

How to create a more prayerful life this Advent season

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



Every year, Advent quickly approaches, and by the time it's over, many Catholics are left saying, "I wish I'd done more to have a prayerful Advent."

"This time of the year is so busy that even with the best of intentions, it is easy to let Advent, this most beautiful season, slip by," Father Jerome Kodell, OSB, a Benedictine monk at Subiaco Abbey, said.

Arkansas Catholic talked to clergy and lay leaders from around the state, who provided advice and opportunities for our readers to keep Christ in Christmas this Advent season.

Prayer (in many forms)

Father Daniel Velasco, pastor of Our Lady of the Holy Souls Church in Little Rock and director of the diocesan spiritual direction formation program, invited Catholics to "get their feet wet" with a new style of prayer that they might not have tried before.

"Embrace a different method of prayer during this time, like the St. Ignatius Daily Examen prayer or maybe a devotion like Divine Mercy," Father Velasco said. "Just to get the feet wet of the faithful in expanding their willingness to have a relationship with God."

The Ignatian Daily Examen consists of five steps to help Catholics become more aware of God's

presence in their lives.

- Become aware of God's presence.
- Review the day with gratitude.
- Pay attention to your emotions.
- Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.
- Look toward tomorrow.

"As a spiritual director, I recommend Ignatian prayer to become more aware of God's presence in our daily life, even though we are surrounded by many different messages," Father Velasco said. "If we take the time to ponder, pray and be silent, we can realize that there is so much more depth in God's presence."

Father Velasco also recommended Catholics "approach the sacrament of reconciliation" during the Advent season.

"There are different reconciliation services around the diocese ... that would be one way to receive God's grace and continue our journey."

Mailelani Lessenberry, a freshman at the University of Dallas, is a young Catholic influencer who has built a following across multiple platforms. Lessenberry, a member of St. Bernard Church in Bella Vista, echoed Father Velasco's sentiments and said prayer comes in many forms — Catholics should find a form that works for them this Advent.

"During Advent, it's a great idea to meditate on the birth, life and passion of Christ as we await his coming on Christmas," she said. "By praying the rosary, we also honor our Blessed Mother, who carried our Savior in her womb before bringing him into the world."

Another form of prayer Lessenberry recommended is adoration.

"What better way to prepare for Jesus' coming than to spend time with him? Most parishes have open adoration hours throughout the week, making it easy for parishioners to stop by and spend time with Christ. Even if you spend just one hour with him this Advent, it's better than no time spent with him at all."

Get the family involved

"For those who have children, plan an activity that involves the children, whether it be an Advent calendar or a fun fact every day in Advent," Father Velasco said. "This gets the kids engaged and also makes it fun to look forward to the Christmas celebration."

Father Kodell said families might find ways to bring Advent saints and holy figures to life for their children as "companions on the journey during this holy season."

Sister Regina Schroeder, OSB, procurator at St. Scholastica Monastery in Fort Smith, encouraged families to make an effort to pray together, even if only briefly.

"The effort to spend time as a family or as husband and wife, even if it is only 10 or 15 minutes with a short prayer, helps me and could help families or couples to give purpose to life," she

said.



Pastor Father Daniel Velasco blesses the Advent wreath at Our Lady of the Holy Souls Church in Little Rock Nov. 30 at the beginning of the Advent season. (Malea Hargett)

Remembering less fortunate

Sister Kimberly R. Prohaska, OSB, prioress of St. Scholastica Monastery in Fort Smith, reminded Catholics that while Advent is a season of joy, not everyone may be feeling joyous.

“It’s important to remember those who struggle during this time of year. Sometimes, people have painful situations that they’re carrying. Are we aware of that? Are we alert to one another enough to be present to one another?”

“There may be people who are suffering and doing without — just to try to pay attention. People are very generous at heart, and sometimes, if we get too distracted by all that the world says that we have to have, we may miss opportunities to have a sacred moment with someone.”

The Diocese of Little Rock’s website has Advent resources at dolr.org/advent. One of those resources is the 2024 Share Your Light Advent Calendar, which consists of 24 ways — for each day in Advent — to help make someone’s day brighter.

Some of the activities are:

- Invite friends, neighbors or co-workers, who are living alone, to share your family’s Advent traditions with them.
- Donate to St. Nicholas Partners to support a Catholic Charities of Arkansas ministry.
- Help moms in need by giving baby items to a pregnancy resource center or volunteering

- to babysit or lending a listening ear to a mom in your life.
- Contact your local jail or a nearby prison to see if you can mail Christmas cookies or cards to inmates incarcerated during the holidays.

That 2024 calendar can be found at dolr.org/share-light-advent-calendar.

Advent wreaths, old-school prayers and holy figures

Many Catholics using Jesse trees, Advent calendars or nativity scenes to center the Advent season on Christ. For Father Kodell, even the Advent wreath itself is an important symbol to keep in mind.

“I think the most helpful practices are those that remind us and draw us back,” he said. “The Advent wreath is a prime example. Every time we see it, we are drawn back into the Advent spirit.”

Father Kodell said the presence of older Christian prayers can give Advent worship a new flair.

“We could make more use during these days of one of the oldest Christian prayers, which appears in Aramaic in the Bible: Maranatha, Come, Lord Jesus,” he said. “It is rich in tradition and puts us in touch with Christians who have celebrated Advent all during the centuries, and because it is in a foreign language, it only means one thing and produces no other associations. It might be used as a word to repeat in prayer, as many Christians do, or it might be posted in large print on the refrigerator or another place of focus in the house during Advent.”

Father Kodell said focusing on one of many holy figures throughout the Advent season can bring a new level of intimacy to celebrations.

“There are holy figures associated with the season — of course, Mary (with her feasts of the Immaculate Conception and Guadalupe) and John the Baptist, but also St. Nicholas and St. Lucy,” Father Kodell said. “The early martyr St. Lucy, whose name means ‘light,’ is not as well known as St. Nicholas, but she lights up the winter darkness on Dec. 13 every year. More recently, a saint of our hemisphere has become part of the Advent preparation — St. Juan Diego. His feast is usually celebrated on Dec. 9, the day he had the vision of the Virgin, but it is superseded this year (because of the feast of Immaculate Conception).”

Finding God in the silence

Taffy Council, a student in the first cohort of the School of Spiritual Direction, oversees eucharistic adoration at Our Lady of Fatima in Benton. During the noise of the holiday season, Council reminds us that “God speaks to us in the great silence of the heart.”

“Ask God each day to give you the grace to spend some time in silence with him, and only him,” she said. “Ask him to create that space and time just for you. Take a deep breath. Tell him what’s on your heart. Take another deep breath and simply listen. Perhaps only hearing the lovely silence. He’s there. He always meets us where we are. I have a dear friend who will call and say, ‘I only have a few minutes on my hands, but I wanted to say hello to my friend.’ May we, too, say that to our loving God.”

Msgr. Lawrence Frederick, known as Father Fred, is the rector of Catholic High School, chaplain of Mount St. Mary Academy and the Carmel of St. Teresa of Jesus, all in Little Rock. He also warned Catholics to beware of distractions and avoid them with a consistent prayer routine.

“Schedule a time of prayer and stick with it,” he said. “Set the phone aside for a period of time to read Scripture each day. Limit time spent on the internet for personal contact with others — all the usual things that distract us from hearing God speak to us.”

Kristine Grelle, a certified spiritual director with Infinitely Rooted and a member of St. Vincent de Paul Church in Rogers, invites Catholics to explore personal prayer in a quiet place as a way of improving themselves spiritually for the new year.

“A growing relationship with Jesus takes dedicated time in silence, listening to the Word and becoming aware of what the Lord is saying to me,” she said. “Each day, I can meditate on the Scriptures that the Church has chosen, pondering the words or phrases that resonate from within. I can also imagine myself in the scene of the Scripture passage to experience them in a new way.”



The first candle is lit on the Advent wreath in Morris Chapel at the St. John Center in Little Rock in this photo taken Nov. 27. (Katie Zakrzewski)

Preparing as soon as possible

Sister Mary Petra Masek, OCD, of the Carmel of St. Teresa of Jesus in Little Rock, said getting holiday preparations done as soon as possible frees up time to focus on Christ.

“Practically, we can look at activities for the celebrations to come and prepare earlier in a less hectic fashion or take a second look at the meaning of them for us at this time,” she said. “They do help to express our faith, but maybe an ‘update’ can be considered to help us keep a gentle

and serene spirit as Christmas comes near. Any of these practices could be done alone or with family, with a faith group, with a parish presentation, with an Advent wreath.”

Sister Schroeder agreed.

“Shopping for gifts seems to be a priority for many people,” she said. “To avoid this distraction of getting gifts, I buy early, long before Advent, so that the gift of self is the focus. ... In these last days of Advent, we get rushed and focused more intently on the gifts that we give others. What can I give? Do we ever think of giving in a new light? A different way? Do our actions and efforts to find the right gift remind others of Jesus and his loving ways? Do we reach out and serve as Jesus did? Can we be the light for others as Jesus is for us? How will I do this?”

Jeff Hines, director of the Office of Faith Formation, said the material preparations for Christmas make it easy to get overwhelmed.

“When you are thinking about family and friends, making plans for gifts and visits, think, too, about Jesus, the person,” Hines said. “To get the most out of Advent, read the Sunday Mass readings ahead of time. Contemplate them. From this, you will learn that the Old Testament prophets told the Jews to expect the Messiah to come. Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. You will learn that we are waiting for Jesus’ second coming and to live life knowing that Jesus is near to you now.”

Meditation and reflection

Silence can pave the way for introspection and asking questions to evaluate one’s faith.

Sister Masek said that while we are still in the Year of Prayer, Advent is a season of waiting, expectation and “accompanying Mary as she prayerfully waits for the birth of Jesus” every year.

“With Scripture, we can draw near to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and ponder with her the rich and glorious mysteries presented to us through the daily liturgies, especially in the readings of the prophets,” Sister Masek said.

“My thoughtful daily meditation as a Carmelite over the years has been, ‘Only Word, uttered in silence by the Father from all eternity, and received lovingly in Mary’s womb, make those you have called to serve you in Carmel witnesses as she was in body and soul to the Word of God.’ Part of this is a reflected thought in a Carmelite intercession. If someone wants to use it, ‘Carmel’ can be substituted for their situation/place. The more quiet and contemplative atmosphere of winter will draw us more easily into this reflective and restorative practice.”



The prayer space for Kristine Grelle, a certified spiritual director with Infinitely Rooted and a member of St. Vincent de Paul Church in Rogers, was designed to be a place of peace and quiet for deeper prayer. (Kristine Grelle)



As for Me & my House we will Serve the Lord



“Looking at my behaviors and practices helps me in my awareness and the opportunity to bring life to others and myself,” Sister Shroeder said. “Personally, I spend each morning in the quiet, beginning with reading the Scripture and reflecting on the Word for that day. For the theme of that week, I ask myself, ‘How does this reading address that theme?’ An example might be hope, and I ask, ‘How does this reading bring hope?’ or ‘What do I need to do today to bring hope in my life or bring hope to others?’ This means I make time for longer reflection and wake up earlier each day.”

Sister Regina said Advent gives us an opportunity to slow down and reflect as we seek a closer relationship with Jesus and one another.

“This means we have to be mindful of how we feel and how we understand my faults and failings,” she said. “If we take the time to focus on a little prayer, ‘Come, Lord Jesus,’ said throughout the day, we will surely be ready for Christmas. We are allowed to focus on Jesus coming into our lives, dwelling among us, living peacefully and reconciling with God and one another. This is the real meaning of Christmas. Christ dwells within us.”

Classics for the season

Lessenberry, who plays music in her spare time, recommended Catholics swap out secular tunes and carols for Christian Christmas music.

“St. Augustine once said, ‘He who sings prays twice.’ By listening to and singing along with Christian holiday music, we can lift our praise to the Lord and get ourselves in the holiday spirit at the same time,” Lessenberry said.

Father Kodell recommended taking the time to read up on the Advent hymns inspired by the prophet Isaiah.

“For personal reading, there is nothing better than to follow the selections from Isaiah in the liturgy and to hear their echoes in the Advent hymns that Isaiah has inspired.”

Beyond Advent

Grelle said it’s just as important to think about what Advent implies in the broader sense of the liturgical calendar.

“The beginning of the Advent season marks the beginning of a new year in the Church calendar. At the start of a new year, we often talk about it as a time to reset, prioritize and make commitments for areas in our lives that we sense the need to change for our own well-being and growth,” Grelle said. “The liturgical new year provides a unique opportunity to focus on our spiritual life as we prepare for the birth of Jesus, the greatest gift, and turn our eyes to deepen our relationship with him.”

Advent resources

The following is a list of other recommended resources to help you have a more prayerful Advent.

Prayers

The Ignatian Daily Examen

The Magnificat

Publications

Advent meditations by Father Mark Toups include “Rejoice! An Advent Pilgrimage into the Heart of Scripture,” “Rejoice! Advent Meditations with Mary” and “Rejoice and Be Glad, A Journey Through Christmas with the Holy Family.”

Websites

The Word Among Us, wau.org

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, usccb.org

Questions to meditate on

Sister Regina Schroeder, OSB, procurator at St. Scholastica Monastery, created a list of questions for families and discussion groups to reflect on together to better prepare for the Advent season.

1. How did God enter into my life today, or did I recognize today God helping me? Talk about what happened.
2. Who are we waiting for at this time of year? If it is Santa or the birthday of Jesus, how am I preparing for this? Talk about how to connect the two.
3. What does it mean to wait? How many times have you done this today? What are some ways we practice waiting in our lives? This takes patience. As you wait for the birth of Jesus, how would you hope Jesus' coming will enrich your life or make your life better? Give some practical ways.
4. Do I have weaknesses and failings I want to change or do better with? What am I working on? How can others help me?
5. What do I hope for? Name one thing or activity that I hoped for and received, and what did I do with it? What will I do with what I hope for as I prepare for Jesus' birthday?
6. How can I bring peace to my family? My work? My classmates or co-workers?

Tennis player-priest starts team at Little

Rock middle school

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



As Father Daniel Velasco, pastor of Our Lady of the Holy Souls Church in Little Rock, stands on the spongey court of the Rebsamen Tennis Center Oct. 10, he adjusts his hat to block the sun, tapping his clipboard as eight boys gather around.

Father Velasco tells the students, in sixth through eighth grades, who is playing against who and on which court.

Father Velasco started the Holy Souls School tennis team in August. And while the tennis team and league are not regulated by the Arkansas Activities Association, the team has given students an opportunity to try their hand at a new sport and make friends with students from other schools.

“We started this year, thanks to some volunteers who helped me coordinate and talk to the other coaches,” he said. “...I’m in charge of the lineups. There’s a lot of coordination that takes place behind the scenes. We have some parents who step up and that’s the reason we’re able to do it.”

Father Velasco said the Holy Souls team will play informally against Pulaski County private schools, including Anthony School, Pulaski Academy and Episcopal Collegiate School.

On Oct. 10, the Holy Souls team, in their white tennis uniforms, squared off against St. Anthony School in bright red, spanning four adjoining courts for their matches.

"This is our third match," Father Velasco said. "We played against Anthony School last week, then we played against Little Rock Christian Academy last Tuesday. This is our third match and we're playing against Anthony again. I think we're going to have about six matches total."

For Father Velasco, tennis is much more than a hobby.

"It is definitely a lot of fun," he said. "Because, as some people may know, I played college tennis."

Originally from Puebla, Mexico, Father Velasco's tennis skills brought him to the United States in 1993 when the tennis coach of Harding University in Searcy was impressed with his skills during a recruiting trip and offered him a scholarship. He played with the Harding tennis team for four years until he graduated in 1997. Since his ordination in 2020, Father Velasco has encouraged students and parishioners to take up tennis.

In 2021 and 2022, Father Velasco, who was then chaplain at Trinity School in Fort Smith, helped coach the middle school's coed tennis team of 15 players to win the championship.

His talents as a coach were reflected Oct. 10, as several teams showcased impressive volleys and even rallied from behind to win their matches.

Doubles partners sixth-grader Tucker Norton and eighth-grader Cade Cosse were losing to Anthony School 4-2 when the two came back and won their match in a 7-point tiebreak. The tiebreak offered the Holy Souls players a learning opportunity, as parents and Father Velasco taught the students the rules of the tiebreak as they played since the students had never played one before.

"I just really like the sport; it's fun to play," Norton told *Arkansas Catholic* after winning his match. "I think I did OK, but I could have done better."

Norton's mother, Barrett, who plays tennis, helped teach students on both teams how to play the 7-point tiebreak. She said Holy Souls played well, noting that the atmosphere isn't about winning but about having fun.

"They have that camaraderie with teammates and get along and talk," Barrett Norton said.

Norton's teammate, Cosse, analyzed Norton's and his performance after the match.

"I feel like we could have done better, we definitely could have swung for the ball more," he said. "Overall, we played really well, and I told (Norton), 'Don't give up,' because they were beating us, and I was like, 'We're going to beat them,' and we did. We just had to stick to it."

Cosse, who has been playing tennis for four years, said the sport as a whole is about mental endurance just as much as physical endurance.

"Listen to your coach," he advised new players. "It's a very frustrating sport. It's very mental. It will get to your head. You have to stay cool, be strong."

Father Velasco said the tennis matches have provided a great opportunity for players to make friends and build their skills.

"We are playing against other schools that have some kids playing tennis, and we're in

agreement to play each other and have fun," he said. "There's no trophy, but I like to keep the score in my notes. It's given me an opportunity to interact with the kids in a different environment. Of course, I'm still their pastor, but at the tennis court, I'm their coach, and they listen, and they are good kids."