

FAITH MATTERS

for families

Faith nourishment for the families
of the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic
District School Board



Preparing Our Hearts in Advent

In the Christian calendar, Advent is a four-week season of eager anticipation and joyful waiting. It is a time when we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth in Bethlehem 2000 years ago (the main focus of our Christmas celebrations), but it *also* points us ahead to the day Jesus will return at the end of time. *And* it reminds us that Jesus comes to us *already*, in the sacraments, in the reading of the Scriptures, when we gather together in prayer, and especially in those who are poor, suffering, neglected or unloved. Jesus is coming, but he is also already with us!

Perhaps the best-known symbol of this season is the Advent wreath, the circle of evergreen branches which includes three purple candles and one pink candle (reflecting the colours of the priest's vestments at Mass). With each Sunday, we light one more candle, leading us closer and closer to our joyful celebration of Jesus' coming into the world at Christmas. With each week, there is more and more light, as we draw closer to the birth of the one we call the Light of the World, who shatters the darkness of violence and sin with the brightness of his love.

For our families, Advent can be a time of togetherness and shared prayer, and of growing excitement as Christmas draws near. When all of society around us is already jumping ahead into Christmas, Advent reminds us of the importance of patient waiting, of watchfulness, and of hope, as we look toward the future—and celebrate the present!

How might families take advantage of Advent to spiritually prepare for Christmas?

- by listening together to some of the beautiful music of this season (suggestions below!)
- by lighting an Advent wreath (or a prayer candle) and offering a short prayer together
- by slowly moving the figurines of Mary and Joseph from your family Nativity scene throughout your house, to symbolize the long and difficult journey they made to Bethlehem ... until they "arrive" in your Nativity scene on Christmas Eve!
- talking about how you can help to support those in your area who are poor or needy as the holidays approach, or who may be lonely at this time of year

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SIMCOE MUSKOKA CATHOLIC
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The Origins of the Nativity Scene

St. Francis of Assisi deserves credit for inventing the Nativity scene (or crèche) as we know it today. Historians say that, in December 1223, St Francis was passing through the Italian town of Greccio, whose caves reminded him of the rocky grotto in Bethlehem where Jesus was born. With the help of local farmers, he assembled a living Nativity scene for Christmas Eve, as a backdrop to the Mass that night. Some accounts say that, by a miracle, the baby Jesus himself came and was visibly present in the manger that night.

In many cultures, the Nativity scene is a focal point of the Christmas celebrations. In an Advent letter last year, Pope Francis wrote: "The enchanting image of the Christmas crèche, so dear to the Christian people, never ceases to arouse amazement and wonder ... The nativity scene is like a living Gospel rising up from the pages of sacred Scripture ... We come to realize that so great is God's love for us that he became one of us, so that we in turn might become one with him." ([Apostolic Letter 'Admirabile Signum'](#))

As we set up our Nativity scenes, and as we gaze on them during Christmas, the simple beauty and rich meaning of Jesus' birth become more and more apparent to us.

[The Nativity Scene Tradition Begun by St. Francis of Assisi](#)

[The Christmas Story as told creatively by Ella, one of our students](#)

Advent & Christmas Resources for Families

[From the Archdiocese of Toronto](#)

[From the Diocese of Peterborough](#)

[Advent Activities for All](#) (from [Loyola Press](#)).

[One Prayer a Day](#) (from [Creighton University](#)).

Music

[O Come, O Come, Emmanuel](#)

[O Come, Divine Messiah](#)

[On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry](#)

[The Huron Carol \('Twas in the Moon of Wintertime\)](#)

[May You Find a Light](#)

[Breath of Heaven](#)

God of Love, Your son, Jesus, is your greatest gift to us.

He is a sign of your love.

Help us walk in that love during the weeks of Advent,

As we wait and prepare for his coming.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

(Advent activities, Loyola Press)



A Blessing for a Nativity Scene

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Leader: We are at the beginning of the days of Christmas. All through the season, we will look on these images of sheep and cattle, of shepherds, of Mary and of Joseph, and Jesus.

Let us listen to the words of the holy gospel according to Luke: *About that time Emperor Augustus gave orders for the names of all the people to be listed in record books. These first records were made when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to go to their own hometown to be listed. So Joseph had to leave Nazareth in Galilee and go to Bethlehem in Judea. Long ago Bethlehem had been King David's hometown, and Joseph went there because he was from David's family. Mary was engaged to Joseph and traveled with him to Bethlehem. She was soon going to have a baby, and while they were there, she gave birth to her first-born son. She dressed him in baby clothes and laid him on a bed of hay, because there was no room for them in the inn. The Gospel of the Lord.*

Leader: And now let us ask for God's blessing as we look upon the figures in our Nativity scene. God of Mary and Joseph, of shepherds and animals, bless us whenever we look upon this manger scene. Through all the days of Christmas, may these figures tell the story of how humans, angels and animals found Jesus in this poor place. Fill our home with hospitality, joy, gentleness and thanksgiving, and guide our steps in the way of peace. Grant this through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

(You may wish to sing a favourite Christmas carol together as a family to conclude)