

**Pastoral Reflection**  
**Advent and Christmas 2004**  
**Diocese of Tyler**  
**by Most Rev. Alvaro Corrada, S.J.**

We are all born in Bethlehem. The birth of the Eternal Word of the Father, according to the flesh took place in Bethlehem. Today Bethlehem stands as a city divided by the war between Palestinians and Israelis. In this holy season we pray for peace in our hearts, our homes, our parishes, and throughout the world.

The Advent Season and the Celebration of Christmas is the reality of Jesus Christ, his Presence in our world. By Faith and Sacrament we are born in Jesus Christ, the Son of Man. We celebrate the birth of God into our human nature. As we celebrate Christmas we are called to keep Christ in Christmas and to joyfully be born again spiritually and sacramentally in Christ Jesus.

The Holiday Season in the United States is a great event of evangelization. The joy of Christmas is a major theme throughout society from Thanksgiving to Christmas. In much holiday advertising this joy is presented as being rooted in material things. As Christians we have an opportunity to really strive to keep Christ in Christmas. We are blessed as Catholics, to be able to share the richness of holiday traditions connected with living out the liturgical seasons. One way to emphasize the focus on Christ is to really promote a sense of the traditional Christmas season. Liturgically the Christmas Season continues from Christmas Day until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. The traditional 12 days of Christmas (from the Nativity until Epiphany) have largely been reinterpreted as a countdown of the 12 last shopping days before Christmas. Keeping the joy of Christmas alive in our parishes and in our families is a great opportunity to focus on the true gift of Christmas, Jesus Christ. Real attention to our living out the season of Advent will greatly enrich our ability to experience the deep joy of the Christmas season.

The sights and sounds of Christmas are very powerful images in our society. Christmas lights and holiday decorations call us to look at our neighborhoods in a different light. The sound of Christmas carols sing out in shopping malls and on city streets bringing warmth and joy to crisp dark nights. The giving of gifts, visiting friends, and generosity to those in need can be events where people are open to encounter Christ anew. As Christians we want to affirm these expressions of preparation for Christmas. In the Liturgy, Christmas hymns and decorations should be reserved for the Christmas season proper, but they can be welcomed in the parish hall, decorations on the church buildings, and caroling by youth groups or family gatherings. Outside of the church building, the use of Christmas lights during Advent can be a great sign of anticipation of the Light of Christ that was manifest in the world that first Christmas. Publicly displaying religious symbols, like the creche, give quiet witness to the real reason for the season. Our local Knights of Columbus do well to participate in appropriate ways with the national effort of the Knights to keep the Holiday Season Holy. Particularly through their program to "Keep Christ in Christmas."

We as disciples have a great gift to give a society of consumers: a personal encounter with Jesus the Christ. We as disciples also have a chance to allow Christ to become more

present in our own hearts and homes in this blessed season. Special symbols and devotions during Advent can help us as individuals and as families to make a more generous response to God's grace in our lives and enrich our experience of the whole Christmas Season.

### **Symbols**

The Creche or nativity set should have a special place in all Churches and homes.

The Advent wreath has become a great symbol of the Advent journey. Originally a German custom, in the last 50 years it has become broadly used in this country. Every Church should have an Advent wreath. Encouraging families to use the Advent wreath as part of their family devotions in preparation for Christmas and offering some type of Advent prayers for the families who wish to use them.

The Christmas Tree is the other great symbol of the season. It has become very popular to display Christmas trees in anticipation of Christmas. This is a fine custom, but we want to encourage people to keep their Christmas tree up at least through the Octave of Christmas (New Year's Day). In the church proper, it is best to refrain from putting up Christmas trees until preparing the church for Christmas, or at least until near the end of Advent. If trees are placed in the church before Christmas, it might be good to not use the lights on the Christmas tree until Christmas Eve.

### **Devotions**

We rejoice during the Advent Season in the participation of Our Blessed Mother, the Virgin Mary giving birth to Christ. Marian devotions have a special place in many cultures during the Advent Season. The whole Church honors the Immaculate Conception of Mary on the 8th of December, a Holy Day of Obligation. The Immaculate Conception is the patroness of the United States and of our Cathedral of Tyier. Mary's being preserved free from Original Sin in anticipation of Christ's redeeming birth, is an infallible dogma of the Church, speaking to the holiness of the Church, and to our being freed from sin through the waters of Baptism into the Paschal Mystery of Christ. Thus, the feast of the Immaculate Conception not only calls to mind the long anticipation of the fulfillment of the promise made to Adam and Eve, but our own encounter with the Word made Flesh who dwells among us.

The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, December 12, was a powerful event of evangelization and a great reminder of our Advent journey. The Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to Blessed Juan Diego as an expecting mother. She expressed in her black cincture the bearing of a child, not only her motherhood of Christ, but her motherhood to the people of the New World and of all the human race. Mary reinforced the efforts of the missionaries in bringing an end to the killing of babies, and the turning away from the worship of pagan gods. This message of evangelization points us all toward the person of Jesus Christ and the sacredness of the human person.

Las Posadas, commemorating Mary and Joseph's search for an Inn, is another devotion that invites us to enter into the mystery of Christmas. This novena of prayer and song reminds us to prepare place in our own hearts and lives for Jesus to be born within us.

Our celebration of the Octave Day of Christmas (New Year's Day) as a day to remember Mary's unique role in the incarnation by honoring her with the ancient title of Mother of God, and of calling for prayer for World Peace invites us to see the opportunity for a brighter future. The Eighth day was seen as the beginning of the new creation.

### **Children and Youth**

Special attention should be given to children and young people during the Advent and Christmas celebration. Devotion to the Christ child, the Biblical reenactment of the infancy narratives and the creche allow children to enter in to the Christmas Spirit. Perhaps a celebration of the Sacrament of Penance can be presented in a special way to reflect the joyful season and to encourage children and young people to conversion and a deeper sharing of the joy of Christmas. A reception for families after the service would be important to bring this joy to all.

### **Liturgy**

Violet is the standard liturgical color for Advent. Advent is a season of preparation and anticipation. The Advent season is not as penitential as Lent, and so a softer tone can be set by the vestments. On the Third Sunday of Advent (Gaudete Sunday), Rose vestments maybe worn. (NB: Blue is not a liturgical color.)

In preparing the environment in the church for the holidays, care should be taken to avoid "decorating". For Advent a simple look in the sanctuary with focus on the Advent wreath is fitting for the character of anticipation for the season. For Christmas and the Christmas season, the church should look beautiful and should invite people into the encounter with the Incarnation. The sanctuary doesn't have to look like a store in the Mall or like the lobby of a great Hotel. The challenge is to prepare the environment and the liturgy for Christmas, particularly the music and the homily, so that the great event of evangelization can bear fruit in the lives of people. Many people will be coming to Church on Christmas who do not regularly come. We have a chance to help them be open to the Holy Spirit and hear God's invitation to them personally. When people encounter the Lord's invitation, our Christian Initiation process has to be in place to support them in responding to that invitation. Inviting them to encounter Christ, and including them in the life of the community brings forth the fruit from an event of evangelization.

The tradition of Midnight Mass has been very strong in the United States. In the past most protestant communities didn't have religious services for Christmas, but now many have followed our example. Midnight Mass should begin at midnight. Having a period of caroling before the Midnight Mass or any of the Christmas Masses can add to the richness of the celebration. The Vigil Mass of Christmas Eve has become very popular in many communities. The prayers for these Masses should be for the Vigil Mass, but the readings can be taken from the Mass at Midnight or another Christmas Mass. (Ordo PN on Page 17).

### **Event of Evangelization**

As disciples of Jesus Christ, Catholics often would like to do something to invite someone to join them for Mass, but don't know how to do it in a positive way. One way to reach out to others is for a community to get some Christmas Cards and do a simple enclosure with the Mass Schedule and a note: "In this Holy Season, we pray that you celebrate it with your community of faith. If you don't have a faith community to share the joy of Christmas with, we invite you to join us in celebrating the coming of our Savior, Christ the Lord." Parishioners could pray during Advent for someone in particular and give them the card; either personalized or simply signed something like "Blessings from the parish family at St. Luke's Catholic Church." The family could even offer to take them to Church with them, if they would like.

Since many people come to Mass at Christmas time, perhaps a reception after the major Masses for Christmas would be a good opportunity for giving them a chance to connect with the parish community. This act of hospitality can help invite them to respond to the grace of the Spirit. The Christian Initiation team might work with the Pastoral Council to help create an environment at the reception that will be fruitful to the work of the Holy Spirit and help individuals move toward the Sacraments and integration into the parish community.