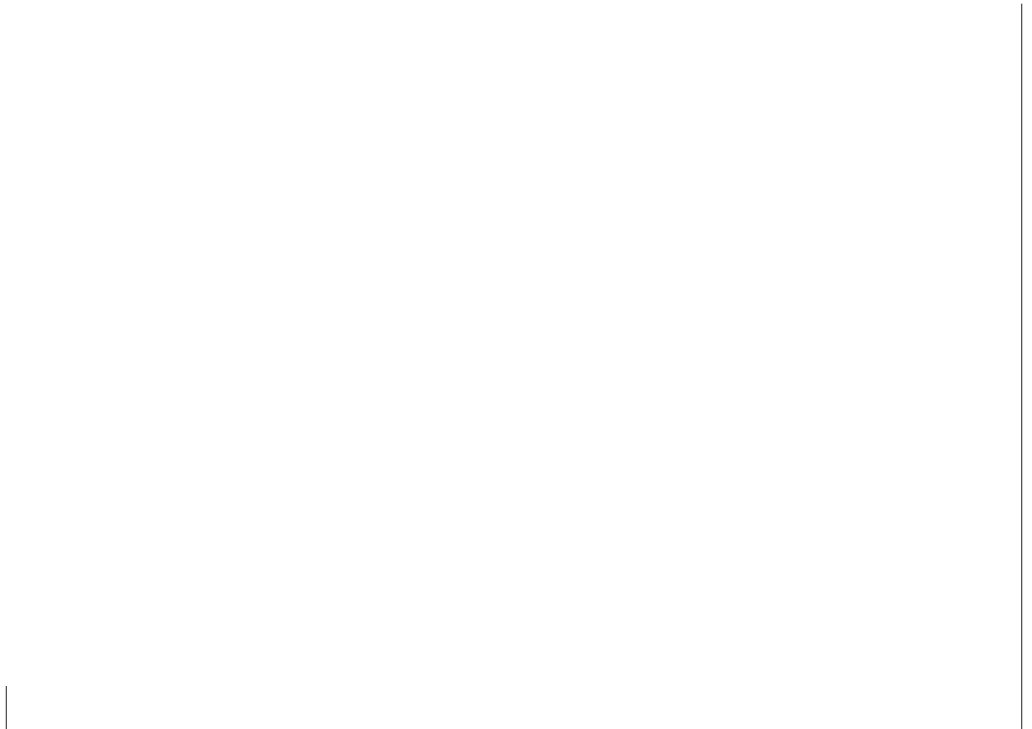


Ministry Ideas

for Celebrating Advent and Christmas

WITH TEENS, FAMILIES, AND PARISHES



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Janet Claussen and Marilyn Kielbasa

Saint Mary's Press®



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For David, Jon, Katie, Todd, and Kevin. May the magic and mystery of the season always enrich the faith of our family.

—Janet Claussen

To Annmarie and Tom Demarais, to their daughter and my beloved godchild, Ceili, and to their sons, Tim, John, Jacob, Ben, and Matt. Your lives are a loving witness to the message of Advent: expect the unexpected, wait in joyful hope, and be a Godbearer to the world.

—Marilyn Kielbasa

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—Janet Claussen and Marilyn Kielbasa

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Introduction

Advent and Christmas—at no other time of the year does the liturgical calendar of the Church meet the secular world head on with often conflicting messages. As the Church begins a new liturgical year with the first Sunday of Advent, the rest of the world is wrapping up the calendar year. While we enter into the reflective mood of purple and pink, merchants deck the malls in red and green. And before we hear the first strains of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” in our sanctuaries, Santa is a step ahead, coming to town with all the grandeur of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade. Then, just as our liturgical Christmas season is beginning on December 25, efficiency experts call for the trappings of Christmas to be packed away, before the shepherds have even arrived at the crèche.

For the seven weeks of Advent and Christmas, our collective psyches are caught between the magic of the holidays and the mystery of the Incarnation. This manual addresses that magic and mystery. It is designed to help teens, their families, and parishes acknowledge the mixed messages of the season while making it a meaningful time for remembering who we are and whose we are.

Keeping adolescents focused on the spiritual nature of the season is an especially daunting task. The attention spans of teens can be just as limited as those of younger children during the season of advertising overload. End-of-term school requirements often come due before Christmas; holidays are more apt to bring teens to the local mecca of materialism than to Church functions; families travel afar to reunite with loved ones.

To meet the challenge of making Advent and Christmas meaningful, parish and youth ministry efforts need to be intentional about bringing alive the Scriptures of each Sunday and holy day of the season. Providing creative ways to pray and reflect on the salvation story helps young people (in fact, all people) focus on the profound mystery of God among us.

Beyond the parish setting, the season calls for Church ministers to support families, helping them to create and practice family rituals as they celebrate Advent and Christmas. It is through rituals that family identity is formed and bonds of love are strengthened. Teens from families that practice rituals and devotions are more likely to practice their faith into adulthood and pass their faith on to their children. Memories of Advent wreaths, Christmas carols, tree blessings, and Epiphany parties become part of the Scriptures of family life for generations.

The seasons of Advent and Christmas are part of our Catholic identity as well. As people of the Incarnation, we give thanks and we remember the coming of the Lord as an infant and look forward to Christ’s Second Coming. Good liturgical practice focuses on “keeping Advent.” We sing and pray with anticipation and expectation before breaking into the joyful strains that Christmas liturgies bring. In the spirit of waiting, we avoid fully trimmed Christmas trees and bright poinsettias before their time has come. We pace ourselves. Too much, too soon disturbs the rhythm and flow of liturgical time.

However, in our zeal to keep Advent, it is important to acknowledge the reality of our worldly context. Rather than dismiss the sentimentality and joy of secular expressions, we who set the tone for liturgical celebrations would be wise to honor the authentic joy that the people of God experience in the traditions that make hearts merry and bright. Those same hearts become open to Christ through affective experiences of Christmas rituals. Finding the right balance between secular and sacred is key. This manual seeks that balance by providing opportunities for teens, families, and parishes to enter fully into the expectation and the joy of Advent and Christmas.

ADVENT

Late November or early December seems like a strange time for saying, “Happy New Year!” but as Catholics, we begin our liturgical year on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. With the season of Advent, the cycle of readings changes, and our mood changes as well. Unlike secular New Year celebrations, the tone is one of preparation, spiritual readiness, and hopeful anticipation as the Scriptures remind us to stay awake and be ready. The prophets of old challenge us to rejoice as we imagine a new way of being that a Messiah will bring while John the Baptist reminds us to repent and make straight the way of the Lord. There is much to ponder as we long to slow down amid the cultural demands of this time.

The General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar state that Advent “has a two fold 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 heart to await Christ’s Second Coming at the end of time. Advent is thus a period for devout and joyful expectation” (no. 39). Again, we sense multiple layers of Advent: the first and second coming of Christ; remembrance and anticipation; devout and joyful expectation.

CHRISTMAS

With the long-awaited arrival of December 25, the actual Christmas season begins. It is the shortest season of the liturgical calendar, but one rich with images of birth, new life, peace, and joy. There are no mixed messages—it is a time for rejoicing. Our liturgical colors change from purple to the white of celebration. Sanctuaries bloom with colors of the true Christmas season as we tell the familiar but profound stories of the mystery of the Incarnation. The feast of the Holy Family on the first Sunday after Christmas Day reminds us that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph struggled from the beginning with misunderstood messages about their son. We honor Mary and her place in the salvation story on January 1, followed by the great feast of the Epiphany, celebrating the global significance of Jesus’s coming. Finally, the season comes to a close with the feast of the Baptism of the Lord on the third Sunday after Christmas Day. The three-week Christmas season moves us from Jesus’s birth to the beginning of his public ministry in the compressed time of our liturgical calendar.

OVERVIEW OF THIS MANUAL

Ministry Ideas for Celebrating Advent and Christmas with Teens, Families, and Parishes is a resource manual that provides activities for gathered sessions with youth in parish settings, as well as ideas for fun and meaningful ways to observe the season with families and friends in homes and in the community. The first chapter provides a list of quick ideas that users can draw on for years to come to establish rituals, perform service, and create significant memories.

At the core of the manual are gathered sessions with youth that are lectionary based, using themes from the Scriptures that can be used in any liturgical cycle. Though any of the sessions can be adapted to intergenerational groups, the session celebrating the Baptism of our Lord is especially designed for parents and teens. Supplementary activities for Sundays or holy days during the Advent and Christmas seasons include prayer services, guided meditations, dramatic presentations, games, and blessings that are appropriate for parish or family settings.

How to Use This Manual

Read through *Ministry Ideas for Celebrating Advent and Christmas with Teens, Families, and Parishes* as far ahead of the actual season as possible. Some of the activities require preparation. Allow yourself adequate time to get ready.

Many of the chapters include fully developed sessions with youth. Based on the lectionary readings, the sessions engage young people in the theme of each Sunday or holy day with dynamic activities that tap into teens' lived experiences and challenge them to live out the Gospel message presented. The last session of the manual celebrating the Baptism of the Lord is a session for teens and parents. Each session can stand alone, although the lectionary themes of the season build on one another. Chapter 1 is filled with ideas and activities that can be used as a springboard for further development of the sessions or as stand-alone ideas or activities.

Think beyond using the ideas only with youth. Many of the activities in this manual can be easily adapted for use in children's programs, in RCIA and adult sessions, and with intergenerational gatherings. Because some of the games in the Christmas-season chapters are designed for families, they also can be used with all ages in parish settings.

Music

Ideally, music throughout the liturgical year should be coordinated with selections that teens will hear and sing as part of Eucharistic liturgies. When choosing music, consider consulting with the parish music director. He or she will know the parish repertoire, the music with which people are most familiar. In addition, most parish hymnals have indexes for liturgical seasons and themes, which can be a quick reference when looking for songs.

Handouts and Resources

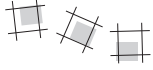
All necessary handouts and resources are found at the end of each chapter in this manual.

RESOURCES

Additional strategies and ideas for celebrating the seasons of Advent and Christmas with young people, families, and parish communities can be found on the Saint Mary's Press Web site. Go to www.smp.org and conduct a search using key words such as Advent, Christmas, New Year's, Epiphany, Baptism of the Lord, and feast of the Holy Family.

YOUR COMMENTS OR SUGGESTIONS

Saint Mary's Press wants to know your reactions to the strategies in *Ministry Ideas for Celebrating Advent and Christmas with Teens, Families, and Parishes*. We are also interested in new youth-ministry strategies for use with youth, families, and parishes. If you have comments or suggestions, please contact us at smp@smp.org.



First Sunday of Advent

Great Expectations: A Session on the Theme of Waiting

OVERVIEW

Advent is a time of great expectations. We wait not only for Jesus's coming as an infant but also for his Second Coming at the end of the world. Using the readings for the first Sunday of Advent, this session focuses on the theme of waiting and the need to be ready for the end times. It is designed for use with groups of teens but can be adapted for intergenerational settings.

Readings for the First Sunday of Advent

- Cycle A: Isaiah 2:1–5, Romans 13: 11–14, Matthew 24:37–44
- Cycle B: Isaiah 63:16–17,19; 64:2–7; 1 Corinthians 1:3–9; Mark 13:33–37
- Cycle C: Jeremiah 33:14–16, 1 Thessalonians 3:12–4:2, Luke 21:25–28,34–36

Suggested Time

60 minutes

PREPARATION

- Gather the following items:
 - an Advent wreath and candles
 - purple, pink, and white cloths for the prayer table
 - Catholic Youth Bibles* or other bibles, one for each participant
 - hymnals, at least one for every two participants
 - a purple candle
 - newsprint and markers
 - index cards or large adhesive labels, one for each participant
 - pens or pencils, one for each participant
- Create a prayer space using the Advent wreath, the purple, pink, and white cloths, a Bible, and any other items that will add to the prayerful atmosphere.
- Choose an Advent song that is familiar to the participants. See the introduction for suggestions, or consider using a song that is used at parish Sunday liturgies.

PROCEDURE

1. Gather the participants around the prayer space. Recruit a volunteer to light one purple candle while you read the following prayer, which is drawn from handout 1, "Praying the Advent Wreath."

Some things cannot be rushed. O God of love, as we light this candle, we pray for the grace to wait patiently. Your people waited so long for the coming of a Savior. We, too, are anxious for the celebration of your coming. We pray to be ready and alert, always trying to live the life you want for us. We light this candle in the name of Jesus, the Christ, who comes as light to the world. Amen.

Close the blessing ceremony by singing an Advent hymn.

2. Gather the participants in the middle of the room. Tell them that you will present two occasions when someone is waiting or expecting something to happen. They will be asked to choose between the two alternatives and, based on their response, to move to the side of the room that you have designated as *a* or *b*.

Read as many entries from the following list as time allows, pausing after each one to let the participants choose an option and move. Elicit comments about why the participants made their particular choices.

- Which is harder to wait for?
 - a. a school vacation or holiday weekend
 - b. a major test to be over
- Which would be more stressful for you?
 - a. waiting to find out whether you got into your first-choice college
 - b. waiting to find out if you made the varsity team or got a major role in the school play
- Which is more frustrating?
 - a. being stuck in a traffic jam on your way to a favorite vacation place
 - b. being stuck in a traffic jam on your way home from a long trip
- Which would be more difficult?
 - a. waiting outside the principal's office to find out your punishment for skipping school
 - b. waiting for your parents to come home and get the message that you skipped school
- Which is more difficult?
 - a. waiting for someone you really like to ask you out
 - b. waiting for the right moment to ask out someone you really like
- Which would be more difficult?
 - a. waiting in line to take your driver's test
 - b. waiting for the driver's license examiner to let you know if you passed the test
- Which one do you look forward to more?
 - a. your birthday
 - b. Christmas

3. Explain the following themes of the session in your own words:

In our culture, we are used to getting immediate results. We often do not like to wait for anything. We bristle at the thought of waiting in line, waiting in traffic, waiting for downloads, waiting to find out important news.

- ✦ Advent, which means “coming,” is about waiting—waiting for something big to happen. In the twenty-first century, the “wait” time of Advent has both secular and religious meaning. Our secular celebrations of the holiday also involve waiting: people wait in checkout lines, children wait to see Santa, and we wait for Christmas break and family celebrations.
- ✦ Christmas celebrates the Incarnation—God’s becoming fully human as well as fully divine in the person of Jesus. The Scriptures of Advent guide us to a fuller appreciation of what it means to wait in God’s time.
- ✦ The readings for all three cycles of Advent speak of waiting, not only about the first coming of Jesus but also his Second Coming. The Old Testament prophets give us a hint of God’s time, of what God has done for us, and of what God promises to do.
- ✦ The Gospel writers look ahead to the Second Coming of Jesus. Matthew and Mark were writing for a people who believed that Jesus would return in their lifetime. But God’s timeline was beyond the comprehension of Jesus’s early followers, just as it is for us today.
- ✦ The Scripture readings tell us what we must do to be ready in God’s time. We are invited to reflect not so much on the coming of Jesus as an infant but on his Second Coming, what we call “the end times.”

4. Ask the participants what images they think of when they hear the phrase “the end of the world.” If they are not familiar with the word *apocalypse*, define it for them as “the visions and events surrounding the end of the world.” Ask the participants to name apocalyptic images that come to mind from movies, songs, books, and other sources. List the images on newsprint. Images may include fire, floods, and nuclear war. The Book of Revelation, with its references to beasts, dragons, and plagues, may emerge as one of the sources.

5. Create small groups of three to four participants and distribute to each group two bibles, a sheet of newsprint, and a marker. Assign each group several chapters of the Book of Revelation, and direct them to make a list on newsprint of apocalyptic images and events from Revelation. Allow about 5 minutes for the groups to complete the task. Then invite the small groups to share their lists with the full group.

6. Use the following information to explain what the Catholic Church teaches about the end of the world:

- Just as the Bible begins in the Book of Genesis with the story of the creation of a world in which everything is good, it ends in the Book of Revelation speaking of a new creation where God’s goodness again overflows.
- The last three chapters of the Book of Revelation contain John’s vision of the Reign of God, the end of history, and eternal life. He describes a new heaven and a new earth.
- John tells his readers that they should look forward to the time of this new city with joy, because when it comes, God will live in their midst. It will be a time when evil is destroyed and suffering is banished.

(The information in the preceding bulleted items is adapted from the article “The New Jerusalem” in *The Catholic Youth Bible*, first edition, near Revelation 20:4.)

- The Book of Revelation also contains bizarre descriptions of terrible things that will happen at the end of the world, and some people think that this final book of the Bible proves that

it will happen very soon. For those who read the Bible as literal truth, the writing in Revelation can sound like the end of the world is near. The writer was, in fact, addressing the people of the early Church, who did expect that Christ would return in their lifetime. As Catholics we do not believe the descriptions are factual. Instead, we believe they contain symbols that offered hope to a Church that was under persecution at the time the book was written. The Book of Revelation does not predict when the world will end but instead brings us hope in proclaiming God's ultimate triumph over evil in history. (Adapted from the introduction to the Book of Revelation in *The Catholic Youth Bible*, first edition)

- Our belief about the end times can be summed up in our profession of faith, the Nicene Creed: “[Jesus] will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. . . . We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pp. 49–50)
- The readings for the first Sunday of Advent speak about being ready for the return of Jesus. We never know when it will happen, so it is essential that we stay awake and be ready.

7. In the large group, brainstorm several scenarios in which staying awake or alert while waiting for something is difficult but extremely important, for example, waiting in line all night for concert tickets or waiting for parents to come home when you are babysitting. After each scenario, brainstorm creative ways that someone might stay awake and ready while he or she is waiting.

8. Tell the participants to return to their small groups. Give each group a sheet of newsprint and a marker. Tell them to list on newsprint ways to stay awake spiritually in order to be ready for the coming of Jesus at Christmas. For example, one way to stay awake is to repeat the phrase “Come, Lord Jesus” frequently throughout the day.

After about 5 minutes, invite the groups to share their lists with everyone and then to post them. When all the lists are posted, ask the participants to consider how many of the ideas are applicable to their lives throughout the year.

9. Distribute index cards or large adhesive labels and pens or pencils. Invite the participants to write down at least one thing from the list that they will try to do during this season of Advent—and beyond. Suggest that they keep the card or label in a conspicuous place to remind them to stay awake and be ready.

10. Close with this prayer, which follows the Lord's Prayer in the liturgy:

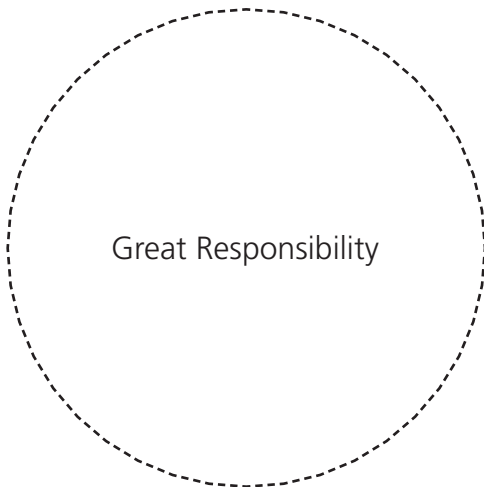
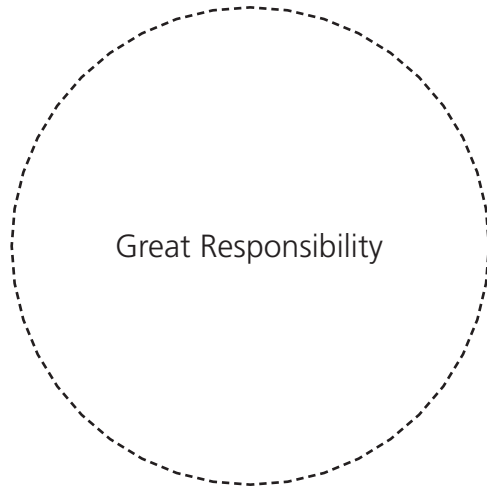
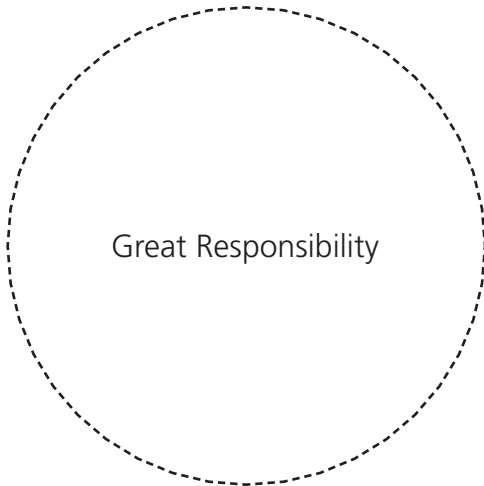
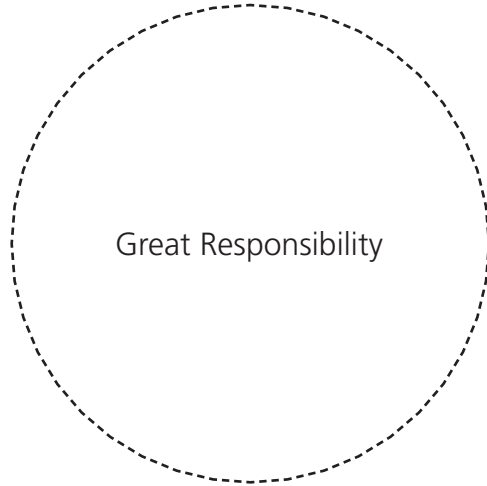
Deliver us Lord, from every evil,
and grant us peace in our day.
In your mercy keep us free from sin
and protect us from all anxiety
as we wait in joyful hope
for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

(*Sacramentary*, p. 562)

Invite the participants to respond as they do at Mass: For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever.

(P. 562)

You may want to close the session by singing “The King of Glory” or another appropriate song.



Acknowledgments

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The quotation on page 10 is from *The General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar*, number 39, February 14, 1969, found at www.scborromeo.org/litcal.htm, accessed January 12, 2005.

The bulleted information on pages 15–16 and step 6 on page 86 are adapted from *The Catholic Youth Bible*, first edition (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2000), near Revelation 20:4 and the introduction to the Book of Revelation, and near Matthew 3:13–17. Copyright © 2000 by Saint Mary's Press. All rights reserved.

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“Ten Commandments Examen” on resource 5 is adapted from *Examination of Conscience*, by Fr. Pat Umberger, at fr.pat.com/examen.htm, accessed January 13, 2005. Copyright © 2004 by Fr. Pat Umberger. Used with permission of the author.

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The “O Antiphons” on resource 7 are from the *Liturgy of the Hours*, English translation prepared by the ICEL (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1975), pages 325, 333, 342, 350, 358, 367 (adapted), and 375, respectively. Copyright of the “O Antiphons” 1974, by the ICEL. Copyright © 1975 by Catholic Book Publishing Company. Used with permission.

The adapted song lyrics of “O Christmas Tree” on handout 4 are the English version of “O Tannenbaum,” found at www.songlyrics4u.com/nat-king-cole/o-tannenbaum.html, accessed January 13, 2005.