

## **Experiencing Advent Deeply...for Busy People**

The challenge of entering Advent, or of entering into any religious experience, is that these days we are often very busy. We may feel bad that we don't have time, but it is true, we just don't seem to have time. The result is that our experience of Advent is four Sunday Masses, which begin with lighting a new candle in the Advent wreath and the rest of it just passes around us, without any real effect.

### **The First Week of Advent: Desire and Focus**

If we can't squeeze any more time out of our schedule to use the resources on this site, including the daily prayer and the reflections, then there are two things that are critical for a new way to experience Advent: **Desire and Focus**.

**Desire:** The powerful advantage of Advent is that it offers us light in the midst of darkness, hope in the midst of despair, liberty in the midst of captivity, and peace in the midst of war or conflict. The key to a grace-filled Advent is to begin by identifying where I am experiencing darkness, despair, captivity and war.

Recognizing our own unique version of these struggles is the first grace of Advent. We can't say "Come, Lord Jesus" with any real meaning unless we have a felt experience of what it is we need. Once we experience our need, then the desire can formulate in our heart to ask for what we need.

**Focus:** How do we focus, if we don't have time? We do it by focusing our attention whenever we can, especially during the "background" times of our day. These are the in between times – in the shower, getting dressed, walking down stairs, getting coffee, driving to work, walking down the hall, doing laundry, shopping, walking to the bathroom, preparing a meal, walking from one meeting to another, heading home from work, getting ready for

bed. In these very brief times, there is something in our minds. Sometimes, we are “day dreaming” or our minds are wandering. At other times, we are thinking about what we have to do, or we are full of anxiety about something coming up, or perhaps we are “replaying” a memory or imagining a future conversation. Whatever is going on in our minds and hearts during those “background” times can easily be refocused. It takes a little practice and some discipline, but it works.

Our days of the first week of Advent can be transformed if we decide – consciously choose, with a deep desire – to use the background times of each day to explore where I am in spiritual need. We can use the images of Advent to help ourselves explore “darkness,” for example. Darkness can include any discouragement, disappointment, frustration and any limits I’m experiencing. It might be struggles in my primary relationships or feelings of self doubt. It might be struggles at work, that tend to dominate my life and hurt my family relationships. It might be repeated struggles with temptations and sin that have become patterns in my life and embarrass me, while I can’t foresee any hope of change

**Don’t Rush – First Things First:** It is important not to skip the need to focus and desire. There might be Christmas decorations in the shopping malls or Christmas parties to go to, but the first step we need to experience is to slow down and begin at the beginning. If we are to have a deep religious experience that allows us to celebrate the Incarnation – in the past and its meaning for me today – then we have to first taste the depth of our longing for a Savior. Until we feel our need for a Savior, we are at risk of missing gifts of the Season of Advent altogether.

**Week Two of Advent – Longing and Anticipation:** Once we experience our deep desire for Light and Hope, Liberty and Peace, we can start to pray with deep longing and anticipation. Longing is an expression of how much we want something. Anticipation is an expression of how much we expect it to become a reality.

Weeks 2 and 3 of Advent can become days of real faith, full of deep desire and powerful hope. Of course, the prayers and readings of this period are all about offering us these graces. The expression of promise and expectant hope can feed our desires.

**Week Three of Advent: Letting It Become Personal:** The latter part of Advent takes us into the story of Jesus' coming to be our Savior. This is not the story of a generic god saving us. Jesus is sent to be a human Savior. God becomes one of us in Jesus. So, in our longing and anticipation, we can begin to get to know him through his relatives who prepare the way for his coming. We can see the hesitation and questioning of Zachary and Elizabeth, then Mary and Joseph. They all make great acts of faith to believe, to trust, that the promises made would be fulfilled. We can use the background times of the third week of Advent to let our faith become personal, as we express our faith, our trust in Jesus' coming to us this year. *"Lord, Jesus, I trust that you can bring your Light into my life, that you can give me hope as you free me and fill me with your peace. Thank you for letting me prepare for your coming this year. Come, Lord Jesus, come."*

**Week Four of Advent: The Final Days of Advent – Getting to the Manger:** So often the final days before Christmas become a blur of activity. Hopefully, this year, we have gotten good at using the background time each day to focus our reflection and conversation with God the Father and with Jesus. Now that we come to the hectic days, we can choose to stay focused right up to and including Christmas. One of the special ways to do that is to not lose the manger. It is the central piece of the story and it is

loaded with meaning and message, consolation and fruit for us. The richest of the Advent experiences are here – in letting ourselves imagine the Holy Family of Joseph and Mary arriving in Bethlehem for the census, having nowhere to stay. A special transformation begins to happen the day before Christmas when we start to imagine that stable where our Savior was born. It is the deepening antidote to some of the excesses of Christmas preparations – too much drinking, too much glitz, celebrations which are quite a few degrees off center. It is there in the stable, in its humble feeding trough that I will find the fulfillment of my ongoing and hope. In that poverty my Savior, my Light and Peace, reveals to me the Good News he came to bring. He came into this world as he would leave it – humble and dependent upon God.

**Christmas Joy:** Christmas will be totally different, after this kind of deep Advent journey. We can't help but experience real joy for having prepared to be renewed in the gift of life that comes to us through Jesus. We will sing, "Oh Come All Ye Faithful, Joyful and Triumphant," with a much deeper meaning for us. When there is more light than darkness, more freedom than addiction, more hope than discouragement, more peace than conflict, we have much reason to rejoice at such a gift. Putting the meaning back into Christmas is reason enough to give Advent a new chance this year, in the midst of our busy lives.