



“John the Baptist is a model evangelizer. He knows he is but a finger pointing at the sun. He himself is not the sun, although whatever light is in him comes from the sun. So it is with us. We are filled with light – our church, our community, ourselves. God wants us to let that light be seen by others so that they too might come to live in the light. We are but witnesses to the light who is Christ, ever coming, everywhere and in everyone who comes into the world. He is the one and the only one to whom we should point. And all our lives and ministry, like John’s, are a preparation for the shining of that light ever more fully.”

Just how do we act as light? “How do we assist in the development of peoples and of the Earth? Does our parish engage in efforts to help the homeless and the poor claim their rightful place with all others in God’s kingdom? How do we promote peace and harmony within our own community? How do we handle tensions between different groups within the parish? Do we acknowledge the strains and seek methods to reach consensus? Or do we pretend they are not there and hope they go away? Peace and harmony are not only gifts we are promised. They can be ours today, but only if we stir ourselves from our present situation in order to deal honestly and respectfully with others. If we are a sign of harmony in our community, we are performing our mission to proclaim the gospel.”

Richard W. Chilson, C.S.P.

The people that walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those who lived in a land
as dark as death
a light has dawned.
You have increased their joy
and given them gladness;
They rejoice in your presence
as those who rejoice at harvest,
as warriors exult when dividing spoil.

Isaiah 9:1-2



O God, rejoicing,
we remember the promise of your Son.
As the light from this candle,
may the blessing of Christ come upon us,
brightening our way
and guiding us by his truth.
May Christ our Savior bring life
into the darkness of our world,
and to us, as we wait for his coming.
We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen!

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**ADVENT
and
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H O P E
P E A C E
Love Joy

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"Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths."

With these words the first true evangelist, John the Baptist, urges us to prepare for the coming of the Christ. Advent is our time of preparation, our time to straighten our own paths by joyfully turning our hearts to God. Yet, because of the secular pressures associated with preparing for Christmas, our people often bypass Advent and miss out on many of the graces of this beautiful season.

However, perhaps rather than always being perceived as railing against the overly secular, we could find ways to "baptize", so to speak, the ways our people find themselves celebrating this time of year. Indeed, the very origins of the date of the Nativity of our Lord came about in this way. We offer here some thoughts on this subject.

- Most people send and receive Christmas cards at this time of year. Our parishioners can be encouraged to use this as an opportunity for evangelization by searching for a card which best expresses their love for the Christ child. In this way an Advent catechesis is carried out by the family itself. (For the coming year, ask parishioners to save the cards they've received and choose one each week to pray for that particular person or family.)
- Many of us are aware of how hard feelings or divisions within a family or among one-time friends negatively affects the celebration of Christmas. There is a true sense of desiring reconciliation. Tapping into this sentiment and belief is a natural way to promote the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which includes, obviously, everyone's need to be reconciled to God. Preparation for this could be encouraged by listing points for an Examination of Conscience for all the Sundays of Advent in the bulletin, online, etc. A brief Act of Contrition could also be printed each week. Confession times should be highlighted. Parishes with only one priest could consider joining other parishes to hold a joint communal reconciliation service.

- Encourage parishioners to place a manger scene, crucifix or piece of sacred art in every room of their homes. Just a simple act such as this is a powerful witness to others entering the home, and at the same time reminds us that God is present in all areas of our lives.
- Our people also may be looking for help in not being overwhelmed by the amount of money which society expects people to spend on gifts, especially for children. Catechesis could be offered both through the Sunday gathering and in schools and religious education programs to allow children to come to the realization that it is truly better to give than to receive. Children have a great natural inclination towards helping others. Highlighting that aspect may help families lower their expectations regarding what must be "spent" to ensure a good Christmas. Leading people to understand that in receiving the birth of Jesus we receive all that is necessary, and that our best gift to each other is how we bring Christ to others, may lessen the pressures that families feel in this regard.
- Another way to evangelize in our neighborhoods and teach children about the season is to have them create Advent banners or flags to hang outside. Since house flags are popular now, a simple one made of felt with an appropriate quote from Scripture (such as the above, "Prepare the way of the Lord" or "For unto us a child is born", etc.) and perhaps a symbol of the season could be easily constructed. Children are always proud to display their handiwork to others and will love seeing their own creations hung outside their homes!
- Most parishes have some type of "giving tree" or a way to collect gifts for the needy at Christmas. Why not ask people to include in every gift a reminder of God's love for the person receiving the gift? Prayer cards, rosary beads, inspirational quotes, etc. cost next to nothing yet share the love of God with those who need it most at this time of year. Again, even children can contribute with homemade cards and pictures. This is a simple but beautiful way to show people we truly care for them.
- A different approach to collecting gifts is by having a "baby shower for Jesus". Collect layettes, diapers and other baby items for *Birthright* or another organization that provides resources for pregnant women.

- Shopping is a mainstay of the season. Promote organizations such as *Handcrafting Justice*, which provides socially conscious gifts for consumers. This is an outreach project of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, who "partner with women in the developing world and are united in working toward empowerment, hope and justice for all peoples." Online shopping is available at: www.handcraftingjustice.org. Search out other vendors which provide similar products and services.
- We know that most seemingly secular Christmas symbols such as the tree, candy cane, wreath, star, etc. have sacred origins. These could be researched and compiled into a small booklet for parents or coloring pages to give to children.



- Many people do not realize that while Advent is a preparation for the coming of the Christ child at Christmas, it also looks forward to the second coming of Christ. Let us remind our people that the completion and fullness of the Kingdom of God is something we also wait for with fervent hope and joy. As St. Peter teaches us (below), we must be a people who attempt to live every aspect of our lives in purity, love and holiness, because that is the only way to true peace of mind and heart. By our own lives may we all bear witness, in this beautiful season of hope, to the reality of the coming Kingdom of God.

"... what sort of persons ought (you) to be, conducting yourselves in holiness and devotion, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God... Therefore, beloved, since you await these things, be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace." (2 Peter 3:11,14).