

Preparing for Christ

Advent Year C



Introduction

The four weeks leading up to Christmas mark the beginning of the Western Church's liturgical year. The Church stresses that Advent is a time of reflection, meditation and preparation. For many of us those weeks are also filled with shopping, baking, decorating, card writing and parties. Preparing to celebrate Christ's coming should be about more than external things; we should be focused on preparing ourselves for the coming of Christ, more concerned with the condition of our souls than our houses. Are we ready for the King? Are our hearts ready to receive our Savior? Do we put Christ before everyone and everything?

The readings at Mass during Advent focus on two events: the anniversary of the Lord's First Coming, (*his birth*) and his Second Coming (*Judgment Day*). In fact, we call it Advent because the Latin *adventus* is a translation from the Greek *parousia*, which refers to the Second Coming of Christ. It is a curious juxtaposition, the Nativity of the Lord—Jesus coming as a helpless baby born poor and naked in a lowly stable and the Second Coming, when “men will see the Son of Man coming on a cloud with great power and glory” (*Lk. 25:27*). The contemplation of these two events through a study of the lectionary readings can assist us to prepare our souls for the coming of Christ now, as well as for the particular judgment we will face at our death and the final judgment at the end of time.

While this study will follow the Catholic Scripture Study format, it will be a little different. We are going to concentrate on the Sunday lectionary readings and incorporate the ancient method of *Lectio Divina* (*praying the scriptures*). To prepare, each participant will read the Sunday readings along with the “Points to Ponder” commentary, answer the study questions and “pray the scriptures”. The group session will focus on reading the passages out loud as a group, answering the questions and sharing reflections through the use of *Lectio Divina*.

“Praying the Scriptures”: Using *Lectio Divina*

Lectio Divina, or “sacred reading” is a way to “pray the scriptures.” It was advocated by St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Benedict and others. St. Dominic included it as the eighth way in his “nine ways of prayer”. Very popular among medieval mystics, it was described by a Carthusian monk named Guigo in his work entitled “The letter of Dom Guigo to Brother Gervase” and is also found in the anonymous, “Cloud of Unknowing” and the writings of Julian of Norwich, among others. This method is still employed in monasteries today.



On September 16, 2005, Pope Benedict gave a lecture at Castel Gondolfo to participants in the International Congress entitled “Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church.” In his remarks he encouraged the use of *lectio divina*:

“In this context (he was discussing the document Dei Verbum and the Church’s love for and veneration of the Scriptures) I would like in particular to recall and recommend the ancient tradition of “Lectio Divina”: the diligent reading of Sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer brings about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying, responds to him with trusting openness of heart” (cf. “Dei Verbum,” n. 25). If it is effectively promoted, this practice will bring to the Church -- I am convinced of it -- a new spiritual springtime. As a strong point of biblical ministry, “Lectio Divina” should therefore be increasingly encouraged, also through the use of new methods, carefully thought through and in step with the times. It should never be forgotten that the Word of God is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path.”

How to use *Lectio Divina* to pray the Scriptures

Lectio Divina consists of four stages: *Lectio* or reading, *meditatio* or meditation, *oratio*, prayer and *contemplatio* or contemplation. These are not rigid steps followed in strict order because the divisions between them especially the last three are somewhat artificial. When using *lectio* you may find yourself reading, meditating, re-reading, contemplating, re-reading, praying, meditating, etc.

Reading

When you are reading either by yourself or in a group, the passage should be out loud. Through *hearing* the word our hearts can be transformed. As you read, the question to be asked is; “What does the text say?” The commentary and discussion questions will help answer that question.

Meditation

The word “meditate” can sometimes be misunderstood but it just means “think about.” St. Ignatius called this “savoring.” Savor the text. The question to ask at this time is; “What does the text say to me?” Think about the texts as a whole. Ask yourself why the Church might have used these particular Old Testament and New Testament readings. What particular words or phrases struck you? Did any word, phrase or theme leap out at you in a new way? In what direction is the text pointing you? The reflection questions provided in this study will be helpful but since you are approaching the text in a more personal way, the circumstances of your own life will be helpful in your meditation.

Prayer

Meditating on scripture will naturally lead to prayer. What do you want to say to God? What response does the text call forth from you?



Contemplation

Some have suggested that one thinks of contemplation as “resting” in God. Perhaps an analogy can be made: two old friends or spouses can be together in comfortable silence. They love each other and enjoy each other. Silence is not threatening or intimidating and one does not rush to fill it with banter and noise. “Resting” in God is simply enjoying him and enjoying the love that he wants to pour out onto you.

Action

Some have suggested that a fifth stage be included, that of action. The Dominicans say *contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere* (to contemplate and hand on to others the fruits of contemplation). After reading, meditating, praying and contemplating we can ask: How does the text call us to transformation, to *metanoia*, to repentance? How does it help me to be like Christ to others?

A brief note on the lectionary

The lectionary is divided into a three year cycle: In Year A the Sunday Gospel readings are taken from the Gospel of Matthew, in Year B they are drawn from The Gospel of Mark and Year C’s readings are taken primarily from The Gospel of Luke.

Our study will focus on the readings for Year C.

To prepare for the group session:

- Read each passage out loud
- Read the Points to Ponder
- Answer the Study questions
- Contemplate the reflection questions and make notes on your thoughts
- Pray out of your contemplation. If you are comfortable doing so, share “the fruits of your contemplation” in your group