

Connect

A newsletter for
high school
religion teachers,
campus ministers,
and principals

Keeping Advent in Advent *by Rev. John P. Mack Jr.*

The annual advent of the beginning of the Church year is buried beneath a deluge of secular, solstice-time “holiday” celebrations. Frosty the Snowman, various reindeer, and that thieving grinch displace the Advent wreath. The grand sweep of the clock’s hands between Thanksgiving Day and the New Year overwhelms the distinct Church seasons of Advent and Christmas that serve as faith anchors for the turning of the calendar. For today, we do stand in time closer to the Advent of our God than when we began this same faith journey yesterday.

Without appearing to be unredeemed scrooges or shrill witches left over from Halloween, people of faith are nonetheless called to remain true to ecclesial rhythms as natural light gives way to supernatural Light. We do not need to give in to the pressure to put up the tree the day after Thanksgiving simply because the stores have already been decorated for a month. Nor do we need to behave like liturgical “sticks in the mud” with a misappropriated zeal deflating any and all festivities, including the Second Coming. We are to prepare for—to look forward to—the “advent” of something glorious

and wonderful, something beyond the advent of a new year. The season of Advent gives us time to ponder anew the Almighty’s sovereignty enfleshed in the Advent at Bethlehem of Judea.

The Catholic school faith community—the soul of our educational endeavors—is the place to hold back the commercial Christmas tide. We should focus our efforts on more than just keeping Christ in Christmas. We must also focus on keeping Christmas in Christmas and Advent in Advent. Preventing the sacred seasons from dissolving into an amorphous, wintry mess begins at the thresholds of our schoolhouses and classrooms. Conscious decisions and conscientious efforts by Catholic school educators can help students and their parents celebrate Christmas by first celebrating Advent religiously. In these efforts, the key to unlocking understanding is Advent’s “look forward.”

Twofold Character

As with any journey, we begin each year of grace with the end in mind:

“The Advent mystery in our own lives is the beginning of the end of all, in us, that is not yet Christ.”

—Thomas Merton

the Advent of holy Sovereignty. We “look forward” to the full coming of the Kingdom, a kingdom for which we pray each time we join in the Lord’s Prayer. “Thy kingdom come”; so prays the prayer. We long for the Christ to become the “all in all” (see 1 Corinthians 15:28). Advent laments the apparent absence of holy Sovereignty, as witnessed in the aimless wanderings of our world, the cynicism that seeps through reality television, and the ever-present culture of death. Advent’s lamentation does not bear a penitential character; Advent’s lamentation is winter’s longing for life—God’s life and presence.

The Church’s “General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar” states, “Advent has a twofold character: as a season to prepare for Christmas when Christ’s first coming to us is remembered; as a season when that remembrance directs the mind and

(continued on page 2)

contributors



Rev. John P. Mack Jr.
 Pastor at Saint Cecilia Church,
 Diocese of Buffalo,
 New York



Michael K. St. Pierre
 Theology teacher
 and associate
 campus minister



Barbara Murray
 Editor of parish-
 based resources
 Saint Mary's Press



**Eileen M. Daily,
 PhD**
 Development
 editor
 Saint Mary's Press



Steven McGlaun
 Development
 editor
 Saint Mary's Press

(*"Keeping Advent in Advent"* continued from page 1)

heart to await Christ's Second Coming at the end of time. Advent is thus a period for devout and joyful expectation" (*Documents on the Liturgy 1963–1979*).

Advent is measured by Sundays (four)—not weeks (three or four) or days—although the last eight days bear a specific character in preparation for Christmas. The four candles on the Advent wreath mark the passing of each successive Lord's Day as well as the passing of the ages along an endless ring of increasing light. The four-Sunday structure of Advent is witnessed by the Gospels and the "themes" of each Sunday. The final eight days serve as an immediate preparation for Christmas, with the ancient O Antiphons chants, which invite God's timely Advent through the invocation of ancient images of the Divine. The last days of Advent are about more than just getting ready for the baby Jesus.

Watch, Wait, Listen, Anticipate

This twofold nature of Advent reflects the creative tension between salvation's two-stage drama played out since "the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). Our experience of the Divine has an inherent tension between the "already" and the "not yet." Advent portrays heavenly visions that are within us, beyond us, and impending upon us. Advent grasps Bethlehem with one hand and the Parousia with the other. Through the long shadows of winter, we look for the Light, the incarnate word of God, here

in the ordinary happenings of life. We watch. Wait. Listen. Anticipate. The imperatives direct us to stand expectant and hopeful for more than just Christmas Day and a commercial bonanza of brightly wrapped presents heaped beneath a festively decorated, well-lit tree. In truth, the gifts pale in comparison with the Presence. Advent looks forward, anticipating the great day of the Lord and the drawing of all things into Christ. The experience of that Advent can be savored today, at this moment in time, within the human experience and the web of our relationships.

"We must also focus on keeping Christmas in Christmas and Advent in Advent."

Anticipation, to the point of child-like excitement, prevails throughout what would otherwise be a dreary winter month. Such expectancy energizes Advent and need not be puritanically dismissed. Advent must embrace the overwhelming seasonal desire for "making spirits bright." We look forward when the sunlight fades and the warmth wanes beneath winter's cold bath. We barely notice the increasing gloom outside because lights, music, and freshly baked cookies inside captivate our senses with great familiarity. But during the growing night, we look forward to the new day—for believers, the day of the Lord. "Lord Jesus, come in glory" speaks our longing.

“Advent must embrace the overwhelming seasonal desire for ‘making spirits bright.’”

Swords into Plowshares

For those who patiently prepare, the virtue of Advent vigilance emerges. Tradition delivers to us the Scriptures, the Liturgy of the Hours, the feasts of Saints Nicholas and Lucy, patristic writings, and the natural human longing for home and hearth.

Advent’s readings are woven together in a similar pattern from one year to the next. The first Sunday looks ahead to the Second Coming, the day of the Lord. The second and third Sundays focus on the role of John the Baptist as forerunner, witness, and prophetic wilderness voice. The fourth Sunday connects with the familiar Nativity scene.

Isaiah’s prophecy compels us to look forward in hope to a radical transformation of an often-violent world. The first reading of the First Sunday of Advent, Cycle A, tells us: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. . . . O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord” (Isaiah 2:4–5).

Isaiah’s image of deadly sticks and stones being transformed into instruments of life is the hallmark of the peaceable kingdom. The following scene, from Isaiah in the first reading of the Second Sunday of Advent, Cycle A, gives us a similar image:

A shoot shall come out from the
 stump of Jesse,
 and a branch shall grow out of
 his roots . . .

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
 the leopard shall lie down with
 the kid,
 the calf and the lion and the fatling
 together,
 and a little child shall lead them.
 (11:1,6)

Unlikely companions, such as a wolf and a lamb, serve as symbols of the universality of the peaceable kingdom, the reconciliation of enmity, and the radical reversal of fortunes in the advent of the kingdom.

Keeping Advent in Advent and keeping Advent well begins in understanding that it is both distinct from and related to the Christmas season. The vision of holy Sovereignty from Isaiah, other prophets, and John the Baptist can distinguish Advent and still lead us joyfully into the Christmas season. The promises of swords being transformed into plowshares and of a peaceful reconciliation between the wolf and the lamb might be shouted down by the culture of death. Yet the prophetic “voice in the wilderness” prepares for a divine Advent through single-hearted perseverance. The Advent call to “prepare a way for the Lord” means more than cooking and cleaning for the annual Christmas visitors to your home. That preparation—that patient waiting—is necessary because we tend to rush to conclusion, to instant satisfaction. And so often we miss the moment, now, when the Advent of God is so gracefully abundant.

Keeping Advent Well

Advent is more than a liturgical hoop through which we jump to get to Christmas goodies. The time of grace leading to Christmas allows believers to reflect on the radical transformation of everything through God’s coming into our world. Without it, Christmas is merely a sentimental journey down the road to Bethlehem, and the power of holy Sovereignty is left in a pile of manger hay. We look forward to the day of the Lord, the Advent of our blessed hope handed down in the Scriptures and in Tradition, from Isaiah’s prophecies to the legendary charity of Saint Nicholas.

Keeping Advent in Advent occurs through faithful observance of annual devotions such as Saint Lucy, Our Lady of Guadalupe, and Las Posadas. Faithful observance of these devotions urges us to build an Advent music repertoire beyond the standard “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” and to refrain from displaying an empty manger on the First Sunday of Advent. Keeping Advent in Advent and keeping the season well leads people of faith along a path to religiously celebrate the Christmas season.

Rev. John P. Mack Jr. has a bachelor of science degree from Kent State University, a master of divinity degree from Christ the King Seminary in New York, and a certificate of advanced studies in educational administration from the State University of New York College at Brockport. Mack holds a commission in the Air Force Reserve as a Catholic chaplain. This article was written while he was deployed in Pakistan in support of the 152nd Air Operations Group from Syracuse, New York, from December 2002 to May 2003.

from the classroom

Make Advent Real, Make Jesus Relevant *by Michael K. St. Pierre*

For many kids, Advent is about as tangible as global warming. *It happens but probably not very close to me. I know about it, but it doesn't seem relevant.* If one of those musings is on the mark, then campus ministers, teachers, and principals around the country can take heart as Advent rolls around again and they have the opportunity to present Jesus to youth in a new and fresh way. If past Advent activities have not gone very well in your school, commit yourself to a new approach this year.

This new approach recognizes that when we don't help students "get into" Advent, we send a message that Jesus is not relevant in the world. That message is hardly one we want to convey, and yet often our schools approach Advent with an attitude that says, "This is the way we've always done it." I'd like to suggest that the Catholic school is the perfect place not only to communicate the Good News about Jesus but also to counter the many secular voices that get rather loud during the Christmas season. The bottom line is this: If we can present Advent this year in an attractive way, we tell students that Jesus Christ is truly dynamic and able to make a difference in daily life.

To accomplish that task, we need to promote Advent—make it inviting and more understandable for young people. The tools are there for us:

liturgical colors, vestments, candles, hymns, readings, and opportunities to gather as a community. All we need to do is to use them in a way that is both fun and relevant to the youth culture.

Presenting Advent in a way that is inviting to young people can be as simple as devising a slogan or logo (for example: "ADVENT: Outwait, Outhope, Outlast" or "ADVENT: Hurry up and wait") that students can identify as unique to your school, or as elegant as a program that includes four separate themes and the accompanying actions. An entire school can have a streamlined program, or you can offer something solely for your own classroom. Consider the following example.

Week 1: Watch

The theme of watching for something that's going to happen is real for students, whether they are anticipating a test grade or a date to the semi-formal dance. Plug into this theme for the first week because it also accompanies the readings for the first and the second Sundays of Advent.

Suggested activity for week 1.

Invite a guest to speak to your class or to the entire student body. Take this opportunity to address topics such as recognizing the poor among us, adolescent depression, or eating disorders. Use the occasion to make

students more aware of issues that affect their lives and the life of the community. Remember, Advent is a season of hope. So if you choose to tackle a weighty issue, have it directed toward hope and new life.

Week 2: Wait

The theme of hanging around and filling in time is tangible for students when you consider the volume of tests, papers, and after-school activities offered each day. In the second week of Advent, your class or the entire school can build on the topic addressed during week 1.

Suggested activity for week 2.

Conduct a fund-raiser that is realistic in scope and attainable by your community. Donate the proceeds to a group or an organization you decide to help.

Week 3: Listen

The theme of being quiet and putting others first may be foreign to many students but nonetheless is worthy of our attention. Despite all the noise of the world, take this week to pause and encourage prayerfulness.

Suggested activity for week 3.

Create a visually appealing card for the wallet or purse that outlines a practical method of prayer, such as *lectio divina*. In each class, explain the method and consider assigning it for a night's worth of homework. You might

choose to devote more class time to prayer this week. By devoting time in class to breaking open the Word and reflecting on it, you will be teaching your students through your actions that Advent is important. You then can generate discussion about what it is like to listen to the Lord through the Scriptures.

Week 4: Anticipate

The theme of anticipation is perhaps ideal for emphasizing action through reflection. Students want to do something with their faith, not just talk about it. Give them the opportunity in this final chapter of Advent.

Suggested activity for week 4.

Offer students the opportunity for a day of recollection or for a day of mission or service work. Whatever you decide, make sure the day is challenging, well organized, and not boring.

Create an Advent Environment

We also must be aware that as a sacramental people, we present a visual reminder of the season of Advent to students and all visitors through the environment of our schools. The surroundings remind students that a Catholic school is

different—it is something special and worth celebrating. A large Advent wreath in the foyer or lobby is a good start. Spruce it up with a backdrop of colored pieces of fabric that stretch from floor to ceiling. Or the backdrop can be a banner with your Advent slogan. A final touch might be a laminated sheet of paper that contains an explanation of the wreath so that visitors and people who are unfamiliar with the Advent wreath can easily learn about it. Try framing the paper or placing it discretely in front of the display.

As campus ministers, teachers, and principals, let us commit ourselves to making this Advent season the most meaningful one yet for our students. If we make Advent real for our students, they can better know that Jesus is relevant in their lives.

Michael K. St. Pierre is the associate campus minister and a theology teacher at Saint Thomas Aquinas High School in Dover, New Hampshire. He has extensive experience in high school and parish settings in working with young people. St. Pierre just received his master of arts degree in systematic theology from Seton Hall University.

“Example makes a much greater impression on the mind and heart than words.”

—Saint John Baptist de La Salle,
patron saint of teachers

About Connect

Connect is a complimentary newsletter from Saint Mary's Press for high school religion teachers, campus ministers, and principals. It is published each October, January, and April.

Copyright © 2003 by Saint Mary's Press. All rights reserved.

To become a free subscriber, send your name, the name of your school, and your school address to *Connect*, Saint Mary's Press, 702 Terrace Heights, Winona, MN 55987-1318; phone 800-533-8095; fax 800-344-9225; or visit our Web site, www.smp.org. Direct all correspondence and phone calls about ideas for newsletter articles to *Connect* Editor, at the above address or phone number.

Acknowledgments

The scriptural quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Catholic Edition. Copyright © 1993 and 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. All rights reserved.

The quotation on p. 1 is from *Seasons of Celebration*, by Thomas Merton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), p. 95. Copyright © 1965 by The Abbey of Gethsemani. Copyright renewed 1993 by Robert Giroux, James Laughlin, and Tommy O'Callaghan. Reprinted with permission.

The quotation that describes Advent on pp. 1–2 is an excerpt from the English translation of *Documents on the Liturgy 1963–1979: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts*. Copyright © 1982 by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, Inc. All rights reserved.

resource reviews Advent Resources

Resources for nurturing our own spirituality and prayer life during the season of Advent abound. Here are a few you might like to look into.

Barbara Murray—*editor of parish-based resources*

Guide Our Journey: Meditations for Each Day of Advent helps the reader journey through the season day by day. Written by Mark Neilsen, this booklet offers a guide to the liturgical readings of each day of Advent. Neilsen then highlights a passage from each day's readings and offers a thought-provoking, often-anecdotal reflection to guide your prayer and meditation. The reflections are honest, real, personal, and universal. They are sprinkled with questions to foster a deeper and more personal reflection. Each meditation ends with a prayer or a suggestion for activities and action. A delightful aspect of this resource is the author's ability to link the reader to the works of others, thereby encouraging further spiritual reading. *Guide Our Journey* is a good companion as we wait in hope during the Advent season.

Order a copy of *Guide Our Journey: Meditations for Each Day of Advent* from Creative Communications for the Parish, 1564 Fencorp Drive, Fenton, MO 63026; phone 800-325-9414; fax: 636-305-9333.

Eileen M. Daily, PhD—*development editor*

During Advent, we see crèches, Christmas cards, and other images depicting the birth of Christ. The season offers an opportunity to teach young people to read and to interpret Christian art. ***Sister Wendy's Story of Christmas*** is a resource teachers can use to begin that process.

All the paintings in the book depict the Nativity. Sr. Wendy Beckett has a talent for highlighting the details in paintings and articulating the links between a painting and the biblical account of the event it portrays. Her explorations of the diversity of the art allow us to see a rich, expansive Nativity, rather than a reduction of the event to the common elements found in all paintings of the scene.

The book has its problems. The few obvious errors (for example, it reads, "Joseph isn't in the painting," though he

obviously is) will be caught by any teacher. The material is written at a four- to eight-year-old reading level, but turning its simple statements into questions would bring the work alive for older students.

Sister Wendy's Story of Christmas (New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1997) is out of print, but copies could be obtained through a library.

Steven McGlaun—*development editor*

Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas is a collection of wonderfully rich reflections for the Advent and Christmas seasons. Plough Publishing did a great job collecting relevant essays and reflections from many influential theologians throughout history. Henri Nouwen, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Saint John Chrysostom, Gustavo Guterrez, and C. S. Lewis are just a few of the authors whose insights are in this book. If you are looking for a quick 5-minute reflection in the morning, this book is probably not for you. If, however, you want to invest more time and energy in prayer during the Advent and Christmas seasons, this is a terrific starting point.

Obtain a copy of *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Farmington, MA: Plough Publishing, 2001) from an online bookseller or your local Christian bookstore.

If you are looking for a book of prayers and reflections for Advent, Christmas, and the Epiphany, check out ***O Holy Night***. Published by Saint Mary's Press, this collection provides brief and meaningful meditations for the liturgical seasons of Advent and Christmas. In this book you will find abundant resources for your personal prayer life or for daily reflections in your school. The reflections are an eclectic collection from people throughout history who wrote from different perspectives. The reflection "Magnificat," written by an anonymous Chilean woman, is particularly moving. Most of the reflections are in poetry form and offer a beautiful insight into these holy seasons.

To order a copy of *O Holy Night*, contact Saint Mary's Press at 800-533-8095 or www.smp.org.

Ambassador of Christ Recognition Awards *by Heidi Schlumpf*



The 2003 Ambassador of Christ Recognition Award recipients are (left to right) Charles "Chad" Workman II with his mother, Patricia; Jackie Vigneault with her husband, Jan; Todd Forman with his wife, Kathy.

Todd Forman, Jackie Vigneault, and Chad Workman II did not know one another until spring 2003, but they have had something important in common for years. Todd, a high school community service director from Cincinnati; Jackie, a youth minister in rural northern Ohio; and Chad, a high school senior from Tennessee, have significantly touched the hearts of teens—and now Saint Mary's Press has recognized all three for their dedication and service.

Todd, Jackie, and Chad are the first recipients of the Ambassador of Christ Recognition Award, which was created to honor three people each year who inspire Catholic teenagers with the Christian spirit. Inaugurated as part of Saint Mary's Press's sixtieth anniversary celebration in 2003, the awards will be given annually to an adult involved in ministry in a Catholic high school, an adult serving in a parish ministry, and a Catholic teen in the senior year of high school.

"These first winners of the Ambassador of Christ Recognition Awards make it clear that the Spirit of Christ is at work in the Church and alive in the hearts of young people in this country," says John M. Vitek, president of Saint Mary's Press. "It's evidence of the overwhelming goodness of young people and of the power and good effect that youth ministry and the faithful teaching of religion are having in Catholic schools and parishes."

Each recipient received a \$1,000 award plus \$500 in Saint Mary's Press resources. In addition, Saint Mary's Press flew the honorees and their guests to Winona, Minnesota,

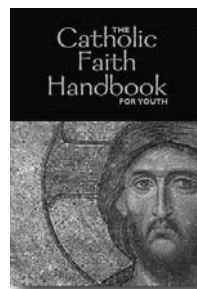
for the sixtieth anniversary celebration on April 12. At the event, Todd, Jackie, and Chad each received a beautiful stained-glass award—to the applause of nearly 200 attendees.

"Touching the hearts of teens" was the criterion for the Ambassador of Christ Awards. The first honorees were selected from more than one hundred nominees from Catholic parishes and schools across the country, and from among Saint Mary's Press customers. In addition to an essay nominating the person, the process required testimony from a teenager whose life the nominee had touched. Six staff members from Saint Mary's Press had the tough job of prayerfully discerning the winners.

"These are such deserving people who often go unrecognized," Vitek says. "We see them as partners in ministry. We create resources for them, but they are really the ones who take it to the young people. They're the ones doing the day-to-day work of carrying out the Good News."

For more information on the Ambassador of Christ Recognition Award or to get the forms to nominate someone you know, please visit www.smp.org or call 1-800-533-8095.

from the press



New Just for You!

If *The Catholic Youth Bible (CYB)* is your right hand, then this new handbook is your left! One of our most exciting new products this year, *The Catholic Faith Handbook for Youth* complements the scriptural wisdom contained in the CYB by offering a rich history of the

Catholic Tradition. With clear, concise information about the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church—organized to parallel the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* so that young people can appreciate the richness of Catholic teaching—this is the most comprehensive Catholic faith handbook available.

*what's
inside*

- "Keeping Advent in Advent"1-3
- contributors2
- from the classroom
"Make Advent Real, Make Jesus Relevant" 4-5
- quote from De La Salle 5
- resource reviews6
- "Ambassador of Christ Recognition Awards"7
- from the press7

in touch

Dear Reader,
I once heard a story about a priest who, during Mass on the Third Sunday of Advent, asked the congregation what the rose-colored candle symbolized. After a long pause, a young child stood up and said, "It means you are running out of shopping days until Christmas." Although we can laugh about the innocence of a small child, this story reveals one of the most common complaints of theology teachers and campus ministers during December: "What about Advent?"

All too often, we as a society, and, I imagine, sometimes as a school, go straight from Thanksgiving to Christmas without slowing down for the beautiful season of Advent. We are

tempted, as the Christmas break approaches, to decorate the school foyer with a Christmas tree, presents, and a Nativity scene, and relegate the Advent wreath to the chapel and theology classroom.

In this issue, you will find a wonderful reflection on the power and grace of Advent, along with practical tools for celebrating the season in your school. I know we are a little early, but consider our newsletter a chance for a head start this year. My prayer is that you and your school experience an Advent of spiritual enrichment and fulfillment.

Peace of Christ,



Steven McGlaun, development editor

Nonprofit
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Saint Mary's
Press of MN

touching the hearts of teensSM
saint mary's press
702 Terrace Heights
Winona, MN
55987-1318
USA

