and give voice to the quickening urgency of the fulfillment of the hopes of the prophets in Christ’s coming in Bethlehem and at the end of time.

They are referred to as the “O” Antiphons because of the first word of the seven titles of the Messiah: O Sapientia (O Wisdom), O Adonai (O Lord), O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse), O Clavis David (O Key of David), O Oriens (O Dawn of the East), O Rex Gentium (O King of the Nations), and O Emmanuel (O “God is with us”).

Origin

According to Father William P. Saunders, "The exact origin of the O Antiphons is not known. Boethius (480–524) made a slight reference to them, thereby suggesting their presence at that time [the sixth century]. At the Benedictine Fleury Abbey these antiphons were recited by the abbot and other abbey leaders in descending rank, and then a gift was given to each member of the community. By the eighth century, they are in use in the liturgical celebrations in Rome. The usage of the O Antiphons was so prevalent in monasteries that the phrases, "Keep your O" and "The Great O Antiphons" were common parlance. One may thereby conclude that in some fashion the O Antiphons have been part of our liturgical tradition since the very early Church.”⁹

The Hymn

The most popular Advent hymn expanding upon these antiphons is, of course *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*. The first five verses of the Latin text (Veni, veni, Emmanuel) date from the Psalterium Canticum Catholicarum (Cologne, 1710) and was sung to a fifteenth century French tune. The text was expanded by Joseph Hermann Mohr in his *Cantiones Sacrae* in 1878 to include all seven of the “O” antiphons. The first English translation in this, the most popular English translation was provided by John Mason Neal in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861).

It might be noted that *O Come O Come Emmanuel* is an appropriate hymn not only during the final days of Advent, but even in the first weeks of the season, as “our minds and hearts are led to look forward to Christ’s second coming at the end of time.”¹⁰

⁹ Saunders, William. “What are the “O Antiphons?”” in CatholicEducation.org.

¹⁰ Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and Calendar, no. 39.

Indeed, all seven antiphons are equally applicable to the coming of Christ in Bethlehem or to his return in glory at the end of time.

December 17

O Sapientia (O Wisdom)

The first antiphon recalls the prophecy of Isaiah, who wrote of the Messiah: “The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: a spirit of **wisdom** and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord, and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord...”¹¹ and who exclaims: “wonderful is his counsel, and great his wisdom.”¹²

The antiphon also notably describes the Messiah as “coming forth from the mouth of the Most High,” which resonates with the prologue of the Gospel of John, which proclaims Christ as the Word made flesh.

December 18

O Adonai (O Lord)

Adonai is the name used in the Old Testament out of respect to the sanctity of God’s name.¹³ Thus, Isaiah refers to the coming Messiah as “the Lord,” the judge, ruler and king who will save. Thus the antiphon recalls the full course of salvation history¹⁴ from Moses to David to the hope of the prophets.

December 19

O Radix Jesse (O Flower of Jesse’s Stem)

As Micah prophesies that the Messiah will come from the house of David (Jesse is the father of David) and be born in David’s city of Bethlehem, so Isaiah predicts that “A shoot shall come¹⁵ out from the stock of Jesse”¹⁶ and that “On that day, the root of Jesse [shall stand] as a signal for the peoples...”¹⁷

¹¹ Isaiah 11:2-3.

¹² Isaiah 28:29.

¹³ Cf. Exodus 3:2 and 24:12.

¹⁴ Cf. Isaiah 33:22.

¹⁵ Cf. Micah 5:2.

¹⁶ Isaiah 11:1.

¹⁷ Isaiah 11:10.

December 20

O Clavis David (O Key of David)

The one who opens and shuts, the holder of “the key of the house of David”¹⁸ is also the one who will open the eyes of the blind and bring out prisoners from their confinement. He is the¹⁹ one who hold “the keys of death and the netherworld.”²⁰

December 21

O Oriens (O Radiant Dawn)

The coming of the Messiah is like the rising of the sun in the East, indeed the Lord will return upon a cloud in the East to judge the living and the dead and “the Sun of righteousness will arise with healing in its wings.”²¹ For on that day we will say that “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Upon those who lived in a land of gloom a light has shone.”²²

December 22

O Rex Gentium (O King of All The Nations)

As Isaiah foretold: “a child is born for us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulders dominion rests. They shall name him Wonder-Counsellor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.”²³

December 23

O Emmanuel (O “God with us”)

Emmanuel means God is with us. He was incarnate of the Virgin Mary in order to bring us salvation and he will be with us at the end of time as a judge of the living and the dead. For it was promised us that “the Lord himself will give you a sign, the young woman pregnant and about to bear a son, shall name him Emmanuel.”²⁴

¹⁸ Isaiah 22:22.

¹⁹ Cf. Isaiah 42:7.

²⁰ Revelation 1:18. 12

²¹ Malachi 4:2. 13

²² Isaiah 9:2. 14

²³ Isaiah 9:5.

²⁴ Isaiah 7:14.



CHRISTMAS

On the Christmas Collects

Most major feasts of the Church have two Mass sets: a vigil, and the Mass during the day. Easter, which commemorates when the Lord rose from the tomb, begins with the “mother of all holy Vigils,”²⁵ and Easter Sunday, the Mass during the day, is a unique celebration which continues for fifty days, as one “great Sunday.”²⁶

*The Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord, however, is celebrated with **four** Masses. In addition to the vigil and Mass during the day, there are two additional Mass settings for “during the night” and “at dawn.”*

For, after the annual celebration of the Paschal Mystery, the Church has no more ancient custom than celebrating the memorial of the Nativity of the Lord,”²⁷ commemorated by four Masses, each of which emphasizes a particular aspect of the mystery of the Incarnation.

*The **Christmas Vigil Mass** takes on the character of joyful anticipation, as a sort of transition between Advent and Christmas.*

*The **Mass during the Night** (widely observed, until recently, as “Midnight Mass”) is commonly known as “the angels’ Mass,” because from the first days of the Church it has commemorated the moment when the angels announced the birth of Christ to the shepherds.*

*The **Mass at Dawn** reminds us that just as the warmth of the sunrise follows the cold, dark night, so we bask in the redeeming light of the Son of God as we celebrate his birth.*

*Finally, the **Mass during the Day**, contemplates the mystery of the Incarnation, and particularly the saving mystery of the Son of Man taking on human flesh in order to redeem mankind.*

This brief commentary seeks to explore the theological themes of the Collects for each of these Masses.

²⁵ *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and Calendar* [UNLYC], no. 21, citing Saint Augustine, *Sermo*: 219.

²⁶ St. Athanasius, *Epistula festalis*: PG 26, 1366.

²⁷ UNLYC, no. 32.

At the Vigil Mass

**O God, who gladden us year by year
as we wait in hope for our redemption,
grant that, just as we joyfully welcome
your Only Begotten Son as our Redeemer,
we may also merit to face him confidently
when he comes again as our Judge.**

This collect has served as the opening prayer for the first Mass of Christmas since the eighth century, when it appears in the Gelasian and Gregorian sacramentaries. It opens the Christmas season by meditating on the joy of Christmas and the need to be ready for the Lord's return at the end of time to judge the living and the dead.

The joy of Christmas

As the angels proclaimed to the shepherds, the Nativity of the Christ is good news of great joy for all the people. That's why the carol exults in our own day in "tidings of comfort and joy" and why this first Christmas collect gives thanks to the Lord who gladdens us "year by year as we wait in hope for our redemption."

Today's collect is not dissimilar to the collect of the Third Sunday of Advent, which asks God to enable us "to attain the joys of so great a salvation and to celebrate them always with solemn worship and glad rejoicing."²⁸

The joy of Christmas, then, is not a modern invention, but has always been deeply rooted in the scriptural and liturgical identity of Christmas.

The Incarnation and the Final Judgement

It is helpful to recall here the famous mystagogical catechesis of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem on the twofold coming of Christ. In his first coming the Lord is "wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger," while at his second "he will be clothed in light as in a garment [and] escorted by an army of angels."²⁹

The great Good News is that the very same baby in the manger is the Lord who will return in glory to judge the living and the dead at the end of time. The immense love which brought about the incarnation lives in his Sacred Heart as he returns to take us with

²⁸ III Advent, Collect.

²⁹ Cf. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis*, nos. 15, 1-3.

him, “that where I am you also may be.”³⁰ It is in this just and loving judge for whom we long and in whom we trust.

Incessantly, the scripture of the Advent *Lectionary for Mass* calls us to vigilance as we “wait in joyful hope” for the second coming of the Lord. Like the wise virgins, awaiting the bridegroom’s return, we must strive to keep our lamps burning with righteous deeds, that we might run out to meet him when he comes in glory.³¹

The Crib and the Cross: Incarnation and Paschal Mystery

The incarnation is also the first manifestation of the kenotic self-emptying which is at the heart of Christ’s paschal suffering, death and resurrection. It is the same babe who made himself a slave, who will open his arms on the Cross in offering the great Paschal Sacrifice.³² The mysteries of the Crib and the Cross are two elements of the same saving action of the Lord, who willed to “hunger, thirst, sleep, to accept suffering [and] to be obedient unto death...”³³

At the Mass during the Night

**O God, who have made this most sacred night
radiant with the splendor of the true light,
grant, we pray, that we,
who have known the mysteries of his light on earth,
may also delight in his gladness in heaven.**

The stereotypical image of Midnight Mass (seen most often in movies and television shows) is replete with images of twinkling lights in a cold night sky as families walk into Church. The ancient Christmas Collect for Mass during the night was first found in the *Gelasian Sacramentary* and is not from our conception of the Midnight Mass.

Indeed, it is remarkable that Collects for both the Midnight Mass and the Easter Vigil describe how these “sacred nights” are not just illumined, but made “radiant” with the splendor of the incarnation and resurrection of the Lord.³⁴

³⁰ John 14:3.

³¹ Cf. I Advent, Collect.

³² Cf. Phil 2:6-11.

³³ Hippolytus.

³⁴ Easter Vigil - Final Collect before the Readings.

The Church's radiance on this holy night is a reflection of the glory of Christ incarnate and risen, for he is "the refulgence of [the Father's] glory."³⁵

The Collect concludes by echoing the typically Advent theme of the twofold coming, asking that, just as we "have known the mysteries of his light on earth," so may we also "delight in his gladness in heaven."

At the Mass at Dawn

**Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that, as we are bathed in
the new radiance of your incarnate Word,
the light of faith, which illumines our minds,
may also shine through in our deeds.**

The Collect for the Mass at Dawn continues the reflection of the Collect for the Mass During the Night on the light of the incarnate and risen Christ which pierces the darkness of our sin.

Like the Collect for Mass during the night, the Collect for Dawn assures us that we have been "bathed in the new radiance of your incarnate Word."

The origin of this image is, of course, in the Exodus account of Moses descending from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, and becoming "radiant while he spoke with the Lord."³⁶

Numerous Mass texts from the *Roman Missal* continue this image in their insistence that we are made radiant with God's splendor when we look toward him.³⁷ Such radiance washes away the stains of sin³⁸ and shines forth in good deeds.³⁹ Thus we are made "radiant in [God's] presence"⁴⁰ and transformed into the likeness of the Son of God.⁴¹

³⁵ Heb 1:1-3.

³⁶ Exodus 34:29.

³⁷ Cf. Psalm 34 (33) and the Entrance Antiphon for the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time.

³⁸ Cf. Prayer Over the Offerings for the Transfiguration of the Lord.

³⁹ Cf. Collect for the Feast of Saint Jane Frances de Chantal.

⁴⁰ Collect for Tuesday in the First Week of Lent.

⁴¹ Cf. Prayer After Communion for the Feast of the Transfiguration.

At the Mass during the Day

**O God, who wonderfully created
the dignity of human nature
and still more wonderfully restored it,
grant, we pray,
that we may share in the divinity of Christ,
who humbled himself to share in our humanity.**

This ancient Collect for Christmas day first appeared in the Veronese and Gelasian Sacramentaries and reflects the language used at every Mass when the priest mixes a small amount of water with the wine which has been brought forward by the faithful for the Eucharistic sacrifice.

By the mid-third century, Saint Cyprian of Carthage testifies to the co-mingling of water with wine in the chalice, while explaining it as our participation in the Incarnation. The water signifies the faithful, while the wine signifies the Blood of Christ; “and when the water is mixed with the wine in the cup, the people are made one with Christ, and the multitude of believers is coupled and joined to him in whom it believes.”⁴²

It is understandable, therefore, that the formula used for the co-mingling would come to be used in the Collect for Christmas day, asking that we might “share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”

The familiar prayer is preceded by a reflection on the dignity of man, “rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God.”⁴³ Yet this dignity is debased by a nature which chooses to “bear the wound of original sin,”⁴⁴ but gloriously restored by the Passion of Christ, who has, “delivered us from Satan and from sin.”⁴⁵ This part of the ancient Christmas collect is drawn largely from the fifth century Christmas sermons of Saint Leo the Great.

O Christian, recognize your dignity, and made a partaker of the divine nature, do not dare by degenerate conduct to return to former baseness. Remember of whose head and whose body you are a member. Call to mind that you were snatched from the power of the shadows and borne over into the light and Kingdom of God. By means of the Sacrament

⁴² W.A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. 1, 232.

⁴³ CCC, no. 1700.

⁴⁴ CCC, no. 1707.

⁴⁵ CCC, no. 1708.

of Baptism you were made a temple of the Holy Spirit: do not by evil actions drive away from you such a great indweller and to subject yourself once again to the devil's thralldom: for the blood of Christ is your ransom because he will judge you in truth who has redeemed you in mercy, Christ our Lord."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Pope Saint Leo I, 1 *in Nativitate*, 3.

On the Christmas Liturgy

Over the years, ORANTES has offered reflections on several liturgical questions surrounding the Christmas Liturgy. Links to these resources are offered here for the convenience of our readers, as they prepare to celebrate the Nativity of the Lord. Please click the hyperlink on each title to reach the original article.

Is it appropriate for children to perform a Christmas play during the Gospel at the Vigil Mass on Christmas?

The question is addressed directly by the *Lectionary for Masses with Children*, no. 53, which explicitly states that “care should be taken, especially at Christmas and during Holy Week and the Easter Triduum, not to stage the various liturgies as plays. At the same time, a reenactment of the Christmas story by children could be held prior to or after the Christmas liturgies. Such a reenactment during the liturgy, however, is explicitly forbidden by liturgical law.

What color vestments can be used at Christmas?

While the color white is proper to Christmas time, on more solemn days, festive, that is, more precious, sacred vestments may be used even if not of the color of the day.⁴⁷

What about Christmas decorations, flowers and plants?

“Plans for seasonal decorations should include other areas besides the sanctuary. Decorations are intended to draw people to the true nature of the mystery being celebrated rather than being ends in themselves. Natural flowers, plants, wreaths and fabric hangings, and other seasonal objects can be arranged to enhance the primary liturgical points of focus. The altar should remain clear and free-standing, not walled in by massive floral displays or the Christmas crib, and pathways in the narthex, nave, and sanctuary should remain clear.”⁴⁸

When are the seasonal decorations removed?

“...Seasonal decorations are maintained throughout the entire liturgical season. Since the Christmas season begins with the Vigil Mass on Christmas Eve and ends with the Baptism of the Lord, the placement and removal of Christmas decorations should coincide with these times.”⁴⁹ Care should also be taken to cut back and remove dead flowers as the season progresses.

⁴⁷ GIRM, no. 346g.

⁴⁸ Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship. [BLS] (USCCB, 2000), no. 124.

⁴⁹ BLS, no. 125.

What other kinds of ritual enhancements are proper to the Christmas season?

During the recitation of the Nicene Creed at the Christmas Masses, the ministers and assembly kneel at the words, “and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man” as an acknowledgment of the mystery of the incarnation. The *Gloria* should be sung throughout the Octave of Christmas, where possible. Finally, if Eucharistic Prayer I is prayed, the insert for Christmas is used throughout the Octave.

What resources can I recommend to parishioners for the celebration of Christmas in their homes?

The USCCB website provides a series of helpful resources, including blessings of a Christmas Manger, Christmas Tree and the blessing of households on the Feast of the Epiphany.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-worship/liturgical-year/christmas>

The Christmas Tree

Some suggest the origin of the Christmas Tree is found in the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” which opened most medieval Passion plays.⁵¹ The apples on its branches eventually evolve into ornaments and candles, which even today anticipate the coming of the the Victor over the sin of our first parents.

The “Order for the Blessing of a Christmas Tree” may⁵² be celebrated “on or before Christmas during a celebration of the word of God, or during Morning or Evening Prayer”⁵³ by a priest, deacon or layperson.⁵⁴ The Order also notes that the Christmas tree may appropriately remain in place until the Epiphany.⁵⁵

The Blessing provides for the blessing of a Christmas tree in the home by “a parent or another family member, in connection with the evening meal on the Vigil of Christmas or at another suitable time on Christmas.”⁵⁶ A shorter rite is provided with a domestic blessing in mind.⁵⁷

The Order of Blessing may begin with a suitable song, followed by the Sign of the Cross and a greeting. One greeting⁵⁸ is provided for a cleric (with the response *And with your spirit*)⁵⁹ and another for a lay presider⁶⁰ (with the response *Amen.*)⁶¹ An introductory address reminds us of the “signs and wonders” which accompanied the birth of the Lord and how that birth brings “joy to our hearts and enlightenment to our minds.” The presider then asks that the lights of the tree lead us to the Perfect Light.

⁵¹ BOB, no. 1570.

⁵² BOB, nos. 1570-1596.

⁵³ BOB, no. 1572.

⁵⁴ BOB, no. 1575.

⁵⁵ 19

⁵⁶ BOB, no. 1574.

⁵⁷ BOB, no. 1592-1596.

⁵⁸ BOB, no. 1576.

⁵⁹ BOB, no. 1577.

⁶⁰ BOB, no. 1578.

⁶¹ BOB, no. 1579.

This is followed by a brief Liturgy of the Word, a homily or “brief reflection”⁶² by a lay person and intercessions,⁶³ concluding with the Lord’s Prayer. The Prayer of Blessing of the Christmas Tree⁶⁴ follows, which a cleric prays with hands outstretched and a lay person with hands joined.⁶⁵

Two forms are provided for the blessing. The first⁶⁶ praises God for the creation of sun, moon, and stars and for “the light of Israel” through the Law and the Prophets. In Jesus Christ, the Emmanuel and Prince of Peace, we are filled with the wonders of God’s love. The prayer concludes by asking that the light of the Christmas Tree might fill our hearts with joy, and lead us to the knowledge of salvation.

The second form begins by recalling that by his incarnation,⁶⁷ Christ has “rescued us from the darkness of sin by making the cross a tree of life and light.” The prayer then asks that the tree remind us of the Cross of Christ and that the light of Christ might always shine in our hearts.

The candles or lights of the tree are then illuminated⁶⁸ and the Order concludes with a simple blessing.⁶⁹

⁶² BOB, no. 1583.

⁶³ BOB, no. 1584.

⁶⁴ 28

⁶⁵ 29

⁶⁶ 30

⁶⁷ 31

⁶⁸ 32

⁶⁹ 33

Pope Benedict on the Christmas Tree

Forty seven years ago, Pope Benedict XVI (the then Cardinal Josef Ratzinger) published a collection of Christmas reflections entitled The Blessing of Christmas (Ignatius Press, 1977), including the following reflection on the oldest surviving Christmas Tree in the world.

A few years ago, I was fortunate enough to see the oldest surviving Christmas tree in the world, which forms a kind of reredos behind the high altar in the church at Christkindl near Steyr.

The history of this tree takes us back to the year 1694. At that time, Steyr had a new sacristan and choirmaster who suffered from epilepsy—or, as the chronicle innocently puts it, “the sickness where one falls down.”

He came from Melk, where he had become acquainted with the devotion to the child Jesus. He placed a picture of the Holy Family in the hollow of a medium-sized pine, and he found strength and consolation as he said his prayers before this picture.

Then he heard of an image of the Christ child that had healed a paralyzed nun, and after some time he succeeded in obtaining an exact copy, a waxen Christ child holding a cross in one hand and the crown of thorns in the other.

He brought this image to the tree and said his prayers before it, sensing that a healing power radiated from the image. Gradually, people heard about this, and they began to make pilgrimages to the Christ child in the tree.

The Church authorities in Passau were slow to approve of this popular devotion, but the local people were finally given permission to erect a little church around this tree, and the foundation stone of the Christkindl church was laid in 1708. It was built by the most celebrated Austrian architects of the time, on the model of Santa Maria Rotonda in Rome.

One might say that it has become a precious husk around the tree, out of which the altar and the tabernacle grow. The tree still bears the little waxen Christ child. He wears a crown, and rays go forth from the figure, giving an assurance of faith and hope to many people.

The Manger in Church

The inclusion of a nativity scene or Christmas manger in Church stems from at least the thirteenth century with the account of Saint Francis and the manger in the Church of Greccio. The selection and arrangement of figures, while based on the Gospels, highlights particular stories from the Gospel as included in the readings and prayers of the Mass.

The following questions and answers are intended to assist parishes in the preparation of appropriate and effective settings of the Christmas mangers in a parish setting.

What is the purpose of arranging a Christmas Manger in a parish Church?

The *Book of Blessings* suggests two reasons for arranging a Christmas Manger in Church: to foster devotion to the Christmas mystery and to allow the faithful to gather before the manger.⁷⁰

Every priest is aware of the admirable custom of families gathering before the manger as they recollect and pass on the Christmas story to their children.

Where is the Manger scene properly placed in Church?

The practice of placing the Manger scene in front of the altar runs the risk of compromising the altar's role as "the center of the thanksgiving that is accomplished through the Eucharist"⁷¹ and "the center toward which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns."⁷²

For this reason, the *Book of Blessings* prohibits the placement of the manger in the sanctuary.⁷³ It recommends instead that the Manger be located "in a place which is suitable for prayer and devotion and is easily accessible by the faithful."⁷⁴

The Neapolitan practice of placing the manger near the entrance of the Church or in chapel explicitly devoted to gathering before the Nativity scene fulfills both of these

⁷⁰ *Book of Blessings*, [BOB] "Blessing of a Christmas Manger or Nativity Scene," no. 1544.

⁷¹ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, [GIRM] no. 296.

⁷² GIRM, no. 299.

⁷³ BOB, no. 1544.

⁷⁴ BOB, no. 1544.

requirements: it is suitable for prayer and easily accessible for the faithful. Alternatively, other devotional areas outside the sanctuary or even in the nave or vestibule of the Church may be chosen.⁷⁵

When should the blessing of the Nativity scene take place?

While the *Book of Blessings* recommends the Vigil of Christmas as the most natural time to bless the Christmas manger, it allows for other suitable times according to pastoral circumstances, including outside of Mass.⁷⁶

How is the Nativity scene blessed during Mass?

The blessing is found in numbers 1562-1564 of the *Book of Blessings* and takes place during the Prayer of the Faithful. A sample formula for the introduction of the Prayer of the Faithful is provided, along with four sample intercessions. At the conclusion of the intercessions, the priest, with hands outstretched, says the prayer of blessing.⁷⁷

The prayer addresses the “God of every nation and people,” who has manifested his love for us since creation and thus sent his Son as our Savior, by whose birth we have come to know “joy and peace, justice, mercy, and love.” The priest⁷⁸ then asks God’s blessing upon the manger, that it might remind us of “the humble birth of Jesus...God-with-us and Savior of all.”

⁷⁵ BOB, no. 1542.

⁷⁶ BOB, no. 1543.

⁷⁷ BOB, no. 1564.

⁷⁸ BOB, no. 1565.

Pope Francis on the Manger

A collection of Christmas reflections by the Holy Father has been published under the title, Christmas at the Nativity. Pope Francis' introduction to that work is published here for the benefit of our readers.

Twice I have gone to Greccio. The first time I went to learn about the place where St. Francis of Assisi invented the Nativity scene, something that also marked my childhood: in my parents' house in Buenos Aires, this sign of Christmas always was put up, even before the tree. The second time I gladly returned to that place, in the province of Rieti, to sign the apostolic letter *Admirabile signum*, on the meaning and significance of the Nativity scene today.

On both occasions I felt a special emotion emanating from the grotto, where a medieval fresco can be admired, one side of it depicting the night of Bethlehem, and the other depicting the night of Greccio. The excitement of that sight prompts me to delve deeper into the Christian mystery that loves to hide within what is infinitely small.

Indeed, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ remains the heart of God's revelation, although it is easily forgotten that its unfolding is so unobtrusive, to the point of going unnoticed. Littleness, in fact, is the way to encounter God.

On the tombstone of St. Ignatius of Loyola, it is written, *Non coarctari a maximo, sed contineri a minimo, divinum est* ("Not to be limited by the greatest, and yet to be contained in the tiniest—this is the divine").

In short, one should not be frightened of the big things; one should go forward and take into account the smaller things.

This is why safeguarding the spirit of the Nativity scene becomes a healthy immersion in the presence of God manifested in the small, sometimes trivial and repetitive, everyday things. Knowing how, in order to understand and choose God's ways, to renounce what seduces but leads down a bad path is the task we face. In this regard, discernment is a great gift, and we must never tire of asking for it in prayer.

The shepherds in the manger are those who welcome God's surprise and live in wonder at their encounter with him, adoring him: in littleness they recognize the face of God. Humanly we are all inclined to seek greatness, but it is a gift to know how to really find it: to know how to find greatness in that smallness that God so loves.

In January 2016 I met the youth of Rieti at the very haven of the Infant Jesus, just above the Nativity shrine. I reminded them, and everyone today, that on Christmas night there are two signs that guide us in recognizing Jesus. One is the sky full of stars. There are many of those stars, an infinite number, but among them all a special star stands out, the one that prompted the Magi to leave their homes and begin a journey, a journey that would lead them where they did not know. It happens the same way in our lives: at a certain moment some special “star” invites us to make a decision, to make a choice, to begin a journey.

We must forcefully ask God to show us that star that draws us toward something more than our habits, because that star will lead us to contemplate Jesus, that child who is born in Bethlehem and who wants our full happiness.

On that night, made holy by the Savior’s birth, we find another powerful sign: the smallness of God. The angels point out to the shepherds a baby born in a manger. Not a sign of power, self-sufficiency, or pride. No. The eternal God is reduced to a helpless, meek, humble human being. God lowered himself so that we could walk with him and so that he could stand beside us, not above and far from us.

Awe and wonder are the two feelings that move everyone, young and old, before the Nativity scene, which is like a living Gospel overflowing from the pages of Holy Scripture.

It is not important how the Nativity scene is set up; it can always remain the same or change every year; what matters is that it speaks to life.

The first biographer of St. Francis, Thomas of Celano, describes the Christmas night of 1223, whose eight-hundredth anniversary we celebrate this year. When Francis arrived, he found the crib with the hay, the ox, and the donkey. Before the Christmas scene, the people who flocked to the place manifested an unspeakable joy, never tasted before. Then the priest, at the manger, solemnly celebrated the Eucharist, showing the link between the Incarnation of the Son of God and the Eucharist. On that occasion, there were no figurines in Greccio: the Nativity scene was created and experienced by those who were present.

I am sure that the first Nativity scene, which accomplished a great work of evangelization, can also be an occasion today to summon forth awe and wonder. Thus, what the simplicity of that sign made St. Francis realize persists down to our own days as a genuine form of the beauty of our faith.

Vatican City, 27 September 2023

The Solemn Christmas Proclamation

The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Twenty-fifth Day of December, when ages beyond number had run their course from the creation of the world, when God, in the beginning created heaven and earth, and formed man in his own likeness;

When century upon century had passed since the Almighty set his bow in the clouds after the Great Flood, as a sign of covenant and peace; in the twenty-first century since Abraham, our father in faith, came out of Ur of the Chaldees;

In the thirteenth century since the People of Israel were led by Moses in the Exodus from Egypt;

Around the thousandth year since David was anointed King; in the sixty-fifth week of the prophecy of Daniel;

In the one hundred and ninety-fourth Olympiad; in the year seven hundred and fifty-two since the foundation of the City of Rome; in the forty-second year of the reign of Caesar Octavian Augustus,

The whole world being at peace,

JESUS CHRIST,

eternal God and Son of the eternal Father,

desiring to consecrate the world by his most loving presence,

was conceived by the Holy Spirit,

and when nine months had passed since his conception,

was born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem of Judah,

and was made man:

THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

ACCORDING TO THE FLESH.