

Advent at Home: Five Practices for Entering into the Season

By Brad Bursa

Most Catholic parents are so far removed from a rich Catholic culture that living a liturgical season—let alone the liturgical year—can seem impossible.

Dr. Tracey Rowland, professor at the University of Notre Dame Australia, describes the scene by saying that young Catholics “find themselves in a situation where they have rarely experienced a fully functional Catholic culture.” She continues, “To find out about Christianity, especially the Catholic version of it, they watch documentaries and movies, they interrogate older Catholics, they google information about the saints, liturgies, and cultural practices. The cultural capital that should follow as a natural endowment upon their baptism, has been frittered away, buried and in some cases even deliberately suppressed by previous generations. They are like archeologists. They discover fragments of the faith which they find attractive and then they try to figure out where the fragment once fitted into a Catholic frame of mind.” Another article will have to tackle the causes of such issues.

This article concerns reincorporating the liturgical year in the home—really and concretely. It engages those Catholic parents who are living in the Catholic culture vacuum and are uncertain as to how to allow the liturgical year to move life in the home. Fortunately, cultivating a liturgical life in the home is quite possible. Why? Because at the bottom of it, to live a liturgical season well means jumping in, being carried by the liturgical river that is already in motion, and letting that movement flow into the whole of life.

Being Moved

The Catechism describes the liturgical year by focusing on God’s initiatory action: “Beginning with the Easter Triduum as its source of light, the new age of the Resurrection fills the whole liturgical year with its brilliance” (CCC, 1168).

The language harkens to Genesis 1, as God creates *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) by speaking light with his Word (Gen 1:3). From this light, which is life itself, from God’s activity in time, the whole world is filled with his brilliance (Jn 1:1–5).

We are moved because he moves.

While the Triduum liturgies are kinds of “hyper-concentrated” experiences, and Easter itself is the “Feast of feasts” (CCC, 1169), the rest of the liturgical year manifests the “economy of salvation . . . at work within the framework of time” (CCC, 1168). The liturgical year unfolds “the various aspects of the one Paschal mystery” (CCC, 1171). The whole of the liturgical year unveils the God who initiates, the God who made time, the God who has time for us.

The Liturgical Year and the Home

The liturgical year celebrates God’s initiative within time, yet it is not limited to the liturgy itself. Instead, the liturgy shapes the whole of Christian life in all its dimensions. The Church intends the liturgical year to be deeply formative (see CCC, 1438).

When it comes to family life, therefore, parents are called to cultivate the home liturgically. Parents exercise their primary responsibility for educating their children by allowing the liturgical year to move and form them as they then craft a liturgical culture within the home (CCC, 1914 and 2223). That sounds rather daunting. However, it can be as simple as choosing a

devotion, practicing it as a family for a season, and pausing to marvel at what God did in your home because of your openness and desire. Remember, we are moved because he moves.

Given that Advent is just around the corner, and given that it is a bit of a blur for most, we will look at some practices that can easily be employed in any Catholic home, regardless of age, number of children, or busy schedules.

Advent at Home

Annually, a sense of excited expectation maxes out during the weeks and days leading up to Christmas. Particularly with children, the anticipation is practically palpable, and its power motivates behavior, activities, and desire. In fact, for children and adults, exasperation can triumph as we “just can’t wait” for Christmas to come—perhaps for gifts, but also for an end to our kids’ questions.

Yet, the Church invites all her members to embrace this hopeful waiting and to remain in it. The liturgy itself celebrates and “makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah” by “sharing in the long preparation for the Savior’s first coming” (CCC 524). Why? Does she want to torture us by making us even more aware of our ache for Christmas? No. The liturgical celebration of “expectancy” and “preparation” is meant to move us interiorly, that we might “renew [our] ardent desire for his second coming” (CCC 524).

Parents, for their part, play a central role in shaping the experience of Advent for their children beyond the formal liturgy. Let’s consider five practical ways parents can cultivate home life such that it is moved by the season of Advent, instead of hastily moving past it.[3]

1. The Advent Wreath

“Dad, can I light it?”

“No, me! I want to light it!”

“Fine, but I’m blowing it out!”

This common bout takes place between my kids before dinner during Advent, as the Advent wreath becomes a fixture on our dining room table and in our evening devotions. The wreath in the home makes present a visible connection to the liturgy, as most Catholic churches feature the Advent wreath in a place of prominence during the season.

Rich in symbolism, yet profoundly simple, the Advent wreath serves as a visible reminder of anticipation—slowly watching the light march forward, one week at a time. The wreath is made of evergreens, which signify life everlasting. The circular wreath has no beginning or end, symbolizing God’s eternal nature. Finally, in ancient times, a wreath would decorate the head of the victor in a competition. Here, we are reminded of Christ’s victory and glory from his humble “beginnings” in the womb of Mary to his triumph over death and Ascension into heaven.

Each of the four candles represents a week of Advent, with a new candle lit on each of the four Sundays of the liturgical season. Three of the candles are purple, signifying penance, prayer, and preparation. The rose candle, lit on the third Sunday of Advent, known as Gaudete Sunday (“rejoice”—the first word in the antiphon for that liturgy), symbolizes a lightness and joy because Advent is halfway over and the light of Christ that much closer. As the light advances from one candle to the next, we are reminded of God’s action throughout salvation history and the ages leading to his true light coming into the world (see Jn 1:9). As Fr. William Saunders of the Arlington diocese puts it, the lighting of the candles signifies “the expectation and hope surrounding our Lord’s first coming into the world and the anticipation of His second coming to judge the living and the dead.”[4]

Many families incorporate the daily lighting of the Advent wreath as they pray before dinner. Prayers for this daily lighting can be found in traditional Catholic devotional books or by searching “Advent wreath prayers” online.

2. Gradual Preparation

Advent is a season of waiting and preparing. However, most of our domestic practices do not align. Whether it is decorating the Christmas tree the day after Thanksgiving or listening to Christmas music 24/7, it basically feels like Christmas from late November until the tree gets tossed to the curb on December 26. Again, Advent is a season of waiting, of anticipating. And this matters. As Pope Benedict XVI once put it, “Advent becomes an opportunity to reawaken within ourselves the true meaning of waiting, returning to the heart of our faith which is the mystery of Christ, the Messiah who was expected for long centuries and was born in poverty, in Bethlehem.” [5]

Our practices in the domestic sphere should align with this waiting and gradual preparation as best as possible. In my family’s home, this means the following:

The nativity crèche appears on the First Sunday of Advent and we slowly add more moss, more hunks of wood and rocks and plants to fill out the scene. We add in the unassuming shepherds during week three. Mary and Joseph arrive on the fourth Sunday of Advent, waiting for their baby.

The Christmas tree appears in the living room on the second Sunday of Advent. We place the lights on the tree, before wrapping it in ribbon or garland the third Sunday. Finally, all the ornaments go on the tree December 24, as we hustle around the house making final preparations for Christmas.

Advent hymns become a mainstay, as we try to push out the Christmas pop. From the Advent anthem “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” to “O Come Divine Messiah,” we hum them all through the season.

These are simple practices, but they are concrete—and they help solidify the sense of joyful hope.

3. Lights Out

At 6:00 p.m. each Friday during Advent, whoever the four-year-old is at the time (seems we always have one) runs through the house turning off all the lights while screaming “lights out!” at the top of their lungs.

To enter more deeply into the profundity of waiting in darkness and longing for the Light (see Is 9:1), we enter that darkness once a week by turning off the lights and powering off all screens, including phones. Flashlights and candles come out, and the light from the fireplace floods the family room, illuminating our space as we engage in the rosary, reading books aloud, and playing games together. “Lights Out” is a palpable (and, admittedly, fun) way to build the anticipation for the rising of the morning sun to dispel the darkness of night—and to pine for the coming of the Son who dispels the darkness of sin in our lives.

4. The Jesse Tree

With its roots reaching back to the Middle Ages, the Jesse Tree is a sort of mash-up between a family tree and an Advent calendar. The inspiration for the tree comes from Isaiah 11:1, wherein we hear that a new shoot will spring forth from the stump of Jesse. Thus, Jesse, the father of David, is seen as being the roots of Jesus' family tree. To be sure, the Jesse Tree carries us beyond Jesse himself and embraces the fullness of the genealogies presented in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

The Jesse Tree began in artwork, in stained glass windows or tapestries, for example. Today, you do not need to weave a tapestry to participate. You simply need a Bible, ornaments that signify key people and events, and a small tree of some kind. Ornaments could be handcrafted or pre-made and downloadable.

Due to the varying length of the fourth week of Advent, many people begin the Jesse Tree practice on December 1. In our house, the Jesse Tree has become a staple before our nightly prayers. The practice is simple: (1) a member of the family places the ornament of the day on the tree; (2) another member reads the corresponding Bible passage; and (3) we share reflections and questions and have some discussion. Quite often, because Scripture is so interesting, this opens into meaningful faith conversations and an opportunity to do a little teaching.

The Jesse Tree is not the Advent devotional practice we started with. Rather, we worked up to it as the children got older and we had some success with the simpler practices listed above. Now, however, the Jesse Tree is central to our experience of Advent at home.

Jesse Tree Calendar: Scripture Passages & Ornament Ideas

The following calendar can guide the reading of Scripture and the corresponding Jesse Tree ornaments from December 1–25 each year. Depending upon the age of children in the family, some passages may need to be abbreviated or summarized by a parent. Dr. John Bergsma's Bible Basics for Catholics is a huge help when it comes to "filling in the gaps" between the Bible stories—providing some key context that is simply necessary to round out the historical narrative.

Date	Scripture Passage	Ornament Image
December 1	Gen.1-Gen. 2:3	Earth
December 2	Gen. 2:4-25	Adam and Eve / Garden
December 3	Gen. 3:1-24	Snake
December 4	Gen. 6:1-8; Gen. 7:1-10; Gen. 8:1-22; Gen. 9:8-17	Ark and Rainbow
December 5	Gen. 11:1-9	Tower of Babel
December 6	Gen. 12:1-5a; Gen. 15:1-6, 12-21	Abraham and the Sun in the Sky
December 7	Gen. 22:1-18	Ram in Thicket
December 8	Gen. 28:10-22	Ladder
December 9	Gen. 37:12-36; Gen. 41:1-8, 25-45; Gen. 42:1-6; Gen. 45:4-15; Gen. 46:29-30	Coat
December 10	Ex. 1:8-10; Ex. 2:23-25; Ex. 3	Burning Bush
December 11	Ex. 12; Ex. 13:17-Ex. 14:1-30	Lamb
December 12	Ex. 19:1-9a; Ex. 20:1-19	Stone Tablets
December 13	Josh. 1:1-3; Josh. 6:1-21	Trumpet
December 14	Judg. 2:6-8; Judg. 2:16; Judg. 6:11; Judg. 6-8	Clay Water Pitcher
December 15	Ruth 1-4	Grain
December 16	1 Sam. 16:1-13; 1 Sam. 17:1- 54	Shepherd's Staff
December 17	2 Sam. 6-7	Crown
December 18	1 Kings 1:28-40; 1 Kings 2:1- 4; 1 Kings 3:1-15 (or 1-28 for long form); 1 Kings 6:1	Temple
December 19	1 Kings 11:1-13	Broken Crown
December 20	2 Kings 24-25:1-21	Teardrops
December 21	Is. 7:10-14; Is. 9:2-7; Is. 11:1- 10	Stump of Jesse (tree stump with new shoot)
December 22	Jer. 29:10-14; Jer. 31: 31-40	Heart
December 23	Luke 1:26-38	Holy Spirit Dove
December 24	Luke 1:39-56	Visitation Scene (Mary visits Elizabeth)
December 25	Luke 2:1-20	Nativity Scene

5. Recover Cultural Traditions

A few years ago, as my grandparents were aging rapidly, I realized that the window of opportunity to get in touch, personally, with my cultural heritage was closing. A few good conversations and a little research later, and I had what I needed to allow that heritage to impact the liturgical seasons. Now, German, French, and Slovakian food graces our Christmas dinner table, and the preparation of the dishes fills the days immediately leading to the great feast. As we prepare the food, we have an opportunity to reinvigorate the dormant traditions that once shaped the liturgical seasons in the homes of our ancestors and to tell our children about the generations and family members that preceded us—and whose faith was integral to shaping our own—however remote or proximate.

There is something so important about tradition and culture, both of which are easily lost in our postmodern society. The liturgical year affords many opportunities to recover these little traditions and allow them to bring new life to the home as they did for the previous generations.

Before Googling . . .

Well, Dr. Rowland's millennial Catholic can now get to work googling ideas about Advent. However, before searching online, one should remember that the liturgical year is not fundamentally about what we find and make of it. Rather, it is about being constantly found and remade by the One who is the true initiator—the One who moves us first. Living the liturgical year at home means allowing the liturgy to enter and shape the family one prayer, one devotion, one practice at a time. It is as simple as that.