

Contrary to what our popular culture has done with the four weeks leading up to Christmas, Advent is really meant to be a preparatory time and even a penitential time for us. Advent is really meant to a kind of “little Lent.”

In its symbolism, the Church continues to stress the penitential and preparatory nature of Advent. As during Lent, priests wear purple vestments, and the Gloria ("Glory to God") is omitted during Mass. The only exception is on the Third Sunday of Advent, known as Gaudete Sunday, when priests can wear rose-colored vestments. This exception is designed to encourage us to continue our prayer and fasting, because we can see that Advent is more than halfway over.

As in Lent, Advent should be marked by increased prayer, fasting, and good works. Now, the “good works” part usually is accomplished during the Advent season. People generally become more friendly and charitable at this time. We go out of our way to cheer others up. We do the extra little things to make our Christmas celebration “complete.”

But, as for the first two parts—prayer and fasting—the weeks before Christmas usually does not lend itself for extra prayer and more fasting. We usually find ourselves running around more, so we have less time for prayer. And fasting? Are you kidding? With all the Christmas parties we have to go to, and all the fancy meals, special cakes, and holiday cookies available, it’s hardly a time for fasting. That’s why, I’m sure, so many folks have “I will go on a diet” for their New Year’s resolution!

But, thank God for the current COVID lock down! Because with the pandemic restrictions placed upon us social get-togethers, office parties, even family gatherings have been banned. Maybe now we could use the time of Advent for what this liturgical season is meant for—a little Lent.

Advent is a time of preparation and a time for penance. With the extra solitary time we may have for reflection with the COVID protocol, let’s remember what Christmas is all about. Use the many symbols around you to remind you of “Who and what we celebrate at Christmas.” Remind yourself why you have a tree in your living room!

Make sure you have a Christmas Creche in your home, that is, the manger scene of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Take time to look at this scene daily. Use it to meditate on how our Savior came into our world.

Have an Advent wreath on your main table. Start a family ritual of lighting the candles of the wreath before each family meal. Extra prayer could be the form of meditating on the various symbols and decorations of the season.

Maybe physically fasting from food will be too difficult with all the “goodies” that will still appear on our tables. Fasting, however, does not always have to mean “food.” How about fasting from watching television or the computer screen to be more present to your family?

Pandemic or no pandemic Christmas will still come on December 25. Jesus was born into a little family while the angels celebrated. May the angels celebrate at your little family’s celebration of Christ’s birth this year.